Contradiction, Paradox, and Irony: The World of Classroom Management

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I live in a curious professional world. I teach Classroom Management and often find that, like Alice in Wonderland, I am wandering through a paradoxical landscape.
Over the past decade I have spent a considerable amount of time exploring the many paradoxes of my field of study as I listen to the fears and joys, despair and elation of in-service and pre-service teachers. I find Classroom Management to be the most fascinating topic to teach and to research in large part because it is so loaded with personal memories, values, ego, fear and, at times, panic. The students in every class I teach spend a good deal of their time trying to resolve internal conflicts between their enculturated concepts of what is meant by discipline on the one hand, and on the other, trying to incorporate new strategies designed to preserve dignity and inspire a sense of safety in the classroom.

Every teacher, new or experienced, enters my class with the preconceived notion, or perhaps a fervent wish, that management will be little more than a series of tricks or a simple formula that, when deliberately applied, consistently lead to classrooms filled with beaming, quiet, perpetually on-task children. They are engaged in a quest for pixie dust. One "Poof" and all the problems students would ever present are fixed forever. I have come to believe that as implausible as the pixie dust theory is, it nevertheless lingers because classroom management has no equivalent concept in society. We all are cognizant of the reality that interpersonal relationships take time to build and nurture. But relationships with students are somehow not viewed through that same lens. Nothing else we do in life prepares us to guide a roomful of students on a learning adventure for five days of the week, nine months of the year.

In the classes I teach and the workshops I present, I encounter teachers who have been professionally engaged for years. For many of them management has become a source of constant struggle and anxiety. For some, it has become the monster that resides in their classrooms, threatening eventually to drive them into careers of selling aluminum siding. Their concern can be boiled down to one constant theme that runs through the comments they make: their fear of losing control.

I have never worked with any educators who desire to become "mean" teachers. Yet the fear of losing control while experimenting with management practices new to them causes educators to believe that in a crunch they will revert to behavioral measures that, in their words, "work" to end inappropriate conduct. And this leads to yet another

paradox, even more curious. Namely, many of the adults with whom I work were far from model students when they went to school. In fact, they were often quite the opposite. And whatever the particulars of their school careers, they all have stories they relate to me of the misbehaviors they engaged in as students and the treatments they received as a result.

I begin the course I teach with story telling. I do not ask my students to think of the most dramatic examples of authoritarian discipline they experienced, but, in fact, that is usually what first comes to their thoughts. For some, the events occurred twenty or thirty years ago, but the fears and humiliation they experienced as students are as keenly painful as they were when they first occurred.

I hear stories of how they were locked in dark closets, tied into chairs, or made to sit under desks. One student related the story of her third grade teacher who, on the first day of class, told the students she was a witch who would "get them" if they were not good. Then, if a child was talking out of turn or exhibiting some other behavior deemed to be inappropriate, the teacher would walk over and pluck a hair from the student's head. The hair would be stored in a jar in the teacher's cupboard.

Many of the discipline stories I hear reflect treatment that was very different between the genders. One woman recalled how being locked in a closet became the "place to be" in her fourth grade classroom. The teacher would only send female students there if they were caught talking. As soon as more than one was in the dark closet they could continue their conversation undisturbed. Although this might seem like fun, there was the ever-present fear of being punished by being locked away in a spooky place. One of my male students recounted how a music teacher he had in the seventh grade began each class by putting on very dark, red lipstick. If a female student was caught talking, nothing happened. If a male student was caught talking, he was called to the front of the room and kissed by the teacher so that the lipstick left an imprint on his cheek.

The educators with whom I work also will tell tales, equally troubling to them, of times when their names were written on the blackboard, of being forced to wear gum on their noses and, most common, having to stand outside their classrooms and become highly visible in the hallways of their schools. As adults, they now believe the common factor in all these strategies was the desire of their teachers to control them through fear and humiliation.

And here is the irony: as dramatic as such examples of intimidation are, I have yet to hear from a single adult that she or he learned to behave in appropriate and responsible ways from these experiences or are better people because of them. Further, these same teachers go to their own classrooms and seek to gain control through the model most imprinted on them. Sadly, the traumatic residues of fear and humiliation leave the deepest impressions. When these same people feel the desperate need to enforce control over their own students, they revert to the very strategies used to control them.

I once witnessed a former student of mine who, after nearly a full year of discussing, practicing, and reflecting on fair and equitable management practices, dismissed her students for the day by reading their names aloud in the order of their spelling scores. Those with the highest scores were dismissed first, those with the lowest were forced to sit until everyone else had gone. When asked about it later, she said she believed that the tactic would motivate students to do better and that she had seen similar practices used when she went to school. Would she enjoy an equally public display of her good and bad days during her first year of teaching, I asked? She laughed, as if it were an absurd idea and said, "No."

The point is that there is not a teacher or administrator who would welcome such treatment as an adult. So the paradox of doing to students what teachers hated having done to them suddenly has a second and equally devilish paradox attached. The message we are sending children is that while teachers may, students may not. Children are not allowed to yell, hit, or treat others with disrespect. Teachers are allowed to do all those things, by virtue of being older and bigger, for purposes of being in charge. So the message to students becomes, 'When you are big, this is how you get to act." It is a dangerous message to send our young people. While such techniques are being applied as immediate solutions to behavioral problems, none of them employ any educational process that would help students manage their behaviors when they become adults.

Moving on. Teachers often argue that teaching students appropriate behaviors is a pointless waste of time. But their argument betrays a lack of faith in the efficacy of information, rationality, or inquiry to nurture responsible social behavior. Teachers and administrators tell me they feel anger toward the existing educational structure and a deep despair that times have changed and classrooms are no longer filled with the apple-cheeked innocent beings who hang on the teacher's every word--assuming such children or schools ever were.

Even those who would reject the anger and despair end up mired in contradiction. They adopt new teaching strategies designed to address various learning styles and multiple intelligences in order to provide better learning opportunities for a broad spectrum of educational needs. Yet, when putting together discipline plans, they often resort to using a "one-size-fits-all" approach, never considering that just as they design lessons which address various learning styles to make a math concept accessible, so an individualized approach to management will make the concepts of social responsibility equally understandable,

It is curious that teachers will adopt curricular innovations that indicate a level of trust in their students, but manage those processes with strategies that indicate a high level of distrust in the ability of students to behave appropriately during a group or self-directed activity no matter how well planned it is. Every discipline decision teaches lessons to students, but too often what is learned is not the lesson teachers had in mind. In fact, the phrase "I'm going to teach you a lesson," when used in conjunction with classroom management, usually means that there is a punitive response in store for the student, as opposed to any sort of useful educational experience.

Another curious paradox is trying to control student behaviors while making little or no attempt to determine the underlying cause of the behavior. It's a bit like the iceberg scenario. Teachers try to control the behavior they see without trying to figure out the depth, shape, or menace causing the problem. When educators place the focus of their decision making on controlling the overt behaviors of students while ignoring all the possible causes of the behaviors, the emotional and educational needs of young people go unattended. Educators too often choose to lock themselves into discipline responses designed to control symptoms rather than to treat the causes of the problems and effect any meaningful change in how a student might respond to difficult situations.

My observations have led me to believe that the reason for this lies, at least in part, in the painful and personal nature regarding teachers' preferences for some students over others. Teachers who declare their comfort zone as one defined by quiet, require that all students who walk into the classroom be quiet. There is no concern whether that environment works for or against students' abilities to learn. Too often the methods employed to achieve a quiet, obedient classroom are detrimental to building a climate in which every student can learn successfully. In fact, based on my observations, I am reluctant to equate a silent classroom with a well-managed one. Constantly quiet classrooms look as they do because the students are being controlled through fear, intimidation, frequent competitions, and public embarrassment. While any of the above approaches may be deemed to "work," inasmuch as they are effective tools of control, they most often work against students who already find themselves on the fringe of the school's social environment. While some students may be willing to bend to the controls used on them, there are others who will view imposed, arbitrary rules as a call to arms.

The compelling need for classroom practices focused on the success of all students becomes self-evident when we look at the statistics of who drops out of our schools. There appears to be a shared idea among many educators that the problems existing in schools are solved through the practices of suspension and expulsion. In fact, these "solutions" only transfer the problems elsewhere. When educators decide to exclude students from educational opportunities, young people are faced with minimum-wage jobs, the street, or prison. The problems do not go away, they only become more dangerous and more costly to a civilized nation.

The high numbers of students with disabilities and students of color who appear in the statistics of school dropouts is, I believe, no coincidence. Teachers tend to define appropriate behaviors according to their own family backgrounds and values. In a classroom made up of twenty-seven students representing twenty-seven diverse economic, ethnic, family, and religious backgrounds, some deliberate instruction must occur if all its members are to function together as a community of learners. Educators may express the desire to rid their classroom of those they deem undesirables, but then who would remain? In most cases it would be those students who look like, act like, and share the same values as, the teachers.

How we manage students in our classrooms is an issue that reflects many of our struggles in this country to come to terms with, to tolerate, to celebrate and to embrace our changing demographics. Given the fact that the vast number of licensed teachers in the United States belong to the majority culture, typically students considered to be potential trouble makers are students of color, students who belong to a minority culture, students who are of a different economic class as the teacher, and students who learn best in ways that are different from the way the teacher acquires knowledge. If we accept the premise that solving educational problems can be done through mass expulsions, then the students who would be left in the classroom once the "less desirable" ones were gone would typically hold middle-class values, share mainstream religious values, and be native English speakers. Certainly becoming knowledgeable about and sensitive to the needs of all students, their cultures and family structures, would be challenging. Nevertheless, they deserve this level of dedication within an educational setting.

When teachers discuss this issue with me, often the question they ask is, 'When is it okay for me to just give up on a student?" My answer to that question is the one I believe most teachers least want to hear, and that is "Never." And while that answer might seem impossibly naive, I argue it is not an answer resulting from being ill informed, but rather the answer of someone who has seen where young people go when society gives up on them. When I offer that response to teachers, they typically counter by telling me that the other students in their classrooms need attention and they cannot spend time with one student at the expense of the rest of the class.

Teachers who express this view seem to believe that their classrooms can only be the way they are now. There are no alternative paradigms that they can imagine, often because they have been presented with no alternatives in their training or subsequent professional development. As a result, they are perpetually seeking quick solutions to the negative behaviors they see in their students. They lack a framework for understanding the potential impact of deliberately creating expectations that establish and sustain a democratic classroom environment based on mutual respect and equitable decision making, and the effect such strategies can have on mediating the anger and frustration existing in so many classrooms.

One compelling rationale for change is the ethical dilemma presented by a reliance on rewards and punishments as a means for establishing discipline. Not only should educators be concerned with the lack of self-efficacy involved when behaving in a proscribed fashion for a reward or out of fear of punishment, but there is also the issue of whether or not the behaviors that are rewarded will in any way serve the needs of democracy when students grow to adulthood. If only the most quiet, docile, dependent behaviors are seen as worthy of reward, what behaviors then can we reasonably expect students to exhibit when they reach the age of majority? Even more alarming is classrooms that depend on extrinsic methods of behavioral control typically spawn peer rejection and distrust as a natural outcome of some students being punished more often, others being rewarded more often.

Thoughtful decision-making takes time tricks do not. Adopting management strategies that admittedly take time is the toughest sell in the world of education. However, if educators truly desire to create classroom climates that are supportive of all learners, there must be an investment of time to discuss expectations, set up rights and responsibilities, and follow up on disruptions in ways that will help and not harm students. Building a democratic classroom climate requires an effective integration of pedagogical knowledge, educational psychology, patience, hard work, an unwavering dedication to equal educational opportunity for all students, and a passionate belief that everyone, including the teacher, can learn from mistakes.

The contradiction between this view of management and what is happening in most classrooms is that the statement above indicates the attributes educators are least likely to consider when they are deciding how their schools or classrooms will function. It has been my experience that most educators want quick remedies that will work all the time with every student in all situations, even though logic tells them that the nature of human interactions means no such solutions exist. The payoff for management strategies requiring an investment of time at the beginning of the school year is that classrooms tend to hold together into April and May, thus saving time at the end of the year. I have found, however, that when teachers make the commitment to employ specific ideas that encourage appropriate behavior while not demeaning students, they typically report back to me that their discipline decisions are resulting in more positive outcomes in terms of classroom atmosphere and a higher level of trust established with and among students. I have also found that until most educators have been presented with some level of "cookbook" strategies, they have difficulty imagining alternative approaches.

And so I come to a personal paradox. I find myself walking a tightrope between how to help teachers feel secure in trying to implement democratic practices and, at the same time, avoiding the cookbook approach—do this when that happens—advocated by so many behaviorist models. The unavoidable conclusion is that in order to promote democratic management, some practical, how-to strategies have to be shared. I have found that teachers are much more likely to try democratic management if there are some one-two-three steps for what to do.in the classroom on Monday morning. As a result, I have come to believe that when assisting educators in the process of' transitioning from behavioral discipline practices that rely on extrinsic rewards and punishment, to those strategies designed to encourage self-esteem and personal responsibility, it is necessary to present teachers with both the rationale for change as well as some practical ideas to make it happen.

Once an educator makes a commitment to employ discipline techniques that will inform rather than punish and are more compatible with democratic curricular models, the next step is to explore what pieces of information are needed for educators and students in order to have everyone modeling and practicing better self-management skills. If educators agree that their teaching practices should be focused on encouraging students to become responsible, independent learners, there are a number of approaches to democratic management from which they might draw. Although many teachers may long for one prescribed approach to discipline, applicable to every circumstance with no

variations, my own experience as a teacher, and the narratives I collect from current classroom teachers, indicates that no one model successfully meets every student's needs in every situation.

Rather than depending on one approach to be the answer to all management or curriculum issues, the most effective teachers I see are those who comfortably synthesize ideas from a number of cognitive or democratic models. There are those who suggest that to use ideas from various discipline models only creates confusion in the minds of students. I argue, though, that the more ideas educators carry with them into the classroom, the more prepared they will be to handle the diverse range of problems encountered on a daily basis. Therefore, if teachers are to master skills that will enable them to create positive and stimulating learning environments, it is most important to assist them in learning about the assortment of discipline techniques aimed at preserving self-esteem and fostering personal responsibility. However, a synthesized approach to management can only have meaning if it arises from a well-grounded philosophical foundation.

When deciding what management models would best serve a democratic classroom environment, it is sensible to begin with a foundation that reflects the precepts our society holds as fundamental. It seems logical to me to begin with a consideration of those elements that are common to any democratic system. If this is the point of departure, then the foundation for a democratic classroom begins with the concept that individual rights are sacred yet always balanced against the equally compelling needs of society. There is a dignity that naturally accompanies affording students the recognition of their human rights. There is mutual respect interwoven into an educated perspective of the ways in which our actions have an impact on those around us. Educators who begin with this premise are helping to ensure that all students who enter their classrooms do so on an equal footing.

This leads to a very interesting paradox, one related to skepticism about teaching appropriate behaviors rather than relying on behavioral control. I receive one consistent bit of feedback on the contents of the course I teach, a nearly universal sense of surprise that the concepts that I encourage my students to consider are actually effective. As one intern said to me, "I thought those ideas you were teaching were crap that would never work. But now that I am teaching, I can't believe how well they work." I am dismayed that the significant role democratic decision making plays in the construction of equitable learning opportunities is too often dismissed as being "touchy-feely" and certain to result in chaotic classrooms.

Unfortunately, when my pre-service students do enter the field experience classrooms to which they have been assigned, they are more likely to see modeled the very strategies that are least likely to promote classroom equity. It is too easy to dismiss the ideas discussed in class once the interns and teachers return to their schools and are told by their colleagues that such strategies just are not effective. I have found that many of the practicing educators who are most quick to disparage the content of the course have not actually tried any of the strategies, or they have tried them as they would have tried some

behaviorist "trick"-they applied the strategy in isolation from its philosophical foundation. Educators who fall into either of the above categories express the conviction that democratic management practices are worthless notions presented by a professor who has breathed the air of the ivory tower a little too long.

As I respond to the myriad of issues raised in the course I teach, I consistently try to assist my students in developing responses to behavioral problems that will vary depending on the needs of the individuals as well as the group. I present to them the idea that all human relationships are built with time, patience, and hard work; there is no reason to expect classroom relationships to be any different. There simply is no magic pixie dust that can be sprinkled over our educational environments resolving all problems and curing all ills as it slowly settles on our shoulders.

One of the recurrent questions students bring to me is how can they keep all students on-task with a minimum investment of time. This is an issue that my students as well as workshop participants repeatedly raise. I find it to be reflective of my earlier statement that educators seem to view time limitations universally as their greatest barrier to implementing democratic management practices. It frustrates them to hear that any student-centered management strategy must be, by its very nature, "time consuming," just as are the interpersonal relations they have outside the classroom.

Time can be viewed as a tyrant that leaves no opportunity to engage in humane interactions or it can be viewed as a commodity that educators can choose to invest in ways that will best serve the needs of all classroom members. Time can be spent working with students to reach a mutually acceptable solution to problems or it can be spent engaged in power struggles with students that lead to stress and result in students who drop out and teachers who burn out. Any problem will take some time to resolve; the issue is how to best spend that time.

Time can either be spent after problems have occurred, trying to come up with perfect punishments in an attempt to ensure it will never happen again, or time can be spent before problems have occurred, at the beginning of the school year, engaging students in discussions concerning behaviors that sustain a safe and encouraging learning environment. And, thereafter, time can be invested in patient communications that reflect the commitment educators must assume to keep students in an educational environment.

During our class discussions, I find that my students are consumed with worry about how they will handle the student who is in a state of outright rebellion. What they have trouble imagining is the difference in classroom climate that occurs when every class member understands and has had some voice in developing the common expectations.

Educators can learn to empower themselves to resolve the behavioral issues that occur in schools. They have the training and ability to move beyond prescribed models of discipline and into the realm of decision-making based on democratic principles. Time is not the enemy. It can be an ally depending on how it is used. To take advantage of available time, educators might ask themselves some of these suggested questions:

- What expectations have been discussed that will lead to a classroom climate that supports the needs of all its members?
- If I did not hold the discussion at the beginning of the year, what expectations are most important to focus on now?
- Will all students have some input into how the expectations are established?
- Will the expectations be presented in ways that are accessible to all learning styles, not just auditory learners?
- Are the expectations too high for some students?
- Are the expectations too low for some students?
- If so, what adjustments need to be made to be equitable?

Spending time setting mutual expectations is a proactive approach to building a democratic learning environment that will address the special needs of all students and reduce the sense that problems are so overwhelming there are no solutions. The time spent on establishing a democratic classroom climate will also help educators shift their focus from the subject matter to learners who need to acquire knowledge of the subject matter.

The hard work comes with the decisions teachers make from minute to minute and from one day to the next in order to sustain a democratic classroom. The words selected when speaking with students, the phrasing used when developing a syllabus, the amount, color, and type of displays present in any given classroom, even the physical arrangement of the classroom, will all serve to support or destroy the attempts of educators to maintain the democratic climate.

If expectations are stated in the form of rules, the rules should be posted in order to provide students with notice, and posted in the languages the students speak. Educators can ask themselves if the expectations are understood and consistent. Did the expectations evolve out of a solid theoretical and philosophical base, or were they made up as time and circumstance seemed to demand? So much to think about, and yet these questions are so crucial to whether or not the playing field students walk on will have any even ground.

Working toward a democratic classroom requires an integration of all decisions, with the definitive goals being the security and self-esteem of every student. Teachers will always be concerned with issues of control but a sense of confidence can evolve from being well prepared with a variety of ideas that assist in responding equitably, appropriately, and professionally to difficult situations in the c1assroom. The concerns teachers express about democratic management are very real and not to be taken lightly. I have come to believe that pre-service and in-service teachers are best served when they are provided with information designed help them incorporate democratic strategies into their teaching as they also learn to confront their anxieties concerning practices that enhance self-esteem and enable their students to feel like valued members of the school community.

And so we look out at this convoluted landscape where little is what it seems to be. Contradictions abound and success is often measured in terms of a day gone well and a

year without too much disruption. And what sense can be made of it? Perhaps the answer is that no sense can be made of it because paradox, contradiction, and irony are the logical outcomes when paradigms of linear management strategies are imposed on the natural messiness that results from compelling all of our children to attend public school classrooms.

Time and control consistently are the universal threads found in the concerns about management expressed by teachers everywhere. Perhaps understanding effective classroom management is the same as accepting paradox as endemic to the topic and the resulting chaos might be the natural outcome of what happens when we work to create climates in which diverse groups of people can come together to seek knowledge. It might be that learning to celebrate the differences and enjoy the nature of all students will bring educators closer to the goal of a calm environment than will the authoritarian constraints that sound so good in theory and so often fail in practice.

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