7. Misbehavior, Social Control, and Student Engagement

A SmartBrief sent out by ASCD reported that Southern schools increasingly were *requiring students to take "character" classes as part of an effort to combat disrespectful behavior. Louisiana lawmakers, for instance, ... passed "courtesy conduct" legislation that requires elementary students to address their teachers as "ma'am" and "sir".*

Disengaged Students and Social Control

When Socializing Practices Conflict with Helping

Enhancing Intrinsic Motivation is a Fundamental Engagement Concern

As you read about the matters covered in this chapter consider:

In what ways has the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on student engagement in formal learning?

Why do you say the school doesn't respect your privacy?

They keep calling my parents to tell them how badly I'm doing my school work!

> Misbehavior disrupts. In some forms, such as bullying and intimidating others, it is hurtful. And, observing such behavior may disinhibit others.

When a student misbehaves, a natural reaction is to want that youngster to experience and other students to see the negative consequences of misbehaving. One hope is that public awareness of consequences will deter subsequent problems. As a result, a considerable amount of time is devoted to discipline; a common concern for teachers is how best to handle misbehavior (e.g., often referred to as classroom management.)

In their efforts to deal with deviant and devious behavior and to create safe environments, the degree to which schools rely on social control strategies is a significant issue. For example, concerns have been raised that such practices model behavior that can foster rather than counter development of negative values and often produces other forms of undesired behavior. And, there is concern that the practices often make a school look and feel a bit too much like a prison.

To move schools beyond overreliance on punishment and control strategies, the call has been for more proactive practices. Examples of such practices include social skills training, positive behavior support, restorative justice, mindfulness, emotional intelligence training, asset development, and character education. From a preventive perspective, there is advocacy for ensuring that the curricula fosters intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, emotional well-being, social and moral responsibility, personal integrity, self-regulation (self-discipline), an academic work ethic, and more.

And the role families should play has long been emphasized. The need for developing more effective school-home partnerships was underscored by the learning, behavior, and emotional problems that emerged during COVID-19 home-schooling.

Disengaged Students and Social Control

> Students who are not engaged or who have become actively disengaged from instruction are among the most frequent discipline and learning problems. And behavior and learning problems usually generate emotional problems.

In general, teaching involves practices to convey content and promote acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. All this works fine when students approach instruction each day ready and able to deal with what schools are ready and able to teach. At school, teachers are indeed fortunate when they have a classroom where the majority of students show up and are receptive to the planned lessons.

In schools that are the greatest focus of public criticism, this just isn't the case. Teachers in such settings encounter many students who not only frequently misbehave, but also are not easily intimidated by authority figures. Such students often have become disengaged from and resistant to prevailing teaching practices. This problem has become a painful reality for families related to online learning.

At school, when students are not engaged in the lessons at hand, they tend to pursue other activity. As teachers and other staff try to cope, with disruptive youngsters, instructional time is lost to "classroom management" efforts. At one time, a heavy dose of punishment was the dominant reaction to misbehavior. Currently, the stress is on developing a more positive approach in and out of the classroom. However, these newer strategies remain reactive, tend to rely on reducing disruptive behavior through *social control* techniques, and pay little attention to the need to help teachers re-engage the student in classroom instruction.

Whatever practices are used in reacting to misbehavior, they often are potent only in the short-run; misbehavior is likely to reappear unless the student is intrinsically re-engaged in formal instruction. Such engagement is key to preventing misbehavior.

All teachers have been taught something about engaging students. Unfortunately, practices for the *re-engaging* students who have become disconnected from instruction rarely are a prominent part of pre- or in-service personnel preparation. And those at home often overrely on rewards and punishment.

For anyone striving to enhance their understanding of and planning for student engagement, the analysis by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris is helpful (see Exhibit 21). Three types of engagement are differentiated (i.e., behavioral, emotional, and cognitive) and school, classroom, and individual factors affecting engagement are identified, along with ways to measure engagement. The authors conclude: "Engagement is associated with positive academic outcomes, including achievement and persistence in school; and it is higher in classrooms with supportive teachers and peers, challenging and authentic tasks, opportunities for choice, and sufficient structure."

Exhibit 21

<div style="text-align:center">

Engagement in Learning

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The review by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris notes that:

   ***Engagement* is defined in three ways in the research literature**:

- *Behavioral engagement* draws on the idea of participation; it includes involvement in academic and social or extracurricular activities and is considered crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes and preventing dropping out.

- *Emotional engagement* encompasses positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics, and school and is presumed to create ties to an institution and influences willingness to do the work.

- *Cognitive engagement* draws on the idea of investment; it incorporates thoughtfulness and willingness to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills.

Antecedents of Engagement can be organized into:

- *School level factors*: voluntary choice, clear and consistent goals, small size, student participation in school policy and management, opportunities for staff and students to be involved in cooperative endeavors, and academic work that allows for the development of products

- *Classroom Context*: Teacher support, peers, classroom structure, autonomy support, task characteristics

- *Individual Needs*: Need for relatedness, need for autonomy, need for competence

Engagement can be measured as follows:

- Behavioral Engagement: conduct, work involvement, participation, persistence, (e.g., completing homework, complying with school rules, absent/tardy, off-task)

  Emotional Engagement: self-report related to feelings of frustration, boredom, interest, anger, satisfaction; student-teacher relations; work orientation

- Cognitive Engagement: investment in learning, flexible problems solving, independent work styles, coping with perceived failure, preference for challenge and independent mastery, commitment to understanding the work

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An often stated assumption is that using social control practices to stop misbehavior will make students amenable to teaching. In a few cases, this may be so. However, the assumption ignores research on *psychological reactance* and the need for individuals to maintain/restore their sense of self-determination. Moreover, it belies two painful realities: the number of students who continue to manifest poor academic achievement and the staggering dropout rate in too many schools.

Concern

Dropouts or Pushouts?

Increasing pressures for school improvements seem to have the negative consequence of creating policies and practices that in effect cleanse the rolls of troubled and troubling students and anyone else who may compromise the progress of other students and keep achievement score averages from rising. Examples are seen in zero tolerance policies, the end of social promotion, and the backlash to special education and to equity of opportunity.

The following excerpt from a resolution by the National Coalition of Advocates for Students was directed at zero tolerance policies but highlights some basic concerns about how schools handle behavior problems. They state that many approaches implement *... predetermined, harsh and immediate consequences for a growing list of infractions resulting in long-term or permanent exclusion from public school, regardless of the circumstances, and often without due process. ... such policies are more likely to result in increased drop-out rates and long-term negative consequences for children and communities. ...such policies have a disparate impact on children of color, and do not result in safe schools and communities. ... alternatives to such policies could more effectively reduce the incidence of violence and disruption in our schools, including but not limited to: (1) creating positive, engaging school environments; (2) provision of positive behavioral supports to students; (3) appropriate pre-and in-service development for teachers; and (4) incorporating social problem-solving skills into the curriculum for all students.*
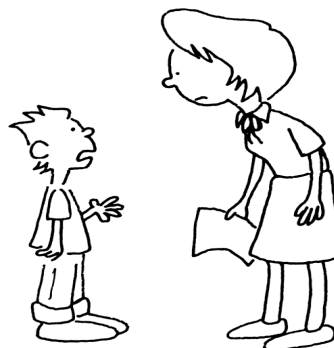

The argument sometimes is made that the reasons students relapse into misbehaving is because the practices used to correct the problem are the wrong ones or are incorrectly implemented. In contrast, the concern raised here is that many approaches to addressing misbehavior produce short-term outcomes because they tend not to include a focus on helping teachers enhance a student's intrinsic engagement in classroom instruction and re-engage students who have disengaged.

As long as a student is not engaged in instruction, behavior problems are likely to occur and reoccur. As long as the emphasis is, first and foremost, on implementing social control techniques, too little attention is given to enhancing intrinsic motivation for instruction. In effect, the focus is on socializing desired behavior rather than helping improve student achievement and well-being.

> Reactive efforts to address behavior problems often overemphasize social control tactics and fail to re-engage students who are disconnected from classroom instruction.

An example of psychological reactance

If you didn't make so many rules,
there wouldn't be so many I need to break!

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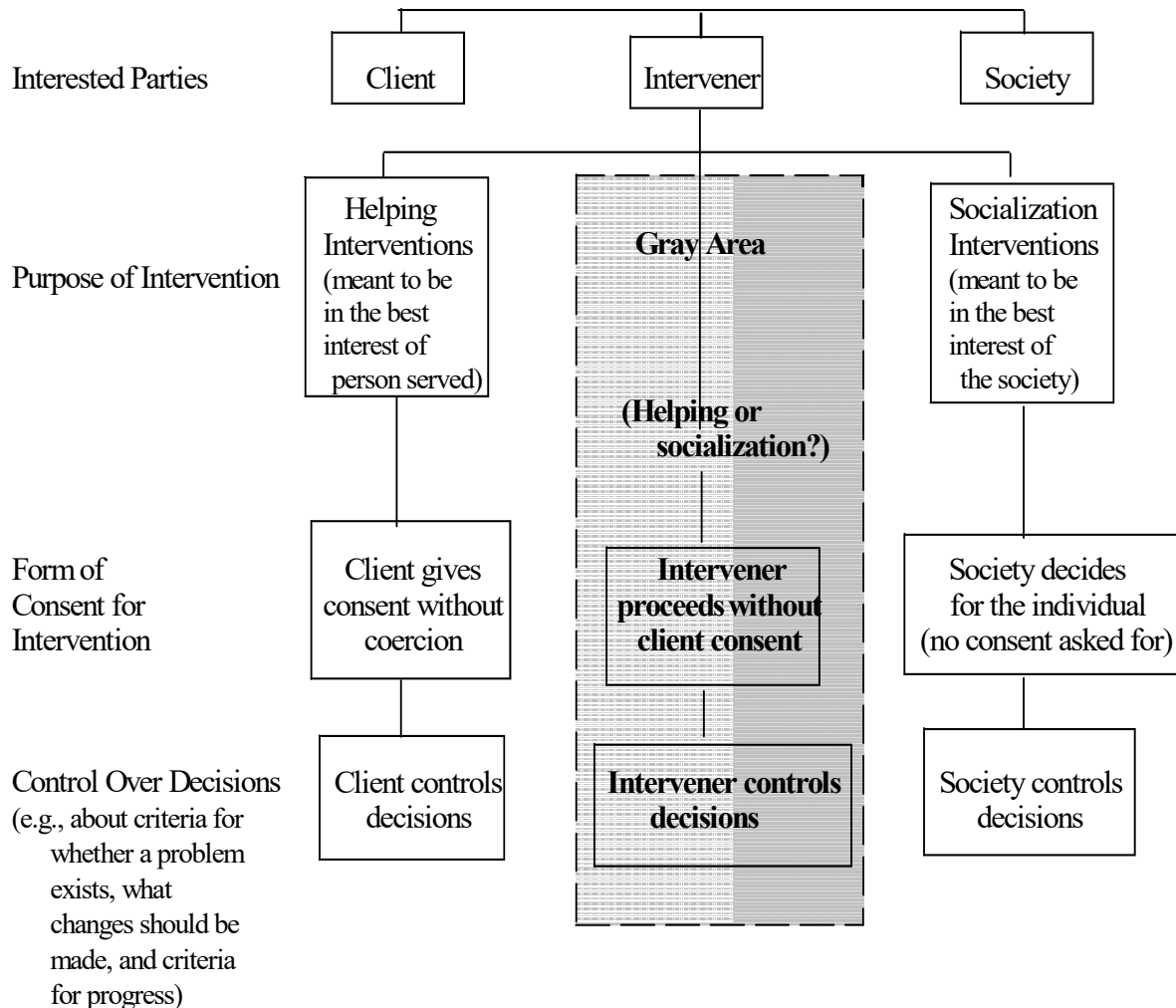# When Socializing Practices Conflict with Helping

One major reason for *compulsory* education is that society
wants schools to act as socializing agencies

Whenever interveners focus on deviant behavior, the following question is pertinent: *Is the agenda to help or to socialize or both?* The key to differentiating helping from formal socialization interventions is to determine whose interests are served (see Exhibit 22). Helping interventions are defined in terms of a primary intention to serve the client's interests; socialization interventions primarily seek to serve the interests of the society and often involve social control interventions.

How does one know whose interests are served? Criteria include the nature of the consent and ongoing decision-making processes. That is, using these criteria, the interests of individuals are served when they consent to intervention without coercion and have control over major intervention decisions. In contrast, socialization agenda usually are implemented under a form of social contract that allows society's agents to decide on certain interventions for individuals without asking for consent; and during intervention, society maintains control over major intervention decisions.

Exhibit 22

Helping and Socialization Interventions

	Client	Intervener	Society
Interested Parties	Client	Intervener	Society
Purpose of Intervention	Helping Interventions (meant to be in the best interest of person served)	**Gray Area** (Helping or socialization?)	Socialization Interventions (meant to be in the best interest of the society)
Form of Consent for Intervention	Client gives consent without coercion	**Intervener proceeds without client consent**	Society decides for the individual (no consent asked for)
Control Over Decisions (e.g., about criteria for whether a problem exists, what changes should be made, and criteria for progress)	Client controls decisions	**Intervener controls decisions**	Society controls decisions

Helping and socializing interventions often come into conflict with each other. As the above discussion of misbehavior underscores, one example is when decisions are made to use social control practices and ignore causal factors and related interventions.

When a youngster misbehaves, one facet of responding involves bringing the deviant and devious behavior under control. Interventions usually are designed mainly to convince students they should conform to the proscribed limits of the social and instructional setting.

People, for the most part, do not appreciate efforts to control their behavior, especially since many of their actions are intended to enable them to escape such control. And while school staff and parents tend to value a school's socializing agenda, they also want youngsters provided with special help when behavior, learning, and emotional problems arise.

Practitioners commonly are confronted with situations where socializing and helping agenda are in conflict. Some resolve the conflict by clearly defining themselves as socializing agents and in that role pursue socialization goals. In such a context, it is understood that helping is not the primary concern. Others resolve the conflict by viewing individuals as "clients" and pursuing interventions that can be defined as helping. In such cases, the goal is to work with the consenting individual to resolve problems, including efforts designed to make environments more accommodative for the person being helped. When practitioners are unclear about their agenda or are forced by circumstances to try to pursue helping and socialization simultaneously, this adds confusion to the situation.

Circumstances arise when the intent is to serve the individual's interest but eliciting truly informed consent or ensuring the individual has control is not feasible. Interveners, then, are forced to operate in a gray area. This is likely to arise with young children and those with severe and profound behavior and emotional problems. Interveners also work in a gray area when intervening at the request of a surrogate who sees the intervention as in a person's best interests despite an individual's protests. School staff experience this situation when they make decisions that students don't like.

The problem of conflicting agenda is particularly acute for those who work in "institutional" settings such as schools and residential "treatment" centers. In such settings, the tasks confronting the practitioner often include both helping individuals overcome underlying problems and controlling misbehavior to maintain social order. At times the two are incompatible. And, although all interventions in the setting may be designated as "remediation" or "treatment," the need for social control can overshadow the concern for helping. Moreover, the need to control individuals in such settings often leads to coercive and repressive actions. Ultimately, every practitioner must personally come to grips with what is morally proper in balancing the respective rights of the various parties when interests conflict.

Concern

Decisions that place misbehaving students together: Is it a helping intervention?

Researchers are reporting (and school personnel have long recognized) levels of deviancy increase with concentrated groupings of students who are being punished for misbehavior. Concerns are raised that the resulting student groupings exacerbate negative outcomes such as increased misbehavior at school, neighborhood delinquency, substance abuse, and dropping out of school. As Dishion and Dodge note: "The influence of deviant peers on youth behavior is of growing concern, both in naturally occurring peer interactions and in interventions that might inadvertently exacerbate deviant development." Such a contagion effect has relevance for student groupings resulting from discipline policies, alternative school assignments, special education placements, and more.

Enhancing Intrinsic Motivation is a Fundamental Engagement Concern

Students who are intrinsically motivated to learn seek out opportunities and challenges and go beyond requirements. In doing so, they behave, perform, and learn more and learn more deeply than do peers who are extrinsically motivated

From a psychological perspective, the essence of the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is the degree to which human behavior is driven by personal needs or reinforcement contingencies (e.g., rewards and punishments). In their delineation of intrinsic motivation, Deci and Ryan emphasize that people strive to meet three fundamental personal needs, namely, to *feel* self-determining, competent, and related to others. Research indicates that these three needs are strongly related to learning, behavior, and emotional well-being. Studies also indicate that overuse of extrinsics can undermine intrinsic motivation. Dealing with misbehavior through use of social control strategies is an example of how often extrinsic motivational practices are overused to the detriment of intrinsic motivation and student engagement.

For some time there has been concern that professional preparation and development and parent education programs have paid too little attention to intrinsic motivation and psychological reactance as related to youngsters' misbehavior. Understanding these concepts clarifies how essential it is to avoid processes that make children and adolescents feel controlled and coerced. Such processes are seen as likely to produce avoidance reactions and thus, reduce opportunities for positive learning and for development of positive attitudes. One result is that students disengage from instruction. Re-engagement involves interventions that help (1) minimize conditions that produce reactance and negatively effect intrinsic motivation and (2) maximize conditions that have a positive intrinsic motivational effect.

> ## Research stresses the need to move away from coercive approaches and increase autonomy-supportive interventions
>
> A research review by Vansteenkiste, Lens, and Deci notes that externally controlling contexts overrely on "overtly coercive strategies, such as salient reward contingencies, deadlines, and overtly controlling language." By way of contrast, personnel in autonomy-supportive school environments "empathize with the learner's perspective, allow opportunities for self-initiation and choice, provide a meaningful rationale if choice is constrained, refrain from the use of pressures and contingencies to motivate, and provide timely positive feedback."

Teachers, parents, and support staff, of course, cannot control all factors affecting intrinsic motivation. Indeed, in addressing student problems, interveners have direct control over a relatively small segment of the physical and social environment. With engagement in instruction in mind, the aim is to establish conditions for learning that are a good fit with the student's current motivation and capabilities.

Students who manifest behavior, learning, and emotional problems may have developed extremely negative perceptions of teachers and instruction. In such cases, they are not likely to be open to people and activities that look like "the same old thing." If the youngster is to perceive the situation as a good fit, major changes in approach are required. Minimally, exceptional efforts must be made so the student (1) views the teacher and other interveners as supportive (rather than controlling and indifferent) and (2) perceives content, outcomes, and activity options as personally valuable and obtainable. From this perspective, any effort to re-engage disengaged students begins with addressing negative perceptions and then enhancing intrinsic motivation for instruction.

Concern

***How Well are Matters Addressed that Have
an Impact on Intrinsic Motivation?***

Positive intrinsic motivation is a *protective factor* and plays a key role in developing *resiliency*. In general, enhancing such motivation involves procedures that can increase positive feelings, thoughts, and coping strategies with respect to learning and minimize experiences that increase avoidance motivation. To these ends, schools must address the following:

>***Motivation as a readiness concern.*** Optimal performance and learning require motivational readiness. The absence of such readiness can cause and/or maintain problems. If a student is not motivationally ready, strategies must be pursued to develop such readiness (often including a focus on reducing avoidance motivation). Readiness should not be viewed in the old sense of waiting until an individual is interested. Promoting readiness involves establishing environments that students perceive as caring, supportive places and offering stimulating activities that are valued, challenging, and doable.

>***Motivation as a key ongoing process concern.*** Many students get caught up in the novelty of a new activity, but after a few sessions, interest wanes. Some students are motivated by the idea of obtaining a given outcome but may not be motivated to pursue certain processes and so may not pay attention or may try to avoid them. For example, some are motivated initially to work on overcoming their problems but may not maintain that motivation. Strategies must elicit, enhance, and maintain motivation so that a youngster stays mobilized.

>***Minimizing negative motivation and avoidance reactions as process and outcome concerns***. Those working at a school and those at home not only must try to increase intrinsic motivation but also must avoid or at least minimize conditions that decrease motivation or produce negative motivation. This involves, for example, not over-relying on extrinsics to entice and reward because doing so may decrease intrinsic motivation. At times, school is seen as unchallenging, uninteresting, overdemanding, overwhelming, overcontrolling, nonsupportive, or even hostile. When this happens, a student may develop negative attitudes and avoidance about a given situation and over time, about school and all it represents.

>***Enhancing intrinsic motivation as a basic outcome concern.*** A critical outcome is to enhance intrinsic motivation for pursuing a given area (e.g., good behavior, reading). Good schooling develops a positive, intrinsic attitude that mobilizes ongoing learning and positive behaving when a student is not at school. Achieving such an outcome involves use of strategies that do not over-rely on extrinsics and that do enable youngsters to play a meaningful role in making decisions about valued options.

<p style="text-align:center">For more on this topic, see the links in the UCLA Center's Quick Find:
Motivation http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/motiv.htm</p>

Concluding Comments

Many students say that . . .they feel their classes are irrelevant and boring, that they are just passing time . . . . (and) are not able to connect what they are being taught with what they feel they need for success in their later life. This disengagement from the learning process is manifested in many ways, one of which is the lack of student responsibility for learning. In many ways the traditional educational structure, one in which teachers "pour knowledge into the vessel" (the student), has placed all responsibility for learning on the teacher, none on the student. Schools present lessons neatly packaged, without acknowledging or accepting the "messiness" of learning-by-doing and through experience and activity. Schools often do not provide students a chance to accept responsibility for learning, as that might actually empower students. Students in many schools have become accustomed to being spoon-fed the material to master tests, and they have lost their enthusiasm for exploration, dialogue, and reflection -- all critical steps in the learning process.

American Youth Policy Forum (2000)

Student disengagement, acting out behavior, bullying, truancy, dropouts/pushouts – no one doubts that motivation plays a key role in all this. In many cases, it is a causal factor; in all cases, it is a key facet of strategies to prevent and correct problems.

Student motivation always is a concern of personnel preparation programs. However, what is taught often is narrowly focused on extrinsic motivators. Generations of school and mental health personnel and parents have been taught about manipulating and controlling behavior using reinforcers. As a result, control strategies continue to dominate how schools and homes react to misbehavior.

The growing concern is that social control practices produce psychological reactance and decrease intrinsic motivation for engaging in instruction. As a result, such practices can be counterproductive and not effective in preventing misbehavior over the long-term. In place of extrinsic controls, schools and homes are being called upon to move toward more autonomy-supportive approaches when dealing with misbehavior, enhancing engagement in learning, and re-engaging disconnected students.

Stop for a few moments, take a big breath, and consider:

As schools re-open:

besides the problem of minimizing the spread of COVID-19,

what will be the challenges with respect to engaging students in instruction?

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In Parts III and IV, we offer concepts and practices for schools to help counter an overreliance on social control interventions.

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