Freedom in the Classroom

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by

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to determine if teachers and students were experiencing freedom to teach and to learn in the classroom. Too often, teachers are not free to create the conditions favorable for self-learning (inquiry), and students are not free to learn and grow due to ongoing disrupters. Dealing effectively with these problems requires an approach that brings about change in students' thinking and behavior. Action Research was used to determine if this is a real problem in our science classrooms. Two questionnaires were distributed, one for teachers and another for students. The instrument used is a Likert Scale and the Supply Method, which is space for comments to elicit information about the classroom climate (Gay & Airasian, 2000). These data were then compared and analyzed.

Introduction

In the classroom the teacher needs the freedom to enjoy teaching, and the students need the freedom to enjoy learning and to grow. Too much of the time this freedom is not happening in the classroom. It was once said that rules without relationships equals rebellion. The word boundaries rather than rules would apply equally.

There are serious problems in our schools. The usual way of dealing with the disrupters is to treat the symptoms and not the problem. If students are given clear boundaries to live by, and understand that if the boundaries are crossed consequences will follow, soon they get the message that their behavior will have to change or else.

Literature Review

"Maximum learning is always the result of maximum involvement" (Hendricks, 1987, p. 121). The true function of the teacher is to create the most favorable conditions for self-learning (inquiry). The teacher is primarily a stimulator and motivator, the one who excites and directs the students. The student is primarily an investigator, a discoverer, and a doer. A good teacher has to be focused on what his/her students are doing, not on what he/she (teacher) is doing. Therefore what's important is not what the teacher does, but what the students do as a result. Teaching is simply stimulating and directing the students' self-activities (Hendricks, 1987).

It is a different world today than it was when our culture had distinct boundaries that children dared not to cross. Our culture, in a sense, kept our children within certain boundaries. But now the movies, music, and television have changed all of that and are now encouraging our youth in rebellion. Much of this rebellion is acted out in the schools. As a result, teachers are not free to create the conditions favorable for self-learning (inquiry).

Boundaries with our students and appropriate consequences if any boundaries are crossed is the way to freedom in our classrooms. This is not a power struggle with children. It is not about anger or frustration, lectures or threats, but love and logic. Love allows students to grow through their mistakes and logic allows students to live with the consequences of their choices. This helps the student to understand that the solution to their problems begins with them and not someone else and that they have to make the first move. Students can understand the logical consequences of their mistakes much

better than relational consequences, like anger, guilt, shame, condemnation, or abandonment (Fay, 1998).

"Teaching that impacts, is not head to head, but heart to heart" (Hendricks, 1987, p.121). Teachers should be friends with their students but firm. There are the two extremes: the "best friend" teacher, who more than anything else wants the children to like him; and the "control freak" teacher, who is always barking orders. The best is somewhere in the middle, where the teacher is both relational and structured. The rule of thumb for success is that when respect comes before friendship, activity results. When friendship comes before respect, passivity resulted. Friendship brings positive feelings, but also laziness. The teacher who starts with respect gets more activity out of the students (Cloud & Townsend, 1998). In other words, boundaries equal freedom. To make this a reality in the classroom and school, the student must understand once he/she is over the line, there will be appropriate consequences.

"Problem children don't evolve in a vacuum. Every problem child generally has a problem context, and children with healthy limits do not grow them out of thin air. Although by nature we resist limits from birth, we have a lot of help either developing boundaries or not developing them" (Cloud & Townsend, 1998, p.38). What needs to change is not only the behavior, but also the students' thinking and attitude. Once a student crosses a boundary, the teacher gains his/her attention with appropriate consequences. Then the students begin to reconsider their ways. They then begin to think that the problems began with them and that they need to make a change to avoid these consequences. However, if the consequences are not applied every time, the students will begin to think the consequences are not for them and they will not change their thinking

or their behavior. Consistency in appropriate consequences is necessary for developing the students thinking and boundaries. Basically, students will mature to the level of structure given, and no higher (Cloud & Townsend, 1998).

Development is an important factor with the teacher as well. The teacher should find where his/her own boundaries are weak. If the teacher has limitations in being able to be responsible and teach responsibility, these limitations will affect how well students learn responsibility. An important question to ask oneself is, did I have any part in creating this problem (Cloud & Townsend, 1998)?

At Christmas children know how to show their best behavior for the purpose of hoping to get the presents they want. Therefore, being rewarded motivates their behavior. Many teachers use the same reward type idea to get students to act for a couple of days the way they want them to act all year long. This is not getting to the real problem and solution. Learning limits and freedom, growing and developing through their mistakes is the solution. "Learning boundaries has a lot to do with going through experiences, such as receiving consequences for behavior, learning to take ownership of one's life, and dealing with the boundaries of others" (Cloud & Townsend, 1998, p. 10). There is nothing wrong with giving to students and giving often, but the reward system of giving, blocks the thinking process necessary to establish healthy boundaries. It encourages a repeat of what has happened in the past by distorting their thinking. As Howard Hendricks notes, "If you want to change a person permanently, make sure his thinking changes, and not merely his behavior. If you change only his behavior, he will not understand why he has made the change. It's only superficial and usually short-lived" (1987, p.41).

When teachers respond to misbehavior with anger and frustration, a cycle of misbehavior begins. Responding in a loving and logical way teaches teachers to prevent or break this cycle by replacing anger with genuine sadness or empathy. This misbehavior cycle starts with misbehavior, then the teacher shows anger or frustration, then the student develops a negative self-concept and may think if it's so hard for adults to help me behave, I must be a pretty hopeless case. The misbehavior continues. The student then develops a distorted perception of authority figures. He/she may think the most powerful people in my life can't make me behave, or the most powerful people in my life really have to sweat to make me behave, or it's entertaining to make adults mad. An example of an enforceable statement rather than anger might be, "I'll be glad to discuss this with you as soon as the arguing stops," or "Feel free to come back to the room as soon as you are calm" (Fay, 1998, pg. 1).

"Boundaries play an essential developing role for students. Loving people recognize that the world does not revolve around them. They consider the consequences of their behavior on people around them before they act" (Cloud & Townsend, 1998, p. 24). Having boundaries in the classroom will also help a student develop character. Character in the sense of who they are and what they do in certain situations, what their moral makeup is, how they function in relationships, and doing tasks. Students should always be in the process of developing character, at school and certainly at home (Cloud & Townsend, 1998).

Boundaries play an important role in setting limits and requiring the students to take ownership of their lives, problems, and responsibilities. Students must learn responsibility in the sense of taking ownership of their life by being in control. Once

students understand that they are accountable for their life and take ownership of their life they realize that all aspects of their life are truly theirs alone, and that they need to be responsible for their behavior, attitudes, and choices. Ownership is the beginning of the steps to freedom. With that realization there is hope for self-control to develop (Cloud & Townsend, 1998).

Ownership basically is about possession. If you own something you say, "This is mine and I am responsible for it." To be responsible for their lives, students must own them. They must take ownership of their feelings, attitudes, behaviors, and choices. These things are all the students' property, and if, for instance they become angry, they must realize the problem of anger is theirs. Someone else may have provoked the anger, but the behavior is their own problem. What they do in response to their anger is their responsibility (Cloud & Townsend, 1998).

Freedom and responsibility are inseparable. Students must understand they have to operate within the boundaries that are established for them. With that responsible behavior comes the freedom for life and existence to learn to enjoy school, and to grow. Unfortunately, some students will bump their heads up against this truth like a wall. They don't have respect for reality. Experiencing the consequences of their actions is the reality for them. As Dr. Cloud and Dr. Townsend note, "While reality can be tough to handle, it is where the good things of life reside. The character that creates a life that works must have a healthy respect for reality" (1998, p. 30). Mature students know that if they do good things, good things will happen, but if they make poor choices, such as goofing off and being lazy it will cost them. Realizing this, they work with both hope for reward and a desire to avoid painful realities that come from poor choices. This results in

growth and maturity for the student. To grow is a character issue. Facing the obstacles of life with an attitude of growth in mind insures developing abilities and gaining knowledge as well as facing negative traits about oneself that need changing. This person can change behavior or direction when confronted with reality (Cloud & Townsend, 1998).

Students that have taken ownership of their life will soon discover that they are in control. They are now making the decisions. By taking control the students fulfill freedom in their lives. They no longer have someone controlling their feelings, attitudes, behaviors, or choices. A student exercising self-control soon realizes the freedoms that boundaries delineate. This is the way it is meant to be for the student, but as we all know we sometimes misused our freedom and, as a result may lose our self-control. The results are displayed in a wide variety of consequences and miseries.

For example, after class began Bobby drummed his pencils on his desk, leaned back in his chair to make the legs creak, shouted out the window to a friend, and threw a wad of paper at the wastebasket. This kind of behavior is common in the public schools. It prevents teachers from teaching and students from learning. If it is not stopped, it guarantees continued problems in our schools. The victims of the disrupters have little class time and are discouraged. It is the Bobby's who are destroying the learning atmosphere the teacher needs to create in their classroom.

There are many classroom discipline plans to consider, but most are superficial and short lived, because the student's thinking is not changed. There is a plan that reinforces appropriate behavior and is believed to succeed in eliminating misbehavior by consistently rewarding the student. It is hoped, the conditioning process will work so well

that payoffs will no longer be necessary (Palardy, 2001). This is another example in which the student is looking only at the reward and not taking ownership and control of his/her life. Michael Tulley and Lian Hwang Chiu note in their study on classroom disruption that of 270 narratives related to effective and ineffective strategies for punishment only half, 135 were managed effectively by teachers. A variety of punishments were used: detention, taking away privileges, isolation, raising or lowering voice, pausing, moving closer to the student, positive reinforcement, corporal punishment, yelling at the student, humiliation, ignoring student behavior, and so forth (Tulley & Chiu, 1995).

How do we implement boundaries with our students according to Cloud and Townsend:

Step 1: See the three realities:

There really is a problem.

The student is not perfect.

The problem is not the problem. (Usually it is a boundary problem)

Step 2: Plug in:

Make sure you connect to good, supportive relationships outside of yourself.

The Boundary process can be exhausting and frustrating.

Step 3: Grow in boundaries personally:

Before you start boundaries with your students be sure of your boundaries.

Step 4: Evaluate and plan:

Evaluate:

Consider the student's age, maturity level, context (life setting-clinical issues, learning disorders, attention deficit disorder).

The important thing is not what you do, but who you are with your students.

Plan:

Come up with a structure that you will use for yourself and will present to the students.

The problem-state the issue in specific terms.

The expectations-make your expectations measurable.

The consequences-write what will happen when the child doesn't meet the expectations.

Step 5: Present the Plan

Introduce the plan at a peaceful time.

Take a "for" stance instead of an "against" stance.

Present the problem.

Present the expectations.

Present the consequences (be direct).

Step 6: Follow through over time (Cloud & Townsend, 1998).

The most important factor to remember is applying appropriate consequences consistently when boundaries are crossed.

Method

Action research is the method used to determine if there is a real problem with disrupters in our science classrooms. "Action research is a systematic inquiry form of research to find problems and correct them" (Gay & Airasian, 2000, p. 594).

Two questionnaires were distributed to gather data, one to students (Appendix A) and one to teachers (Appendix B). Gathering data from both of these sources in the classroom served as a check and balance. If the students were having problems with the disrupter, then surely the teachers were having problems as well.

Questionnaires consisted of seven questions, to be answered on a Likert Scale of 1 to 5, 1 being never and 5 being always, and the Supply Method, which is a space to explain their answer (Gay & Airasian, 2000, p. 153 & 158). The student questionnaires were distributed by a teacher to all of the students in all of the classes taught that day. The teacher distributed 90 student questionnaires and received 55 questionnaires back. The 90 teacher questionnaires were distributed by the principal to the teachers at a school; 13 questionnaires were received which were collected in an envelope in the teacher lounge.

Data Analysis

A focus developed during the interpretation of the data from the quantitative research that clearly supported the position, that there is a problem in the classroom with disrupters. Question #5 on the student questionnaire asks if disrupters in their classroom are interfering with their freedom to learn and their teacher's freedom to teach. Almost half of the students indicated this is a problem to some degree. Twelve students believe it to be always a problem (5=always), and sixteen students believed it to be a problem most

of the time (4=almost always), while eight students believed it to be a problem about half

Figure 1: Questionnaire Results Students

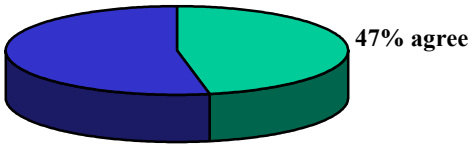
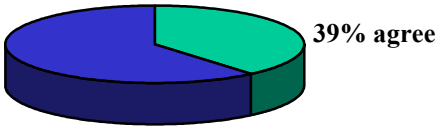


Figure 2: Questionnaire Results Teachers



the time (3=about half the time). Therefore, as indicate on Figure 1 (47%), 26 students out of 55 agree disrupters are a problem. A similar question was asked on the teacher questionnaire. Question #3 on the teacher questionnaire asks if they felt free to create conditions for self-learning (inquiry). The data indicated that 5 teachers indicated this to be a problem to some degree. Three teachers believed they were free to create the conditions for self-learning (inquiry) about half the time (3=about half the time), while two believed that they were rarely able to create conditions for self-learning (2=rarely). Therefore, as indicated on Figures 2 (39%), 5 teachers out of the 13 agree disrupters are a problem in their classroom. The numbers are not the same, but the percentages indicate that close to half of the students and teachers are having problems with the disrupters in their classrooms. Question #6 on the teacher questionnaire asked about the principals effectiveness in following through where the teachers realm of authority ends. About one third (31%) felt the principals were not following through effectively. This suggests that the problem with administrative principals is not as far from 100% effectiveness as the teachers. If approximately 50% of the students and approximately 40% of the teachers indicate there are significant problems with disrupters in the classrooms, one could infer that about half of the time the teachers are not effective in dealing with the disrupters.

Question #6 on the student questionnaire, asks if they think disrupters are getting the message that painful realities come from poor choices, indicated 47 (86%) did not think disrupters were getting the message. This serves as check and balance, indicating the lack of effectiveness in dealing with disrupters in the classroom.

Conclusions

As a result of this research it is clear that there is some real problems in our schools with disrupters. With almost half of the surveys indicating there are problems with disrupters, and related questions indicating that the administrative principals are not effectively following through where the teachers authority ends, clearly students who want to learn and grow are suffering the consequences of this problem. If it is not stopped, it guarantees continued problems in our schools. It has to be understood by the administration that when the consequences necessary to correct a students behavior are out of the teacher's realm of authority, the administrative principal will have to follow through effectively at that point. As pointed out in the six steps to implement boundaries change does not happen immediately, but consistency with the disrupter students will eventually communicate the message and change for the better will occur. Setting boundaries with, love and logic, and prayer to implement them can lead to significant progress in solving the problems in the classroom.

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Appendix A

Is There Freedom in the Classroom?

All answers will be used for data purposes only and kept confidential. Your answers will have no bearing on the grade you receive in this class.
Demographic data—gender_____, age_____, and ethnicity_____.
Please circle the number that best describes your experience.
1=never, 2=rarely, 3=about half the time, 4=almost always, and 5=always.

1. Are you comfortable with the learning environment in your classrooms? Please explain. 1 2 3 4 5

2. Are you confident your teacher has your best interests and growth in mind when teaching responsibility and accountability in the classroom? Please explain.
1 2 3 4 5

3. Are you aware that if you make good choices, good things will happen? Please explain.
1 2 3 4 5

4. Are you aware that if you make poor choices, it will cost you? Please explain.
1 2 3 4 5

5. Are classroom disrupters interfering with your freedom to learn and your teacher's freedom to teach? Please explain.
1 2 3 4 5

6. Are the classroom disrupters getting the message that painful realities come from poor behavior choices? Please explain.
1 2 3 4 5

7. Are you satisfied with your classroom learning experiences? Please explain.
1 2 3 4 5

Appendix B

Is There Freedom in the Classroom?

All answers will be use for data purposes only and confidential.
Demographic data--length of teaching time_____, gender_____, ethnicity_____, and teaching in or out of teaching field.
Please circle the number that best describes your experience.
1=never, 2=rarely, 3=about half the time, 4=almost always, and 5=always.

1. Are you truly enjoying teaching? Please explain.
   1 2 3 4 5

2. Are you satisfied that disrupters in your classroom understand that their actions will not be tolerated? Please explain.
   1 2 3 4 5

3. Are you free to create conditions for self-learning (inquiry)? Please explain.
   1 2 3 4 5

4. Are disrupters in your classroom affecting student involvement? Please explain
   1 2 3 4 5

5. Are the disrupters in your classroom the same students? Please explain.
   1 2 3 4 5

6. Are you satisfied your principals are effective in following through where your realm of authority ends with disrupters? Please explain.
   1 2 3 4 5

7. Are parents interfering with your efforts to create conditions for learning and student involvement? Please explain.
   1 2 3 4 5