

Room to Grow

Giving children a sense of ownership in their classroom can lead to the kind of open and cooperative learning environment that most teachers dream about.

Returning to my 1st grade classroom after a two-day absence, I was greeted by stories, pictures, and cards from my students, along with the substitute teacher's evaluation: "Fantastic class! The best 1st grade I've ever taught!" Smiling, I placed the evaluation in a file of similar ones accumulated throughout a busy year of professional obligations that had taken me away from the class.

At lunch another 1st grade teacher, whose children had inspired less than glowing comments from her last substitute, asked what I did to make my kids such capable, cooperative students. Her question was couched in terms of discipline.

"Your class is so good. Tell us your secret. What do you do for discipline?" she asked.

I hesitated, knowing that the answer was much more complex than a brief explanation on how to control a class.

Finally, I responded, "I talk to them."

"No, I don't mean that. What do you do when talking isn't enough?"

I knew I was oversimplifying as I answered, "I do a few things. We have discussions about what goes on during the day. I work hard at not being the dispenser of discipline or the owner of the class. I want to have a class that is a community of learners. I don't want it to be *my class* with the children as reluctant visitors—it's *our class*."

Sounding incredulous, she tried again, "You must do more than that. You must at least call home and talk to the parents about bad behavior."

"No, actually, I don't. If problems are happening in class, that's where I feel they have to be resolved. I would only call home if a child has seriously hurt

another child."

That conversation turned out to be the catalyst for a self-examination of my philosophy of education. About six years ago, I read an article by Constance Kamii (1984) that, like a bolt of lightning, changed the way I thought about teaching. Kamii discussed Piaget's theory of moral autonomy as a self-governing process. According to both Piaget and Kamii, discipline and knowledge are not tangible things but are to be constructed within the child's existing structures of knowledge. Before reading



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that article, and many others on constructivism, I considered myself a good teacher. I also believed I had to control all the learning that took place in *my* classroom. How I have changed!

Most teachers feel a normal and logical resistance to giving up control. But giving children the opportunity to become autonomous by allowing them to make decisions does not mean losing control; it means providing a framework for learning, having expectations, and then adding plenty of wiggle room for times of self-direction.

The process of internalizing discipline occurs in developmental stages. As a long-term observer of children, I have noticed that they acquire self-discipline that is lasting and transferable. They also build on what they already know as they proceed to adulthood. Children become confident, active participants in their own learning by learning to use their own inner resources.

Responsibility

Through my years of teaching primary grades, I have learned that children thrive when given appropriate responsibilities in the classroom; it gives them a sense of ownership and self-confidence. Trust is the partner of responsibility. As we learn to work together in a community, my role is to extend to the children an attitude of openness, interest, and thoughtful response. The children know through my active appreciation and understanding that I trust them to do their best and to take their responsibility seriously.

I also let them know that I don't expect perfection. It's all right to have mistakes, misinterpretations, and misunderstandings, particularly in the initial stages as they try their wings at taking responsibility. For example, chil-

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dren who are learning how to handle the varied tasks of being helpers—gathering appropriate materials together, measuring, counting, and taking turns—are bound to meet challenges. As a result, the children will either rise to the occasion, or, as a class, discuss—objectively and without blame—how to improve the process the next time. With either possibility there is the opportunity for growth.

With increased responsibility, the children not only gain confidence in their own abilities and ideas, but they also learn to help others and learn from their peers by reaching out to children who are having difficulty. Generosity and caring feel good to givers and receivers and build genuine concern and appreciation for others—while creating opportunities for positive interaction that I, as the teacher, don't direct!

Learning that systems can be improved is an important step in building autonomy. Increased responsibilities provide the children opportunities to solve problems by examining what works and what doesn't. To facilitate the flow of the children's ideas, I ask open-ended questions such as,

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How can we make sure that next time table three will get all their materials? Is there a better way to organize and pass the art materials? How might we spend less time doing this so we will have more time to work on our project?

I do not have right answers for the children to guess. Instead, I provide time for them to brainstorm solutions and debate the merits and drawbacks of each. So often we, as teachers, worry about covering the curriculum and miss the obvious importance of time that the children need to generate ideas that are meaningful to their lives. Children learn about responsibility as they make decisions about how their classroom is run. Discipline becomes not a matter of my control but a matter of giving up control in areas that children are developmentally able to handle.

Respect

If asked, most teachers would say that they definitely convey respect for their students. Respect seems to me to be less tangible and more personalized than responsibility. Showing respect takes time—time to listen to what children have to say and thoughtfully respond to their ideas and questions. All teachers have had the child who takes what seems like forever to tell a story. As I sit and listen to this child while 26 other children await their turns, I take a deep breath and concentrate on what that child is trying to share with me. I show that child that I respect what he or she is saying, and I model respectful listening for the other

children through my body language and facial expressions. I make eye contact when I listen and lean toward the speaker to show my interest.

It also takes time to watch what children do—the struggle one child might be having, the excitement another is feeling—so that interactions with each child can be insightful and respectful of who that child is. Vivian Gussin Paley (1986) tells of Bill, a visitor to her class, who had a magical way with the children. After observing him a number of times, she pinpointed that he was successful because he was truly curious about what the children thought and said. His questions had no preconceived answers, allowing him to observe how those 5-year-olds intuitively went about solving problems.

Respect is also shown through language. The words and tone that I use convey whether I respect an individual child or the entire class. Sarcasm and superiority shut the door to communication and a sense of community. Children instinctively know that it is not safe to trust someone who does not treat them respectfully.

Modeling respectful ways of interacting is only part of the picture. The other part is monitoring how children treat one another. When a child is not respectful of another child, I discuss the situation objectively. I might state what I think has happened: "Darby says that you took his pencil. If you need a pencil I'd like you to give that one back to him, and I will get you another." Telling a child who needs a pencil that he or she is bad to steal one from someone else only builds defensiveness. Acknowledging that a child wants or needs something and then using problem-solving skills to find a solution together creates a positive climate of acceptance.

Stating what has happened in

nonjudgmental terms gives the children the opportunity to respond in logical ways that are meaningful to them. If there is a confrontation, I might pose a problem for the class to solve: "Some children are angry at one another because they have to share the glue, and they feel it is not being shared equally. What do you think they might do?" Children sometimes offer to share theirs or offer suggestions about fair sharing like, "Count to five and then give it to the other person." The children in question then use the suggestion they like. It is their choice as long as they ultimately resolve the problem. I am very careful not to step in with my solution—it can inhibit the chil-

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dren's autonomy, and the argument usually continues unless they decide on a solution themselves.

In 1st grade, when most of the children are still in the egocentric stage of development, sharing is not only a big task, but it is also important to the beginning of their moral autonomy. Asking, rather than telling them what to do, encourages the children to be self-directed problem solvers and, ultimately, autonomous decision makers. I have often asked, "This student needs a pencil. Does anyone have one to share?" There has never yet been a

time when five or six children haven't offered. I always make sure to thank them for their caring and generosity.

Asking children how they feel when something negative occurs is another way that I elicit personal responses. When a child shares that it makes him or her angry when another child teases, I might ask other children to respond. I always get more responses than I actually want, but the children know that what they feel and have to say is important and valued.

Student-Generated Curriculum

Student-generated curriculum and discipline seem a far cry from each other, yet the two make perfect partners

when viewed from a constructivist perspective.

Last fall, I came to live and teach in a desert town.

The children in our class were very interested in the animal life that surrounded them, particularly the more dangerous types like scorpions, tarantulas, and black widows. There was also much discussion about the Mojave Green, a mysterious rattlesnake that inspired tales of great

bravery and fearlessness from the children who claimed to have seen one.

As their interest in the subject became more intense, jars with insects varying from a praying mantis to grasshoppers arrived in class. I asked my students if they would like to learn more about insects and received a resounding yes. So, we studied insects. We fed the ants that had a nest adjacent to our building, observed them, and recorded what they liked to eat. We wrote stories, sang songs, memorized poems, and drew pictures. For a month and a half, the children were

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totally engrossed with learning about insects. When I felt their interest was waning, we moved to another topic.

When children are fascinated by the subject, they don't feel forced into learning, into following *my* agenda in *my* classroom, which is when discipline problems occur. The curriculum is theirs—they do not get bored. Instead they become autonomous, self-directed learners—bringing in ideas and information to share and involving their parents in the process. Did I cover chapter one in the social studies or science book? No. Did the children read, write, learn about geography, do scientific exploration, ask questions, and discover answers? Definitely!

Children bring to the classroom a personal view of life that may be shaped by harsh realities. I envision my classroom as a haven—a place where children can test their ideas, develop moral autonomy, find answers to their questions, and learn about what interests them. Just as a baby screams for attention, a powerless child demands attention through negative behavior. Children involved in student-generated,

developmentally appropriate activities have no need for the extreme demands for attention that are labeled as discipline problems. ■

References

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