

Autonomy, Self-Determination and Discipline in Our Public Schools

By Ron Rubin, Safe Schools Consultant

Introduction

Over the past several years, I and many other educators have been involved in animated dialogue regarding the use of extrinsic rewards as a means of motivating behavior. Discussions on this subject have taken place in the educational literature, teacher's rooms, the hallways of our schools, via email, and at conferences, administrator meetings and staff meetings.

At the same time, statewide sponsorship and use of the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program has been embraced in many states including the state of Vermont where I live, work, and send my nine and eleven year olds to school. Well funded and staffed by our Department of Education PBIS, which relies heavily on the use of extrinsic rewards, is now implemented in approximately a third of Vermont's public schools.

I do not, and never have, supported the use of extrinsic rewards as a method of motivating behavior. In this respect, I've drawn upon the work of Alfie Kohn, Edward Deci, Richard Ryan, Larry Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg, Steve Van Bockern, Research for Better Teaching, Inc., and the Center for Mental Health in Schools (the Center). In the early winter of this year, the Center published a special edition of its *Addressing Barriers to Learning* that focused on "School Engagement, Disengagement, Learning Supports, and School Climate". The vast majority of this edition is devoted to discussing extrinsic and intrinsic motivation as related to school engagement, etc. In February 2011, the Center published a policy brief entitled: *Moving Beyond the Three-Tier Intervention Pyramid Toward a Comprehensive Framework for Student and Learning Supports*.

While all of the above sources have helped me to clarify my thinking regarding the efficacy of using extrinsic rewards to motivate behavior, I've come to realize that my opposition runs much deeper than efficacy alone. For some reason the topic of extrinsic rewards and in particular, the implementation of PBIS really pushes my buttons. I find it poetically ironic that a pyramid has been adopted to graphically represent the PBIS system of discipline...not unlike a twisted reflection of our collective unconscious that has embedded itself in our schools. After all, pyramids were built on the backs of slaves, forced labor, or at best, engineered consent.

Until recently, I never understood why my reaction to the use of extrinsic rewards and PBIS was so visceral. Something about the Center's recent publications, the mosaic of current events in Wisconsin, Northern Africa, and the Middle East, combined with my sixties-based social-political activism and my childhood and professional experiences in school has spurred a great deal of introspection that has helped me gain a measure of clarity. It is from these meanderings of mind and heart that the subsequent article was born; a

continued effort to understand myself, my practices as a consultant, and contribute to the conversation regarding the use of extrinsic rewards.

“School is soooooo boring”. This is a common refrain that I often hear when talking with some of the best “action researchers” in our public schools...the students. Such comments often mirror my own observations. Although there are undoubtedly many highly skilled and creative teachers in our public schools, it appears equally true that a significant degree of instruction isn’t at all what would be called, “brain-friendly”. Too much teaching and therefore, learning tends to be far less than actively engaging, socially interactive, intrinsically motivating, relevant, meaningful, and/or non-threatening. Numerous efforts have been underway over the past fifty years to change such circumstances led most conscientiously by UCLA’s Center for Mental Health in Schools.

The subject of school disengagement and motivation demands careful scrutiny. This discussion cannot be divorced from examining our view of children concerning the opportunities that educators provide for students to experience autonomy and self-determination (independence). It seems we assume the worst of children when considering if, and how, students might be involved in decision-making and/or power sharing within our school communities. In turn, we severely limit such opportunities and establish disciplinary procedures and practices based upon a generalized, underlying belief and/or fear that our children will run amuck and our schools will quickly turn to anarchy and chaos if we allow students something more than second-class citizenry in our institutions of k-12 education. The following letter, given to me by the middle school principal to whom the letter was addressed, is a good illustration of the relationship between disengagement, autonomy, self-determination, and disciplinary procedures and practices.

Dear Dr. _____

What is this strange mysterious force that dissolutions many of the employies in this school to believe that they have the right by birth to intimidate, attack, and lie to both students and other employies. Not that that bothers them; some of their transparent lies and tattered stories are obviously figments of their overactive imaginations. Even when this is made apparent to the school teachers and administrators, the school will invariably take the side of the employies. The employies will also believe that simply because a student has been punished unfairly in the past, the employies have the right to detend them for a very minor or non-existant infraction of the School “Policy”, supposedly signed by students (if it was actually signed by students, it must have been signed approximatly 10 or 15 years ago).

Students will not stand for this abuse. Keep it up and you may lose complete control over the student body. This corrupted dictatorship maintains its authority by a twisted concept they call “respect.” According to the school employies, respect means that students should automtically obey any unfair or pointless rules imposed upon us, and that if we disobey these “rules”, then we are scum.

“Respectfully,”

X

No doubt, the preceding letter might be interpreted as testimony to students’ negative intentions. However, such an interpretation fails to decode the message being expressed. While my own observations of the degree to which educators diminish students’ need for independence is not nearly as scathing as the perceptions communicated in X’s letter, I am unimpressed by the progress our public schools have made in the arena of student autonomy and self-determination. For the most part, I find that students have little, if any, say regarding their attendance at school, the goals and objectives of their learning, what they will learn, with whom they will learn, when they will learn, where they will learn, how they will learn, the criteria used to assess their success, the way(s) in which they might demonstrate their mastery, and/or the content of school and classroom rules. It often amazes me that when we take so much power away from students, that they’re not all in outright rebellion. The fact is, many are. These are the students who get in our faces questioning and challenging our authority.

In a country founded upon democratic principles whose schools are manifestly dedicated to helping children learn these principles; and where schools routinely espouse community, the above circumstances are curious and perplexing. It appears that the latent functions of schooling are more compelling than the manifest functions of educating and learning often expressed in our school mission and philosophy statements. It appears that our major objective is to prepare children to preserve and perpetuate a no-limits-to-growth type of consumerism where they will fit in like cogs in a wheel. It appears we worry that our children will not embrace our values if they are given the opportunity to determine their own.

Given the above, especially at a time when so much of our lives are laced with turmoil and numerous fears, we opt for establishing disciplinary procedures and practices that are largely known, simple to understand, easy to implement, and expedient. Perhaps more important, too many of our disciplinary practices focus on intervention vs. prevention and are seemingly based on the self-righteous premise that we must save our children from themselves if we are to maintain order and compliance in our schools. In brief, regardless of efficacy, unanticipated negative outcomes, or the fact that the word “discipline” means to learn, we opt for controlling students as a means of preserving our own sense of security. A sense of security that includes protecting our egos from the rejection we experience when a child is non-compliant.

Certainly, such a view is not far removed (as expressed in the preceding letter) from how we might characterize a dictatorship. Please bear in mind I am not suggesting that our schools become a free-for-all where anything goes. In the Fall 2009 issue of *Reclaiming Children and Youth* I and a colleague have written rather comprehensively about the parameters that need to be considered when involving children in decision-making and power sharing.

However, I'm unequivocal in my belief that in the context of reasonable, well-conceived parameters we can and must turn more power over to students in our public schools. To do otherwise perpetuates a vicious cycle based on a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more we control the angrier they get, the more we need to exercise control. Round and round it goes. Parenthetically, I find it interesting that the "drill sergeants" among us are frequently those who, while desirous of great latitude for themselves, are quite hesitant to place students in the proverbial driver's seat.

When children, indeed, I daresay any of us find that our need for independence is unfulfilled we experience less confidence relative to intellectual (academic) and social/emotional competence. As well, the denial of autonomy and self-determination creates feelings of helplessness. Helplessness is a highly uncomfortable emotion that fuels defiance, anger, and power struggles, which lead to adversarial relationships steeped in coercion, manipulation, subversion, exploitation, passive aggressive behaviors, and the modeling of bullying.

As a result, we enlist a wide variety of disciplinary procedures and practices aimed at managing the student defiance, anger, and power struggles that we, as the adults, have caused. Our refusal to help students learn and practice the skills required for decision-making and to engage in power-sharing breeds resistance and the use of numerous control mechanisms aimed at maintaining the status quo. Along the way we are quick to blame the victims and overly pathologize student behavior. We blame the victims of destructive relationships thereby, engendering feelings of rejection and mistrust. We blame the victims of futility and hopelessness, that causes feelings of inadequacy and the fear of appropriate risk-taking. We blame the victims of learned irresponsibility, that produce feelings of powerlessness and indifference and leads to non-compliance. And we blame the victims of what are often hostile environments where children are disposed of, causing counter aggression. Our disciplinary procedures and practices are geared toward controlling and/or fixing the child at all costs rather than examining our own behavior, the systems we've established to educate our children, or how we might better shape our learning environments to help fulfill students' basic needs inclusive of their basic need for independence.

As mentioned in the introduction, the above generalized attitudes toward children and youth and the antecedent disciplinary procedures and practices to which they give rise, have been packaged in a program called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Notwithstanding the fact that like any program, PBIS possesses several strengths, it is still part and parcel of a way of thinking that posits the need to control and/or fix children for their own good and in turn denies them autonomy, self-determination, and therefore, the opportunity to fulfill their need for independence.

I'm certainly not an expert with regard to PBIS. However, it's rather clear that it relies heavily on the use of extrinsic rewards as a means of gaining compliance aimed at enabling schools to meet their academic goals and obligations. I would suggest that while compliance and order, as well as the need to control highly disruptive, some times dangerous behaviors, are necessary pursuits,

they are not sufficient if we truly believe in the mantra that educators chant about developing responsible, self-disciplined student members of their school communities.

The use of extrinsic rewards (A.K.A. “reinforcers” in educational “double-speak”) to motivate behavior is control through seduction, contingent regard, and engineered consent. Doing so places a commercial value on behavior and indeed, on being a good person. Like the use of simple praise it is manipulative, feels good temporarily but does little, if anything to contribute to a person’s sense of self worth and capability. As well, the use of extrinsic rewards turns many children into token junkies who are focused on the reward rather than the inherent value of the behavior thereby, impeding intrinsic motivation, persistence, and moral development. The rewards we can afford to make available to students in our schools are easily outstripped by the highly materialistic culture to which our children are exposed. This fact in combination with the fact that behavior is ultimately driven by our needs, makes it unlikely that the rewards offered can maintain their reinforcing value over time. And since adults are the ones who dole out the rewards, they become the cue for behavior promoting an external vs. internal locus of control and diminishing generalization of the desired behavior to other people and/or environments.

Regardless of what one thinks about the efficacy of using rewards to promote positive behavior, it’s the purpose of doing so that I particularly question. One might say that rewarding children for following school rules isn’t any different than paying people for the work they produce. And after all, isn’t that the way our world works; don’t we want to make sure that in every way possible our children are prepared for living in our world, joining the labor force, enjoying the monetary fruits of their vocations, and contributing to economic growth. What’s wrong with that?

I guess I believe that as educators we have a much different purpose than simply helping children learn how to fit in to business as usual. This seems especially true when business as usual (i.e., unlimited consumerism) has and continues to cause the interrelated dilemmas posed by severe environmental degradation, the depletion of our planet’s natural resources, warfare, and an increasingly widening abyss between the wealthy and the poor that is based upon unfair competition. I’d like to think that as educators we recognize our obligation to help our children learn how to shape the present and future rather than merely fit-in and conform to the status quo. I’d like to think that as educators we recognize our obligation to help students appreciate the fact that the future isn’t out there waiting to happen to them but in fact, there are a multitude of alternative futures, which they have the power to author and choose for themselves.

Helping our young authors wisely and ethically shape the future in ways that promote their own voice, health, the health of others and that of our planet is intimately connected to a genuine opportunity for them to learn to become self-disciplined, responsible members of every community they are a part of. Doing so, is likewise directly related to opportunities for autonomy, self-determination, and

the disciplinary procedures and practices we adopt in our schools. The question for educators is do we want our children to be reactive or proactive, responsive to the most persuasive voice or critical thinkers, pawns or power-brokers, automatons or their own leaders.

Functional Behavioral Analysis (FBA), a second major component of PBIS and other school-based disciplinary programs, also seems to be predicated on a mindset of control. While my gut-based response to FBA isn't nearly as charged as my reaction to the use of extrinsic rewards, I find it intellectually and emotionally irksome. I would call attention to several issues, which I think deserve discussion.

A FBA is ordinarily implemented as a means of understanding chronic misconduct and developing strategies to quell the misconduct. FBA takes the position that people behave in ways that serve one or more of three functions: the desire to get something, avoid something, and/or to draw attention to themselves. I have no doubt that behavior "functions" in these ways. However, to assume that such functions are the end-all and be-all to human behavior is to adopt a mechanistic world view that is outdated, harkens to a cultural and real time that is long gone, and places educators in the role of managers overseeing the assembly line development of products (i.e., students) who conform and are obedient to certain specifications. The latter is exceedingly important when turning out widgets. However, it is antithetical to helping children become critical thinkers who know who they are, honor diversity, understand that their purpose in life goes far beyond catering to their individual selves, and recognize that the whole to which they belong is far greater than the sum of the individual parts.

Although certain functions underlie our behavior, there are other, more deeply seated, elements that motivate the way we conduct ourselves. I subscribe to the efforts of Larry Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg and Steve Van Bockern (*Reclaiming Youth At Risk*). These educators, researchers and practitioners adopted what they learned from the Native American child-rearing practices of the Lakota Sioux and have developed a framework of basic human needs, expressed as a medicine wheel, which they call the "Circle of Courage". The "Circle of Courage" is comprised of four basic needs: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity or what we refer to in western psychological literature as attachment, achievement, autonomy, and altruism. Time and effort devoted to analyzing the functions of behavior may be necessary but it is not sufficient to understanding behavior or chronic misconduct. It may in fact deter or exhaust educators from helping children mend the places where their circle is broken in a way that would lead to genuine self-esteem. The kind of self-esteem that infers being responsible, accountable, treating others with dignity, confronting challenges as opportunities, learning from one's mistakes, and having a positive impact.

The type of self-esteem defined above depends intimately upon not only helping children mend their circles but perhaps more important, building their circles. In this respect, representing the basic needs of belonging, mastery, independence and generosity as a medicine wheel is a powerful and practical

image that conjures up quite different metaphors than a pyramid. A symbol that expresses the pragmatic interconnectedness of our basic needs and takes us back to the first few paragraphs of this article. When our need for autonomy and self-determination (independence) is met, children like school more and are more interested, engaged, and motivated. As a result, they demonstrate higher level thinking skills, better academic achievement, increased social-emotional competence, greater creativity, and higher levels of moral thinking. And in turn, they need not be controlled by extrinsic rewards.