

Chapter 5

HOW NOT TO GET CONTROL OF THE CLASSROOM

Moral autonomy appears when the mind regards as necessary an ideal that is independent of all external pressure.

—JEAN PIAGET, *THE MORAL JUDGMENT OF THE CHILD*

A seemingly benign and kindly form of control, to bend rather than break a child's will . . . [is] unlikely to create a genuine sense of autonomy in the child, or a sense of choice and responsibility.

—PHILIP GREVEN, *SPARE THE CHILD*



EFFECTIVE . . . BUT AT WHAT?

The preceding two chapters argued, first, that it doesn't make much sense to punish or reward students, and second, that discipline programs typically rely on punishing and rewarding students (whether or not these words are used). Now it is time to dig beneath the *methods* of discipline and take a look at the underlying *goals*. Simply criticizing what is going on in classrooms, or proposing new techniques, seems to beg the question—and the question is: What are we trying to do here?

This issue is rarely addressed explicitly by people who conduct research on classroom management programs. However, the way their studies measure the "effectiveness" of these programs suggests a distinct set of assumptions about what teachers ought to be doing. Consider one of the classic publications in the field, an early attempt to be scientific about discipline. After videotaping several dozen primary grade classrooms, Jacob Kounin (1970) identified a few key teacher variables as keys to success. Of these, the one that has been most widely cited was rather cutely called "withitness." This term meant the teacher not only was attentive to what students were doing, but let them know she knew what was going on; she developed a reputation for having, as it were, eyes in the back of her head. Such teachers were shown to be more effective than their withoutit colleagues.

But what does it mean in this context to be "effective"? To Kounin, it meant getting "conformity and obedience" (p. 65); it meant students didn't do whatever was defined as "deviant" and kept busy at "the assigned work" (p. 77). Now, if a good classroom is one where students simply do what they're told, we shouldn't be surprised that a teacher is more likely to have such a classroom when students are aware that she can quickly spot noncompliance. After all, if a good society was defined as one where citizens obey any and every governmental decree, then scholars might be able to adduce scientific evidence that a good leader is one who resembles Orwell's Big Brother.

In fact, researchers since Kounin have found that classroom management was most effective "when long periods of student talk (recitations) were avoided. In other words, the teacher retained control over pacing." For that matter, the effective teachers retained control over just about everything, closely directing and monitoring students and providing tasks that were "very highly structured" (Emmer and Evertson 1981, pp. 345, 343). Again, these results are perfectly logical if we accept the premises; the techniques follow naturally from the objective. The objective is not to promote depth of understanding, or continuing motivation to learn, or concern for others. It is to maximize time on task and obedience to authority.

The point here is not to criticize how research is conducted; it is to ask what the whole enterprise of "classroom management" is about. Contrary to claims often made in its behalf, it does not merely signify a set of procedures that enable educators to more effectively reach any goals they may happen to have. The very idea of classroom management, far from being neutral, enfolded within it certain goals. And these goals may well be seen as highly problematic.

"SIT DOWN AND SHUT UP"

If researchers usually fail to address such issues head on, at least many of the people who design and sell discipline plans are quite clear about their objectives. In certain manuals written for parents, the goal may even appear right on the cover. For example, a book called *Magic 1-2-3* (Phelan 1995) carries the subtitle "Training Your Children to Do What *You* Want" (emphasis in original). Both the first word, which is deliberately intended to evoke the control of animal behavior,¹ and the italicized word, which suggests that children's own needs and desires don't matter, leave no doubt about the point of the program.

Even when classroom management guides don't talk about "training" students, it isn't unusual to find a subtitle or chapter title such as "Guidelines for Maintaining Control." Even more commonly, articles about discipline in education magazines take for granted that our chief concern should be to get students to comply with our wishes. We are advised to tell children in no uncertain terms how we expect them to behave, to impose "limits" as we see fit, and to announce what will happen to anyone who disobeys. In short, the prescription is *dictate*, *control*, and *threaten*. An effective teacher by definition is one who manages to get compliance with minimal effort and who succeeds in forcing rebellious children to back down (e.g., Jones 1979).

Assertive Discipline, the best-known of these systems for making the trains run on time in the classroom, was introduced in the mid-1970s. (For a tongue-in-cheek guide to some key terms in this program, see Appendix 2.) The latest edition of the Assertive Discipline

manual contains a bit of perfunctory talk about helping students to develop "responsibility" and "self-esteem," but even the most cursory exposure to the program makes it clear that the overriding goal is to get students to do whatever they are told without question. Teachers are encouraged to remove anyone who misbehaves because this "gives you back the control of the classroom" (Canter and Canter 1992, p. 87). That the teacher *ought* to have unilateral control is not a proposition to be defended; it is a premise, a first principle. And if students balk at the demand for obedience—or at anything else—it doesn't matter. All that counts, as Canter states with remarkable candor, is that they capitulate:

Whenever possible, simply ignore the covert hostility of a student. By ignoring the behavior you will diffuse [sic] the situation. Remember, what you really want is for the student to comply with your request. Whether or not the student does it in an angry manner is not the issue. The student is still complying with your expectations (Canter and Canter 1992, p. 180).

Even when judged by the narrow criterion of getting children to conform, the evidence suggests that Assertive Discipline is not terribly effective. When various approaches to classroom management are examined empirically, some studies typically show "positive" effects while others show no effects. It is rare to discover that a program has negative effects, but they have turned up in some studies of Assertive Discipline. Overall, most of the published research shows the technique to be detrimental or, at best, to have no meaningful effect at all (Emmer and Aussiker 1990; Render, Padilla, and Krank 1989).

Still, one of the chief selling points of a program like Assertive Discipline is, in the words of one teacher, that "it's easy to use. It's all spelled out for you" (Hill 1990, p. 75). Without a packaged system, Canter warns, the teacher would be "forced to constantly make choices about how to react to student behavior" (Canter and Canter 1992, p. 46). In other words, the teacher might have to think for herself or bring students into the process of solving problems. The late John Nicholls spent a year watching a 2nd grade teacher struggle to implement Assertive Discipline and observed that it "stifled her wit

and cut her off from the children she communicates with so well" (Nicholls and Hazzard 1993, p. 187). Indeed, teachers who have abandoned the program in favor of a noncoercive model of teaching sometimes say they would quit the profession before using Assertive Discipline again.

A few years ago, a writer asked me whether I thought this program would be around long enough to warrant her taking the time to criticize it in a book she was writing on another topic. As I pondered her question, I found my reactions shifting. My first thought was: "By all means! Hundreds of thousands of teachers² have been exposed to this set of techniques, and many have never been helped to reflect on how destructive it really is."

Then I reconsidered. It's too easy, I realized, to blame a single person or program for what is disturbing about American schools. Canter has often pointed out that "there is nothing new about Assertive Discipline," that it is "simply a systematization" of common behavior management strategies (Canter 1989, p. 631)—and he is absolutely right. If this program disappeared from the face of the earth tomorrow, another collection of bribes and threats would take its place. It is really these generic techniques that need to be uprooted.

Only gradually did I realize that even this was not the last word. Rewards and punishments are instruments for controlling people, and the real problem, I came to see, is the belief that the teacher should be in control of the classroom, that the principal objective—and sometimes the objective of the principal—is just to get students to comply. In this chapter, and implicitly through the remainder of the book, I will try to show why this common assumption is so troubling and what the alternative looks like. Before doing so, however, let us take a quick look at the New Disciplines to see whether their objectives are any different.

"BE SEATED AND REFRAIN FROM TALKING"

If you ask the purveyors of the New Disciplines what they are trying to accomplish, you will often hear broad, laudable goals concerning children's psychological development. There are even occasional

denunciations of mindless conformity: we are told that "obedience, even when it 'works,' is not . . . defensible" (Curwin and Mendler 1988, pp. 23–24) and that "the more voice and choice students have, the more cooperative and responsible they'll act and feel" (Albert 1989, p. 19).

What really counts, however, is what goes on in a classroom where such a program is in operation. What would be inferred by a visitor who had never read the rhetoric? What philosophy is implied by the specific practical recommendations? The answer, I have reluctantly concluded, is that the New Disciplines are just as much about getting compliance as is the more traditional approach. The overriding goal is to get students to do "what they are supposed to be doing" (Curwin and Mendler 1991), to "learn what's acceptable [to the teacher] and what's not" (Albert 1989, p. 67).

Indeed, we are tipped off from the start by the fact that presentations on these programs often begin with a nostalgic nod to the good old days when students did what the teacher asked without questioning. More significantly, these systems accept—also without questioning—that it is desirable, if not necessary, for teachers to be in control of their classrooms. The only issues are how benevolent that controller will be and how respectfully she will get and maintain the control. This imperative is hard to miss in many of the quotations from New Discipline books and videos that I have already cited.

For Rudolf Dreikurs, getting students to do what the teacher tells them is only a means to an end. His ultimate objective seems to be preserving the status quo in the broadest sense. On the very first page of his major tract on logical consequences (written in the 1960s), Dreikurs offers a bitter condemnation of social unrest that lumps together protest marches and juvenile delinquency (Dreikurs and Grey 1968, p. 3). He goes on to indignantly denounce how "parents are called upon to justify their actions in ways which were not expected of them in the past" (p. 4) and how "today children are free to do as they please" (pp. 20–21). Sprinkled throughout the book are remarks about the need "to keep things moving smoothly" (p. 153) and the importance of "respect for order" (p. 125) and getting children to "learn to respect the established rules" (p. 72).

In Dreikurs's other books—and those of the authors influenced by him—there is much talk about “democracy” and the importance of replacing crude coercion with modern methods such as mutual respect and dialogue. At first, it isn't easy to explain how these ideas could exist side by side with a list of “consequences” that seem almost sadistic. Likewise, one struggles to understand how a section of one of his books entitled “Democratic Practices” could contain such suggestions as using a class meeting to drive “a wedge between the participants, splitting them up [so as] to weaken their power. The moment the teacher wins one or more of the students, it fortifies her position” (Dreikurs et al. 1982, p. 237).

But the apparent contradiction dissolves once we recognize the very specific, and rather peculiar, meaning Dreikurs gives to democracy. In a pivotal sentence, he declares: “*It is autocratic to force, but democratic to induce compliance*” (Dreikurs et al. 1982, p. 67; emphasis added). And later: “Children should be stimulated to want to conform” (pp. 85–86). Given this perspective, it makes sense that discussion sessions would be used strategically by teachers to “induce compliance.” Dreikurs is decidedly not talking about offering students a genuine opportunity to participate in decision making.

Some discipline practitioners shy away from explicit talk of compliance. Their language is lovelier and their techniques are trendier, but ultimately their systems are woven from the same cloth. For someone interested in goals, it makes little difference whether one resorts to nods and smiles rather than scowls and shouts, whether one prefers class meetings, positive reinforcement, or old-fashioned punishment. What counts is that the teacher has never given up any real control. What matters is that the goal is not learning: it is obedience.

THE PROBLEM WITH COMPLIANCE

Like a few other people I know who conduct workshops, I like to start a session by asking participants to think about the following question: “What are your long-term goals for the students you work with? What would you like them to be—to be like—long after

they've left you?” After a moment, I ask what words or phrases have come to mind, and I write on a flip chart each answer that is volunteered. Then I ask the group to reflect on the list as a whole and see if any generalizations suggest themselves.

The document that emerges almost always describes a certain kind of person rather than just a certain kind of learner. Psychological and social characteristics (for example, “caring,” “happy,” and “responsible”) predominate over those relating to intellect. Moreover, someone invariably notices that even those goals that do pertain to intellectual development have been conceived broadly (“curious,” “creative,” “lifelong learners”) rather than in terms of specific academic content. In all the times I have done this activity in different parts of the country, no educator—or parent, for that matter—has ever said that his or her long-term goal for students is for them to know how to solve an equation with two variables, or remember the names of the explorers of the New World.

This simple exercise, which I recommend for virtually any staff development session or faculty meeting, is so useful because it is so unsettling. It is unsettling because it exposes a yawning chasm between what we want and what we are doing, between how we would like students to turn out and how our classrooms and schools actually work. We want children to continue reading and thinking after school has ended, yet we focus their attention on grades, which have been shown to reduce interest in learning (Kohn 1993a, 1994). We want them to be critical thinkers, yet we feed them predigested facts and discrete skills—partly because of pressure from various constituencies to pump up standardized test scores. We act as though our goal is short-term retention of right answers rather than genuine understanding.

These points have been made before. But now consider the non-academic goals, which seem to be at least as important to educators and parents. Just as no one offers specific academic content as a long-term objective, so no one says, “I want my kids to obey authority without question, to be compliant and docile.”

Now maybe the people who attend my workshops are strikingly unrepresentative of American educators, or maybe those who do show up are just too embarrassed to admit that they are hoping to

produce compliant people. You will have to judge for yourself, based on your own goals and those of your colleagues, how typical and candid are the responses I'm reporting here. But if compliance is, in fact, not what most of us are looking for in the long run, then we may be faced with the same basic conflict: our ultimate objectives for kids versus our short-term goals (control of the classroom) and methods (coercion, consequences, rewards). Something has got to give.

What I've been arguing, over the course of several chapters, is that desirable outcomes are harder to achieve if we rely on bribes and threats. Even when children are "successfully" rewarded or threatened into compliance, they will likely feel no commitment to what they are doing, no deep understanding of the act and its rationale, no sense of themselves as the kind of people who would *want* to act this way in the future. Remember: they have been led to concentrate on the consequences of their actions to themselves, and someone with this frame of reference bears little resemblance to the kind of person we dream of seeing our students become.

But now we are ready to move beyond a critique of punishment and rewards. The next step is to recognize that trying to keep control of the classroom and get compliance, as virtually every discipline program assures us we must, is inimical to our ultimate objectives. What we have to face is that *the more we "manage" students' behavior and try to make them do what we say, the more difficult it is for them to become morally sophisticated people who think for themselves and care about others.*

This proposition immediately leads some people to ask: Aren't there times when we simply need students to do what we tell them? To answer this question thoughtfully, we should begin by observing that the number of those occasions seems to vary quite a bit from one teacher to the next. This fact suggests that the "need" for compliance is less a function of some objective feature of the situation than of the teacher's personality and background—or of the pressures brought to bear by others (for example, to have one's classroom "under control"). Thus, we ought to examine our preferences rather than taking them for granted. If I discover that I need students to be more compliant than you do, I should not feel entitled to use a coer-

cive discipline program; rather, I should examine the source of my demand for compliance.*

So does this mean that anything goes? Does it mean that students don't have to comply with our preference for them to study, that they can ignore their assignments, shout obscenities, or create havoc? This sort of scenario is frequently invoked as a way of fending off challenges to the way things have always been done. But it misses the point. The question isn't whether it's OK for students to act in those ways. Rather, the question is whether they are likely to do so in the absence of a teacher-controlled, compliance-oriented classroom.

If we reject an unduly pessimistic view of children's basic motives, if we recognize that the quality of the curriculum has a lot to do with students' enthusiasm (or its absence), then we will be less likely to revert to the simplistic opposition of control versus chaos, in which teachers think they "must choose between putting up with behavior problems and being the big boss and stamping them out" (Nicholls and Hazzard 1993, p. 56). False dichotomies like this one are popular in part because they make choosing easy: clearly we don't want chaos, therefore there's only one road to take. But in the kind of classroom I will be describing, the teacher works with students to create a democratic community. He is much less concerned with his own status as the authority figure, and much less enamored of a goal like "inducing compliance."

Paradoxically, students in such classrooms are more likely to comply when it is truly necessary for them to do so—and, yes, of course, there will be such times. In certain situations, any teacher will need students just to do what she says, period. But students are more apt to trust her and go along if blind obedience is the exception rather than the rule in her classroom—which is to say, if she makes a habit of trusting *them* and has earned their respect. I am talking about a teacher who doesn't compel kids to learn or care *because she said so*, but instead helps them to experience the value of learning and caring.

* See the discussion in Chapter 2 about focusing on the child who doesn't do what he's told as opposed to reconsidering what he has been told to do.

But hold on. Even if our ultimate goal is for students to do the right thing for the right reason, don't we have to start out by demanding compliance? Doesn't the teacher need to have control of the classroom initially, as a prerequisite for achieving more ambitious and worthy ends?

Before answering that question, let's do a quick reality check. How often are these ends the real reason for taking control? We can search through countless articles and books on classroom management without finding any evidence that the writers are ultimately trying to empower children but just have a different way of getting there.* Indeed, the children themselves know full well that compliance remains the real point throughout the school year. When 4th graders in a variety of classrooms, representing a range of teaching styles and socioeconomic backgrounds, were surveyed about what their teachers most wanted them to do, they didn't say, "Ask thoughtful questions" or "Make responsible decisions" or "Help others." They said: "Be quiet, don't fool around, and get our work done on time" (LeCompte 1978, p. 30). Similarly, in interviews with 2nd and 6th graders that probed their beliefs about what it means to "behave well," the most common single answer had to do with keeping quiet (Blumenfeld, Pintrich, and Hamilton 1986).

But let's say a teacher really did want to help students take responsibility for themselves, to be capable decision makers and self-directed learners. Would she nevertheless have to start the year by securing control of the classroom in order to reach these goals? Absolutely not. In fact, to do so would make it far more difficult to be successful later on.

* Whether most educators really see control of the classroom as a necessary evil that facilitates *academic* learning is also open to debate. As Linda McNeil (1986, pp. 157-158) has observed, "many teachers . . . maintain discipline by the ways they present course content." To turn teaching into a transfer of disconnected facts and skills, for example, makes it easier to keep control. One traditionalist says that teachers should start the day with a "review drill" precisely because such an exercise "becomes a control mechanism" [McDaniel 1982, p. 247]. Curricular design, in other words, may actually be the means, with control being the end—thus turning the conventional wisdom on its head.

Be yourself

From the first day of school, a teacher chooses a style of leadership (ranging from autocratic to democratic) and sends a message about whose classroom it is (his or everyone's). It has often been observed that a teacher who seems indifferent and irrelevant to what the students are doing will have a hard time playing a more active role later on. Fair enough. But it is just as true that a teacher whose style is controlling, whose chief goal is to get obedience, who unilaterally decides on the "expectations" for what will happen in the room and imposes these on students, will not find it easy to transform that environment.

You may be familiar with the hoary educational adage that teachers should not smile until Christmas (or even Easter)—that is, that they should be severe and controlling for months and only then relent a bit, displaying a bit of kindness and revealing themselves to be actual human beings. I don't know who came up with that appalling saying, but I can only hope that he or she is no longer in a position to do harm to children. It is difficult to imagine an approach more out of step with everything we know about child development and learning. Even construed narrowly, that advice makes no sense: the available research "clearly demonstrates that nice teachers are highly effective . . . [and refutes] the myth that students learn more from cold, stern, distant teachers" (Andersen and Andersen 1987, pp. 57-58)—except, of course, that they may learn to be cold, stern, and distant themselves.

I have to believe that few educators would deliberately refrain from smiling. But quite a number subscribe—indeed, are trained to subscribe—to the fundamentally similar belief that control must come first. Some may even use smiles to gain that control. My contention is that a different set of goals and practices makes sense from the very beginning.

MAKING MORAL MEANING

One way to talk about compliance is to say that the goal is to get children to learn the "appropriate" behavior, as designated by someone else. This approach is strikingly similar to the traditional model

of academic instruction, where information or skills are transmitted to students so they will be able to produce correct answers on demand. For anyone who understands the limits of a "right answer" approach to learning, it can be illuminating to see that classroom management is basically about eliciting the "right behavior." This analogy also may help us to think about what we could be accomplishing instead.

The "constructivist" model of learning challenges the central metaphors that so often drive instruction. Children, like adults, are not passive receptacles into which knowledge is poured. They are not clay to be molded, or computers to be programmed, or animals to be trained. Rather, they are active meaning makers, testing out theories and trying to make sense of themselves and the world around them. Learning comes from discovering surprising things—perhaps from grappling with a peer's different perspective—and feeling the need to reformulate one's own approach. It entails playing with words and numbers and ideas, coming to understand these things from the inside out and making them one's own. Skills are acquired in the course of arriving at that deep and personal understanding, and in the context of seeking answers to one's own questions.

When children are instead required to accept or memorize a ready-made truth, they do not really "learn" in any meaningful sense of the word. This is what we witness when students have to do problem sets in math, multiplying rows of naked numbers; or make their way through worksheets until they can identify vowels or verbs; or slog through textbook lessons about scientific laws or historical events. This may be the way to prepare children to take standardized tests (though it doesn't appear very successful); it is not the way to help them become learners. "Teachers everywhere lament how quickly students forget" what they've learned, but the students "haven't forgotten; they never learned that which we assumed they had" (Brooks and Brooks 1993, pp. 39–40). At best, they learned how to spit out someone else's right answers.

Exactly the same is true if those right answers concern how one is supposed to *act*. I can get a child to recite "We should keep our hands and feet to ourselves" by repeating it enough times or by post-

ing it on the wall, just as I can get her to recite "To divide by a fraction, turn it upside down and multiply." I can get a child to stop slugging someone (at least in my presence) by threatening to punish him if he continues, just as I can get him to pick out the topic sentence of a paragraph. But the first examples in each pair don't suggest someone who is developing socially or morally, any more than the latter examples suggest someone who is developing intellectually.

Think about actions The only way to help students become ethical people, as opposed to people who merely do what they are told, is to have them construct moral meaning. It is to help them figure out—for themselves and with each other—how one ought to act. That's why dropping the tools of traditional discipline, like rewards and consequences, is only the beginning. It's even more crucial that we overcome a preoccupation with getting compliance and instead bring students in on the process of devising and justifying ethical principles.

This approach can be observed in classrooms scattered here and there across the country, and it is reflected in the work of the Child Development Project (which I describe in Chapter 7). It is also described in a pathbreaking book for early childhood educators³ entitled *Moral Classrooms, Moral Children* by Rheta DeVries and Betty Zan (1994).

DeVries, along with Constance Kamii (1984, 1991; Kamii, Clark, and Dominick 1994), has her roots in a constructivist approach to math and science education for young children. But both of these researchers, drawing on the work of Jean Piaget (1965), also argue that children must actively invent (and reinvent) ethical meaning, just as they must construct mathematical meaning. In taking this position, they join the late Lawrence Kohlberg (e.g., Kohlberg and Mayer 1972; Power, Higgins, and Kohlberg 1989), who spent his career applying Piagetian notions of cognitive development to the moral realm—and other early childhood specialists such as Carolyn Edwards (1986) and Lilian Katz (1984)—in emphasizing that getting children to comply cannot be the teacher's primary goal.

Of course, merely *telling* teachers to stop focusing on compliance isn't any more likely to lead to real change than is merely telling children to act responsibly. But we can encourage teachers to

think about their long-term goals and about whether their classrooms are really animated by these goals. Anyone can nod in agreement with such objectives as helping kids to develop an intrinsic commitment to good values, but does one's classroom reflect that concern? Or is the real point, day to day, simply to get kids to do what they're told?

We also have to identify particular assumptions and practices that accompany the quest for compliance—and to help others (and ourselves) think about them from a constructivist point of view. Two of those constellations of issues are addressed at length in the following chapters: first, maximizing the opportunity for students to make choices, to discover and learn for themselves; and second, creating a caring community in the classroom so that students have the opportunity to do these things *together*.

Even before addressing these broad issues, though, I'd like to look at three overlapping aspects of a constructivist approach that directly challenge conventional classroom management: moving beyond a focus on *behavior*, on *rules*, and on *ending conflict*.

BEHAVIORS VS. PEOPLE

The developer of one New Discipline program has described its goal as getting students to "choose appropriate behaviors." That sounds at first like nothing more than plain common sense. But on reflection, there is reason to be concerned about each of those three words and the model that informs them.

The use of "choose," as I noted earlier, raises questions about the extent to which students are really just expected to do what someone else has decided, rather than having the chance to make any real choices. It's often a way of blaming students for things about which they had little to say. As for the modifier "appropriate," we might respond, "Appropriate to whom? And why?" To fudge those questions, as discipline programs tend to do, is to guarantee a system based on obedience.

But even to aim at getting certain "behaviors" from students is problematic. To focus on changing how a student *acts* virtually guarantees the use of carrots and sticks, which manipulate actions. Or, to

put it the other way around, the techniques of applied behaviorism suggest a tacit reliance on behaviorist theory. Giving rewards (or "reinforcers") for compliance can be traced back to B.F. Skinner's view of all organisms, including us, as devoid of selves. We are nothing more than "repertoires of behaviors" that can, in turn, be completely explained in terms of things outside of us ("environmental contingencies").

You may not be sympathetic—or even familiar—with this odd, shrunken view of what it is to be human. But any time educators (or parents) frame the issue in terms of the need to change a child's behavior, they are unwittingly buying into a larger theory, one that excludes what many of us would argue are the things that really matter: the child's thoughts and feelings, needs and perspectives, motives and values—the things, in short, that result in certain behaviors. The behavior is only the surface phenomenon; what matters is the person who behaves . . . and *why* she does so.

Here are two students in two different classrooms, each of whom just gave half his lunch to someone else. The first student did so in the hope that the teacher would notice this and praise him: "Isn't that a nice thing to do! I'm so proud of you! I really appreciate your sharing like that!" The second student did so without knowing or caring whether the teacher saw him: he was simply concerned that the kid sitting next to him might go hungry.

The two behaviors are identical. What matters are the reasons and feelings that lie beneath. Discipline programs can (temporarily) change behavior, but they cannot help people to grow. The latter requires a very different orientation in the classroom: looking "through" a given action in order to understand the motives that gave rise to it as well as figuring out how to have some effect on those motives.

Consider, then, a specific contrast between two ways of responding to a child who shared his lunch. The teacher who is preoccupied with the behavior—and who seeks, in this case, to produce more of it—would probably resort to praise. A different approach, derived from Martin Hoffman's work on "inductive discipline" (Hoffman and Saltzstein 1967), would be to help the child attend to how his decision to share has affected someone else (in this case, the recipient of

his food). "Boy, would you look at Jaime's face! He is one happy guy now that he has enough to eat, isn't he?"

The message of praise is: I approve of what you did, so you should do it again. It is a way of reinforcing the act.* "Look at Jaime's face!", on the other hand, is concerned with helping the sharer to experience the effects of sharing and to come to see himself as the kind of person who wants to make other people feel good—irrespective of verbal rewards.⁴ Even when this particular response isn't used, the goal remains much deeper than buying a behavior; it is nothing less than assisting children in constructing an image of themselves as decent people.

BEYOND RULES

Behaviorism lives on, not only in stickers and stars but in lists of concrete rules telling children exactly what they must, or must not, do. In Assertive Discipline, broader guidelines ("Treat each other kindly") are explicitly repudiated in favor of specific prescriptions ("Keep hands and feet to yourself") and proscriptions ("No profanity"): "The more observable a rule is, the easier it is for students to understand and comply with it" (Canter and Canter 1992, p. 51). Once again, Discipline with Dignity follows Canter's lead: "Rules work best when they are behavioral and written in black-and-white terms" (Curwin and Mendler 1988, p. 21).

Much is made of the need to spell out these rules (and the consequences that invariably accompany them) in advance, in order to provide "predictability." (Also, doing so may help to silence the inevitable complaints of unfairness in an environment defined by punitive consequences.) Thus, a teacher in the Discipline with Dignity video (Curwin and Mendler 1991) is brought on camera to announce with some satisfaction that her students are "aware, when they've broken a rule, what's going to happen, how it's going to happen, and when it's going to happen."

* Interestingly, despite the behavioral focus, this practice probably does make a deeper change in the child's way of looking at the world—for the worse. He is led to become concerned primarily with getting the adult's approval.

Unfortunately, the real message communicated in such a classroom is that it is not a community where troublesome behavior is a problem to be solved together; it is a place where the teacher says, "Do what I tell you, or here's *exactly* what I'll do to you." Just as a threat is no less a threat simply because it is uttered calmly, so a threat does not change its nature merely because it is spelled out ahead of time. If anything, the advance notice enhances its salience.⁵

An article entitled (without irony) "How to Be an Effective Authoritarian" offers the following as its first piece of practical advice: "Rules should be *specific*. . . . So that students do not have to define the real meaning of a rule, state it in specific, objective terms" (McDaniel 1982, p. 246). Notice that this prescription is more than behaviorism come to life; it is also, true to the essay's title, authoritarianism come to life. If the overriding objective is to get students to do whatever the teacher demands, it makes perfect sense to spell out specific rules that mandate specific behaviors. If, however, the goal is to help students grow into compassionate, principled people, then having students "define the real meaning" of rules is the best way—perhaps the only way—that a list of rules prepared by the teacher can help students become thoughtful decision makers. But such an arrangement can only do so much: it is far better to ask children to create the rules.

Some classroom management programs now suggest bringing students in on the rule-making process. But it's important to realize that this idea does not in itself reflect a constructivist perspective. For example, a program may allow, or even encourage, us to react with relief when a student comes up with the very rules that we had in mind: "What we have found is that the kids will either come up with the same rules [as the teacher's] or even tougher rules, but then they have ownership and you can label them 'We decided' instead of 'I decided'" (Nelsen et al. 1993, p. 140).

An adult with more ambitious objectives might well view such a neat correspondence with concern: students may be saying what they think the teacher wants to hear, or reciting what they memorized in previous years. No learning has taken place in such a transaction, nor has any moral or intellectual growth. The point may be,

making the child
as it seems to be with Dreikurs, to foster the *appearance* of participation in order to secure compliance.

Some teachers (and consultants) have more on their minds than getting kids to obey: they genuinely want to create a classroom where students are respectful of one another. But they try to reach these objectives by drilling students in the right way to act (e.g., Charney 1991). Students have no opportunity to reflect on why it may be the right way, nor any chance to disagree. Their job is to say and do what they are told. The fact that you or I may be entirely sympathetic with *what* they are told—for example, the importance of respecting other people's feelings—shouldn't blind us to the limits of what can be achieved by merely telling people something. We ought to be concerned when even "very reasonable rules [are] . . . imposed and enforced from above, with little opportunity for students to develop an understanding of or personal commitment to them" (Lewis 1995, p. 144). (A reliable earmark of this "imposed from above" approach is the use of public praise to reinforce certain behaviors.)

If students are to create rules, the teacher must be clear (first in her own mind, then with them) that the point is just that: to create. Student-generated rules that emerge from a deep and ongoing conversation are likely to be valuable not because of the rules themselves but because of the conversation that gave rise to them. *The process is the point.*

But let's go even further. From a constructivist perspective, the very idea of rules may be troubling. Teachers who have taken the important step of inviting students to help make up the rules would do well to question the value of generating a list of behavioral particulars—for at least three reasons. First of all, rules turn children into lawyers, scanning for loopholes and caveats, narrowing the discussion to technicalities when a problem occurs. The long-term implications of creating such a mind-set are quite disturbing, as Marilyn Watson explains:

Students are encouraged to perform a kind of calculation: Is the fun or personal gain of this violation worth the pain or personal loss I'll suffer if I get caught? The school is seen as a legal system in which one operates out of self-interest, making personal choices

about one's behavior and experiencing the positive and negative consequences of such choices. In this case, the school is not a moral agent, not a socializing agent; it does not define the kind of community which the child is joining, but acts merely as an enforcer of an externally determined code of conduct, a code that is imposed on only some members: the students.⁶

Second, rules turn teachers into police officers, a role utterly at odds with being facilitators of learning. Watson again puts it very well:

If adults are the upholders of order, then whenever they are in the presence of children, they must be vigilant. They must be watching for violations. . . . And most children will avoid the presence of adults for fear that they will be controlled or chastised. Such an approach to discipline creates the very opposite of a caring community—in fact, it mitigates against the school's becoming a community at all.

Third, rules usually enfold within them a punitive consequence for breaking them. The result is that we are thrown back into doing things *to* students rather than working *with* them to solve problems. The more "behavioral" or "black-and-white" the rule, the more likely it is that all these things will happen.

The alternative to concrete rules is not to say, "Do whatever you personally feel like." (That's another false dichotomy.) It is to engage the class in discussion about the "ways we want our class to be" (Child Development Project 1996a) and how that can be made to happen. There are few educational contrasts so sharp and meaningful as that between students being told what the teacher expects of them, what they are and are not permitted to do, and students coming together to reflect on how they can live and learn together. It is the difference between being prepared to spend a lifetime doing what one is told and being prepared to take an active role in a democratic society (or to transform a society *into* one that is democratic, as the case may be).

Do children differ in terms of their ability to think abstractly? Sure. Those who are inclined to think in concrete terms, if only because they are younger, can begin with specific ideas for how we should treat one another. But the process shouldn't end there. Work-

ing together to abstract a few common principles from a brainstormed list of specific suggestions can be, among other things, a terrific way of honing thinking skills. It can help even six-year-olds to transcend a preoccupation with black-and-white rules. But first we educators have to do so.

THE VALUE OF CONFLICT

Need conflict { The constructivist classroom, I have been arguing, is one in which the process matters at least as much as the product. The wrestling with dilemmas, the clash of ideas, the need to take others' needs into account—these are ultimately more meaningful than any list of rules or guidelines that may ultimately result. The sound of children arguing (at least in many circumstances) is music to the teacher's ears. Conflict is so vital to development that some experienced teachers go out of their way to highlight, or even create, situations where kids must think or feel their way out (Katz 1984, DeVries and Zan 1994, Lewis 1995), such as by deliberately having fewer materials available than there are children.

Of course, there is little need to invent conflict in many classrooms; the natural supply is abundant. Moreover, conflict sometimes takes forms that are patently destructive and must be stopped, if only to ensure the safety of the participants and those around them. But disagreement, however challenging it may be to the teacher and his prepared lesson plan, can be seen as an opportunity for learning—a teachable moment—rather than as something to be efficiently ended. Even unconstructive forms of conflict need to be resolved rather than snuffed out. (Unhappily, some versions of “conflict resolution” fail to live up to their name: they reflect little understanding of the need to examine the deeper issues involved, including people's motives—or the fact that something of value may have been gained because of the incident.)

Indeed, from this perspective there is something a little suspicious about classrooms that operate too smoothly, too cleanly. Here the conflict may have been pushed underground, or promptly dispatched by the teacher's intervention. Eric Schaps (1990, p. 8) expressed concern about classrooms he had observed where cooperative learn-

ing was going exactly according to plan, with students saying all the right things. “Deeper learning would look somewhat ‘messier’ than what I am seeing,” he remarked, adding that many teachers “seem satisfied with easy or predictable answers. Their questions do not often probe or challenge; their comments are often routine and formulaic.” If teachers and students were really exploring ideas wholeheartedly, there would be “more conflict, more frustration.”

If two children are fussing with each other, the constructivist tries to resist the temptation to silence them or separate them in order to get on with the lesson. In an important sense, the conflict *is* the lesson—or at least it can become one if the teacher doesn't take over and solve (or end) the problem. But don't expect to find this point of view in discipline programs. Here, conflict is regarded as comparable to dandruff: something unsightly to be eliminated as rapidly as possible by using whatever seems to work.

To someone who thinks in terms of managing students, the only thing worse than the sort of conflict in which students are arguing with each other is the kind where they have the temerity to challenge the teacher. Thus, Cooperative Discipline tells us, a child's objections to something the teacher demands can be brushed off as “pseudologic” or “linguistic acrobatics” and need not be taken seriously (Albert 1989, p. 45). “Refuse to accept excuses,” instructs Discipline with Dignity (Curwin and Mendler 1988, p. 15)—once again echoing the advice of Assertive Discipline (Canter and Canter 1992, p. 177). And from yet another source: a teacher who reprimands students for doing something must not listen if they attempt to explain what they were doing. The teacher must

guard against . . . getting verbally engaged with the child about the particulars of the alibi. Such wheedling or diversionary tactics have as their sole purpose derailing your efforts to set a limit. If you do not bite the bait, you will succeed. Shut up, get close, and wait. When the child runs out of hot air, say firmly, “Sit up,” “Turn around,” or “Get to work.” As soon as the child caves in and complies, become warm and nurturant and say, “Thank you” (Jones 1979, p. 29; also see Charney 1991, p. 102).

This advice appears in an article entitled "The Gentle Art of Classroom Discipline."

Such contempt for rational discourse with children—and indeed for children themselves, whose points of view are just so much "hot air"—follows naturally from the fact that a respectful dialogue may interfere with one's attempt to control them. It shows up again in the work of Dreikurs, notwithstanding his humanistic reputation. Over and over, he criticizes teachers for discussing problems rather than simply taking action. To discuss is to fall into the clever student's trap: "One cannot be firm if one talks. In the moment of conflict, talking is increased warfare and can have no beneficial effect" (Dreikurs and Grey 1968, p. 47). In place of discussion, the teacher who gets an argument from "the tyrant"—and this way of characterizing a student may tell us all we need to know about Dreikurs's point of view—should do the following: "first, you simply reply 'You may have a point.' Second, you do whatever *you* think is right" (Dreikurs and Cassel 1972, p. 69).

Unquestionably, there are some situations in the classroom that don't allow for an extended discussion at the time they occur. (A commitment to pick up the conversation later would seem to be called for here.) It's also true that some kinds of discussion are, shall we say, less useful than others. But the bottom line is that "teachers should expect and welcome children's excuses and arguments about rules" (Edwards 1986, p. 169) because that is how children become thinkers—by making up their own minds about whether something makes sense and figuring out how to convince others.

To discourage (let alone punish) objections is to sacrifice the development of judgment to the imperative of conformity. Denying students a voice, however, does not make their objections disappear; it just sweeps them under the carpet where people will trip over them—that is, where they will make their presence felt in ways that are less productive than rational argument.

Of course, it takes a special teacher to be open to this kind of conflict, someone who is not only patient but secure enough in herself not to need to have the last word. Most of us will often find it difficult to welcome conflict, but this is surely something to which

we can aspire. To create a classroom where students feel safe enough to challenge each other—and us—is to give them an enormous gift.

One more objection needs to be answered: Aren't there times when a student really is just trying to bait us or waste time? Yes, and it's certainly acceptable to suggest—gently and perhaps with a sense of humor—that this is what seems to be going on. But I trust teachers to be able to tell the difference if, as a rule, they welcome discussion and see conflict as desirable. I'm less sure about disciplinarians, with their deep suspicion of children's motives and their intolerance for dissent. Every challenge to them is likely to be seen as unacceptable; every question is impertinent.

Discipline writers may solemnly inform us that it is not enough to stop misbehavior in the classroom; rather, we must take action beforehand to limit its occurrence. But the real quantum leap in thinking is not from after-the-fact to prevention, where problems are concerned. It involves getting to the point that we ask, "What exactly is construed as a problem here—and why?" It means shifting from eliciting conformity and ending conflict to helping students become active participants in their own social and ethical development.

