

The Case Against Classroom Management . . . a Quarter-Century Later

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The Case Against Classroom Management... a Quarter-Century Later

By Alfie Kohn

I often urge noneducators to ponder the versatility and resilience that have been asked of teachers during the pandemic. Just think about all that's required to sustain relationships with, let alone educate, dozens of students who have been reduced to so many squares on a screen. And consider how the long-awaited transition back to actual schools presents challenges of its own.

The return to in-person teaching coincides with the twenty-fifth anniversary of my book *Beyond Discipline*, which I originally described, only half in jest, as a modest attempt to overthrow the entire field of classroom management. What led me to say that – and to write the book in the first place – was how often teachers are encouraged to control their students rather than to consult them and support them. That disturbing fact is hardly new, but it becomes newly relevant

now that schools have reopened their doors.

Like a mutating virus, the programs peddled to teachers back in the 1990s, including one called Assertive Discipline, have mostly given way to newer variants with names like Class Dojo and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). But they, too, consist largely of Skinnerian manipulation; their approach is still more “doing to” than “working with.” Sometimes children, or whole classes, are even pitted against each other in a race for artificial distinctions.

These strategies reflect another unfortunate continuity over the last 25 years: how the field of classroom management, with its focus on methods, promotes the tacit acceptance of problematic goals. When we’re led to look for “effective” strategies without asking what exactly that word means, the default objective is less likely to be about promoting students’ social, ethical, and intellectual development than simply getting them to do whatever they’re told. That was true in 1996, when teachers were advised to train students as if they were pets by dropping marbles into a jar, a step to receiving a reward for following directions. And it’s true in 2021 when teachers are told to monitor students on an app and award points for obedience.

During the last quarter-century, there has been some welcome scrutiny of the political, economic, and racial implications of discipline, including the macho “zero tolerance” fad – a rebranding and intensification of punitive tactics that, it turned out, actually made schools less safe.

But a different kind of political consideration has often gone unnoticed: Newer initiatives dedicated to instilling in students a “growth mindset,” self-regulation, grit, resilience, and mindfulness are ways of fixing individuals rather than addressing systemic problems. Small wonder that efforts to help students adapt to the existing rules and structures – and to become more productive at whatever tasks

they're told to do – have often proved more popular with adults than challenges to rethink one's curriculum or pedagogy and the power hierarchy.

Similarly, well-meaning efforts to emphasize the importance of social and emotional learning are sometimes used to enforce the Protestant work ethic rather than to foster, say, curiosity and empathy. As Val Gillies, a British sociologist, observed, the “acknowledgment that pupils are emotional beings” has become just a way “to better manage them.”

In a 1996 commentary in *Education Week*, I urged educators not to be seduced by programs that, in an effort to appear enlightened, describe their brand of discipline as “cooperative” or infused with “dignity” or “love and logic” even though they just offer slightly different versions of carrots and sticks intended to make children obey. I also warned that even if a noxious program disappeared tomorrow, a new one would pop up like the next Kleenex in the box if teachers failed to question the underlying assumptions of classroom management itself, notably its dim view of children (and, by extension, human nature) and its consequent prescription for control.

But when we *are* willing to ask the root questions, a qualitatively different kind of classroom comes into focus. It's based on two things: constructing caring classroom (and school) communities, and giving students more say, individually and collectively, about what they're doing.

Since I wrote my book, a profusion of psychological research has confirmed the benefits of – and offered strategies for providing – what has been called autonomy support. This concept, derived from a branch of psychology called self-determination theory, focuses on meeting a fundamental human need to experience a sense of agency. In a school setting, teachers who offer autonomy support take pains to minimize coercion (including the sugarcoated kind) and give students

chances to make meaningful decisions, which include constructing possibilities rather than just selecting items from a menu.

Research shows that doing so is beneficial for students' overall well-being as well as their enjoyment of school, their motivation to learn, and their academic success. Psychologists have also explored reasons that some teachers seem resistant to creating such classrooms and have suggested strategies for supporting them in moving past their focus on compliance.

Resources on the subject of community, meanwhile, emphasize the advantages of helping teachers to think less about "managing" students and more about creating supportive relationships with each one and fostering connections among students so they come to feel part of an "us." The idea is to shift from asking "How can I get these kids to do what I tell them?" to "What do these kids need? How can I help them to meet those needs?" The classrooms that result – mercifully devoid of bribe-and-threat behavior management systems – aren't just more respectful (and pleasant!) but are also characterized by more impressive academic learning.

It recently occurred to me that some children who were in elementary school when I first offered this critique may today be back in schools – as teachers. My hope is that the places to which *their* students return this fall are less like traditional classrooms than democratic learning communities.

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