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# Almost There, But Not Quite

By Alfie Kohn

The late educational researcher John Nicholls once remarked to me that he had met a lot of administrators who “don’t want to hear a buzz of excitement in classrooms — they want to hear nothing.” His implication was that some teachers strive to keep tight control over students less because of their principles than because of their principals. After all, their evaluations may depend not on whether their students are engaged and happy, or curious and caring, but rather on whether they are silent and orderly.

Schools can still purchase standardized discipline programs – or, for that matter, develop home-grown strategies — that rely on heavy-handed, old-school techniques intended to break down students’ resistance and coerce them into conformity. These days, though, programs more commonly use progressive rhetoric and palatable-sounding strategies. They may invoke such notions as dignity, cooperation, responsibility, love, and logic. They may rely on positive reinforcement rather than punishment, and use softer words to describe the latter. In fact, they may appear so reassuringly humanistic that we have to remind ourselves the basic objective – compliance – is unchanged.

Rudolf Dreikurs, for example, is an author I liked a lot . . . until I finally sat down and read him. The “logical consequences” programs that he inspired, as well as other attempts to use pleasant-sounding means to achieve authoritarian ends, prompted me to write a book on the subject a few years back (Kohn, 1996). More recently, a group of researchers confirmed that, although most teachers try to maintain “control with a light touch,” their goal typically remains to control students. Almost all the teachers interviewed by the researchers endorsed the need to teach “good citizenship,” but it turned out that most defined this in terms of “maintaining order and work effort . . . following rules [or] respecting authority” (Brint et al., 2001, pp. 173, 175).

## Asking the Right Questions

What matters, then, are the fundamental questions that drive educational practice, even if they are not posed explicitly. Some teachers and administrators want to know, How can we get these kids to obey? What practical techniques can you offer that will cause students to show up, sit down, and do what they’re told? But other educators begin from an entirely different point of departure. They ask, What do these kids need – and how can we meet those needs?

The more I visit classrooms, talk with teachers, and read the literature, the more convinced I become that you can predict what a school will look like and feel like just from knowing which set of questions the adults care about more. You don’t even need to know the answers they’ve found (which tactics they will use to secure compliance, in the first case; what they believe children need, in the second). The questions are what matter.

Even educators who try to focus on students’ needs, however, may feel themselves caught in an

undertow, pulled back to traditional assumptions and practices that result in doing things to students rather than working with them. Some aren't even aware that this is happening. I have long been intrigued by the tendency to assume one has arrived when, in fact, there is still a lot farther to go. Consultants will tell you that few barriers to change are as intractable as the belief that one doesn't need to change. When you tell some teachers about a new approach, they instantly respond, "Oh, I'm already doing that." And sometimes they are – sort of, but not entirely.

In a classic essay, David K. Cohen described a math teacher who firmly believed she was teaching for understanding. Indeed, she was using many innovative activities and materials – for example, having her students do number sentences and calendar activities – yet she had adopted them without questioning her traditional assumptions about pedagogy, such as the idea that the goal is to produce right answers rather than to understand mathematical principles from the inside out. The result was a classroom that subtly discouraged students from exploring ideas, even as the teacher prided herself on how effectively she encouraged such exploration (Cohen, 1990; also see Campbell, 1996).

### Going Part of the Way

Exactly the same partial success, often accompanied by a gap between perception and reality, shows up in the way many classrooms are structured, how they feel to students, how people are treated. A half-dozen examples follow. You may find yourself adding more.

1. Blaming the Students: Some teachers consciously try to create a "working with" classroom, yet automatically assume that when students act inappropriately, they have a behavior problem that must be fixed. It is the students who must change, and the teacher stands by to help them do so.

Norman Kunc (n.d.), who conducts workshops on inclusive education and non-coercive practices, points out that "what we call 'behavior problems' are often situations of legitimate conflict; we just get to call them behavior problems because we have more power" than the students do. (You're not allowed to say that your spouse has a behavior problem.) Some teachers respond with fury when they have a conflict with a student, and some respond with understanding, but few teachers have the courage to reflect on how they may need to reconsider their own decisions. A San Diego educator, Donna Marriott stands out for having done just that:

If a child starts to act up, I have learned to ask myself: "How have I failed this child? What is it about this lesson that is leaving her outside the learning? How can I adapt my plan to engage this child?" I stopped blaming my children (2001, p. 27). Unsettling as it may be to acknowledge, an awful lot of smart, warm, empathic teachers continue to blame their children when things go wrong – and they may not even be aware that they are doing this.

2. Keeping Control of the Classroom: It is possible to allow students to make decisions in the classroom – even boast about how they are empowered – while limiting the number, significance, or impact of these choices to ensure that the teacher remains comfortably in control. One can hold class meetings, for example, but unilaterally determine what will be discussed, who will speak and when, how long the meeting will last, and so on. Or consider a teacher in Washington state who boldly hung a sign at the front of her classroom that read "Think for yourself; the teacher might be wrong!" Only gradually did she begin to realize that her classroom remained in important ways teacher-centered rather than learner-centered. Her practices were still "authoritarian," as she later realized: "I wanted [students] to think for themselves, but only so long as their thinking didn't slow down my predetermined lesson plan or get in the way of my teacher-led activity or argue against my classroom policies" (Coe, 1997, p. 7; also see Miranda, 1999).

3. Missing the Systemic Factors: Some educators work hard to cultivate a caring relationship with each student, to earn his or her respect and trust. They understand how traditional management techniques erode those relationships. However, problems persist in their classrooms, at least partly because the teachers lack a wider perspective that illuminates what is happening among the individuals involved. As Sylwester (2000, p. 23) writes, "Misbehavior is to a classroom what pain is to a body - a useful status report that something isn't working as it should." The underlying problem of which that misbehavior is but a symptom may not be limited to the needs of a given child. Just as some therapists move beyond the "identified patient" to consider the dynamics of the family as a whole, the teacher may need to address at the systemic level his or her own role and the way all the students in the classroom interact.

Many teachers believe that everything would be perfect if only they could get rid of a particular student who is always causing trouble. But if that student is finally removed, another one may pop up, like the next tissue in the box, to fill the role previously played by his classmate. In other words, educators can make only so much progress if they understand individuals but overlook roles and systems.

4. Ignoring Problems with the Curriculum: Teachers who work with students to create a caring community -- and who respond constructively to setbacks that develop - sometimes pay insufficient attention to deficiencies in the academic curriculum. As a result, they are forever struggling to get students to pay attention to tasks that, frankly, don't deserve their attention. Misbehavior may continue primarily because students resist instruction that emphasizes decontextualized skills or requires rote recall, activities intended to raise test scores rather than to answer authentic questions, lessons that they find neither relevant nor engaging - and that they had little or no role in designing. Truly, the question of how a classroom is "managed" is inextricably linked to the theory of learning that informs curriculum content and instruction. This is why I have talked, only half in jest, about a modest attempt to overthrow the entire field of classroom management. No matter how much progress is made in that field, it can never accomplish meaningful goals if it is divorced from pedagogical matters.

5. Settling for Self-Discipline: Some educators reject rewards and punishments, believing, as I do, that a child may come to act in the desired way only in order to receive the former or avoid the latter. They want students to be self-disciplined, to internalize good values so that outside inducements are no longer necessary.

But even this goal is not ambitious enough. The [self-disciplined student may not be an autonomous decision maker](#) if the values have been established and imposed from outside, by the adult. Accepting someone else's expectations is very different from developing one's own (and fashioning reasons for them). Creating a classroom whose objective is for students to internalize good behavior or good values begs the question of what is meant by "good." Moreover, it may amount to trying to direct students by remote control.

6. Manipulating with "Positive Reinforcement": Finally, educators who resist the usual carrot-and-stick approach to discipline may fail to understand that praise is just another carrot - that is, an extrinsic inducement - analogous to a sticker, an A, a pizza, or a dollar. Even classrooms that otherwise seem inviting are often marred by eruptions of evaluation from the teacher, as students are told they've done a "good job." In these classrooms, support and approval are made contingent on doing what pleases or impresses the teacher - precisely the opposite of the unconditional acceptance and empowerment that children need.

Considerable evidence (reviewed in Kohn, 1993, chap. 6 and Kohn, 2001) demonstrates that positive reinforcement tends to make children more dependent on adult approval and less interested in

whatever they had to do to get that approval — for example, learning or helping. Joan Grusec (1992), a developmental psychologist, found that young children who received frequent praise for displays of generosity tended to act slightly less generous on an everyday basis than other children did. Every time they had heard “Good sharing!” or “I’m so proud of you for helping,” they became a little less interested in sharing or helping. They came to see those actions not as something valuable in their own right but as something they had to do to get that reaction again from a grown-up.

This problem is not limited to praise that is excessive, effusive, or transparently manipulative. Rather, the whole idea of offering a verbal reward to encourage a particular behavior is an example of “doing to” rather than “working with.” Because many wonderful teachers have never been invited to consider this possibility, they may be taking away with one hand what they work so hard to offer with the other.

### Going Farther

None of these six problems is necessarily fatal. Teachers who feel a twinge of guilty recognition while reading about them may well have classrooms that, in most respects, provide successful and even inspiring learning environments. One hopes that the people who made them that way are willing to challenge not only the conventional wisdom (for example, about the nature of children or the need for discipline) but also their own practices and premises. We ought to be pleased with how far we’ve come – but not so pleased that we can’t see how much farther there is to go.

### NOTES

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