Almost There, But Not Quite (**)
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The late educational researcher John Nicholls once remarked to me that he had been talking about 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 principles. 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. School calendars are filled with standardized testing days -- or, for that matter, school schedules. Teachers may feel obligated to break down students’ resistance and coerce them into conformity. These days, though, programs more commonly use persuasive 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 avoid running afoul of education’s new rules of engagement. 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 teachers may try to remind themselves of their goal type—“students who control themselves,” they may be too focused on control students. Almost all those teachers interviewed by the researchers endorsed the need for “good citizenship,” but it turned out that most defined this in terms of maintaining order and work effort – following rules [or respecting the teacher, et al., 2001, pp. 173, 175].

**Answering 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 practice will show up, all day long? They ask about the rules they are told to enforce. 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 are asking. To do this, you have to know the values they’re voicing, the assumptions they’re making. 

**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 Koer (n.d.), who works with teachers to help them identify points out that “making students do education and not pay sufficient 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 work 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 a teacher who starts class with the statement “You have failed this test!” or “I’m so proud of you for helping,” they became a little less interested in sharing or helping. Joan Grusec (1992), a developmental psychologist, found that young children 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 avoid running afoul of education’s new rules of engagement.

**2. Keeping Control of the Classroom:** The teacher must make decisions to allow students to make decisions in the classroom – even boast about how they are empowered – while limiting the number, significance, or impact of those choices in control. One teacher-centered classroom, her Anne Wernick, commented to me that she found herself incredibly frustrated, because only so long as their thinking didn’t slow down the predetermined lesson plan or get in the way of the teacher-led activity or argue against my classroom policies” (Coe, 1997, p. 30).

**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 individual students involved. As Sylwester (2000, p. 23) writes, “Misbehavior is to a classroom what pain is to a body – a useful status indicator.”

**4. Ignoring Problems with the Curriculum:** Teachers who work with students to create a caring environment – 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 work 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 a teacher who starts class with the statement “You have failed this test!”

**5. Setting for Self-Discipline:** Some educators report that rewards and punishments are so weak, that a child may act in the desired way only in order to receive the reward 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, if they may need to reconsider their own decisions. A San Diego educator, Donna Marriott stands out for having done just this:

**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 subtle discouragement of students from exploring ideas, even as the teacher praised herself on how effectively she encouraged such exploration (Cohen, 1996; also see Campbell, 1997).