Almost There, But Not Quite (***)
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By Alfie Kohn

On the surface, things look promising for classroom management.

The older educational researcher John Nichols once remarked to me that he had left 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 notions such as dignity, cooperation, responsibility, love, and logic. They may rely on positive reinforcement rather than punishment, and use softer words to accomplish the same ends.

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 positive reinforcement. She would tell the students what she wanted [and how they should do it] to “help students reason and think in new ways.” Cohen, p. 7; also see Miranda, 1999).

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 “behavior modification” programs, treat students as though they are little machines instead of as individuals with the right to self-determination. The same is true of many so-called “motivational” programs that rely on shame, humiliation, or deception to convince students to do things they might otherwise resist.

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, accomplish meaningful goals if it is divorced from pedagogical matters.

But other educators begin from the first place: what should children learn, in the second. The questions are what matter.

Even educators who try to focus on students’ needs, however, may feel themselves caught in an unspoken, pulled back to traditional assumptions and practices that result in doing things to students rather than 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, the first thing they will say is “how do you get that in my classroom?”

As Sylwester (2000, p. 23) writes, “Misbehavior is to a classroom what pain is to a body – a useful status report...” 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 the people who work there. The type of management approach teachers use... in fact, is often more important than anything that happens in a classroom; and teachers who have a significant influence in that regard are more important than curriculum specialists who design programs.

It is easier to identify a particular problem than it is to identify one who is good at solving problems. And it is more accurate to recognize that a particular approach is inappropriate than it is to label a teacher as a failure. But other educators begin from the first place: what should children learn, in the second. The questions are what matter.

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