

CHAPTER ONE

The Cultural Foundations of Classroom Management

Schools continually confront the problem of determining how to insert about 100 pounds of student brain tissue (and accompanying bodies) into a 1,000–square foot classroom and then how to manage it appropriately over a 1,000–hour school year—biologically, ecologically, and developmentally. Since we educators attempt to enhance our students’ ability to successfully confront life’s challenges, you’d think that students would be pleased and appreciative of our efforts and so would participate joyfully in all classroom activities. Think again.

Classroom management is generally a major concern of beginning teachers (and also of their administrators), and most teachers consider it a difficult aspect of their assignment throughout their individual careers. Our profession has consequently developed an extensive classroom management literature. Some proposed programs focus principally on institutional values, such as maintaining a smoothly functioning, relatively quiet classroom; others focus on the developmental needs and/or legal rights of students; but most attempt to create a reasonable balance between institutional and personal needs.

In sum, though, the classroom management literature tends to view management as an element of school administration. The educators manage the students, who do the misbehaving. The reality, though, is that teacher and institutional misbehavior also occurs

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frequently in a school, and it's the cause of some (if not much) disruptive student misbehavior. So why do the educators get to make all the management decisions if they're part of the misbehavior problem?

The political goal is to run schools as inexpensively and efficiently as possible. The principal pressure on students is thus to perform, not to enjoy. Furthermore, the current politically powerful but biologically naive obsession with narrowly defined high-stakes standards and assessment programs that purport to precisely measure an imprecise brain simply exacerbates an already difficult situation.

To complicate things even more, educators must now also consider recent developments in the biological sciences that provide intriguing new perspectives of student and teacher behavior, misbehavior, and classroom management. These developments focus on such factors as innate predisposition, the relative interactive strengths of various neural systems, normal and abnormal fluctuations in hormonal and neurotransmitter levels, and stress mechanisms and processes. Knowing that a biochemical imbalance at least partially led to the inappropriate behavior of a teacher and/or student certainly doesn't solve the immediate management problem, but *knowing why* generally leads to *knowing how to*. New creative and compassionate approaches to classroom management will certainly emerge over time out of this knowledge, just as they emerged in the management of mental illness, once researchers and clinicians understood its biological substrate.

This book will thus focus on how our profession might begin to develop policies and practices that (1) incorporate a biological/ecological perspective into classroom management and (2) shift the focus of classroom management to that of a collaborative curricular laboratory for developing social skills. It won't suggest a handful of magic procedures for getting students to behave. It will rather provide the functional biological background information on behavior and suggest intriguing exploratory metaphors and activities that you will find useful as you begin to work with colleagues and students in the observation, discussion, and informal investigation of school behaviors that will lead you to a better understanding of social behavior and its management. Appropriate practical applications will certainly emerge out of such joint exploratory efforts. Some may emerge quickly, others years from now, but nothing will change if we don't begin the process.

We need to continually consider that classroom management isn't something totally separate from curriculum and instruction. Management issues tend to focus on behavior, but most school behavior is closely associated with curricular and instructional issues—which also have no magic solutions.

Compare a cook and a chef. Both can create very nutritious and delicious food, but they differ when things go wrong in preparation. For example, a recipe-driven cook who lacks an important ingredient in the recipe can't proceed without it, but a chef who understands the chemistry of ingredients and cooking processes can imaginatively substitute for the missing ingredient. Similarly, *cook-teachers* can successfully follow established management procedures, but they're limited in their ability to improvise when the procedures don't work. Conversely, *chef-teachers* understand both behavior and procedures, and so they can successfully improvise when conditions require it. This book is thus for *chef-teachers* and *apprentice chef-teachers* who want to get beyond the recipe orientation that has dominated classroom management for decades.

So as you read on, repress (at least slightly) our profession's almost innate tendency to seek immediate practical applications of new developments. Useful applications generally don't immediately emerge from major scientific developments. The DNA code was discovered in 1953, but most genetic engineering has occurred during this past decade. Cloning didn't emerge until 1997, and stem cells were discovered at the turn of the century. Furthermore, it's quite a trip from the tightly controlled variables of cognitive science laboratory research to messy classroom research, where the variables bounce off the walls.

Practical applications? What are the practical applications of an infant? Infants are wet, noisy pets, at least 20 years from a clear sense of how they will turn out. What we do with infants is observe them carefully and nurture them. We try out such things as music lessons and playing with balls if we note interest and ability, but we don't make wild promises about their accomplishments (except perhaps in family letters). As childhood merges into adolescence, real interests and abilities become clearer, and we then invest more heavily and decisively in potential *practical applications*.

Similarly with the brain sciences—in reality still in their infancy (but growing rapidly). It's a time to put our energy into getting acquainted with this *scientific infant* that will change our professional

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lives—to observe, explore, and nurture. Our discoveries about our own children don't generally surprise us because we've provided them with their *genes* and their *jeans*. Similarly, many discoveries from the brain sciences don't surprise us either because we educators have been working with a room full of brains for a long time, and although we may not completely understand neural networks and neurochemicals, we do know a lot about how minds and bodies function. Call it folklore knowledge if you wish, but our professional instincts have generally served us well. They thus provide us with a sense of competence in our ability to go from where we are (in our understanding of classroom behavior) to where we might be (in our understanding of the biology of behavior).

So for now, just relax with the broad concept of classroom management (as difficult as it may be to relax with such an emotionally charged issue). Realize that we're in this for the long haul. Think about how current management practices emerged and how you came to your own beliefs about behavior management. Let your mind fluctuate between what happens within the natural world and the classroom environment. Note similarities and differences. Consider how you might use things you learned in one environment to enhance life in the other. Mostly, though, realize that the base of our professional knowledge of behavior management is now shifting from folklore to scientific knowledge, from coerced student behavior to collaborative decision making—and that the revolution is occurring on our watch.

It's occurring on our watch because (as suggested above) so much of what we now know about the biology of our body and brain has occurred during the past decade, amazing as that might sound. So it's almost a matter of our profession flying blind—trying to determine what to do about scientific and related cultural developments while they're still occurring.

I firmly believe that the collaborative exploration of what to do is much more exciting for a teacher and class than being told what to do—but if you really prefer a prescriptive book that explicitly tells you how to manage your classroom, this book's probably not for you.

To better understand the emerging 21st-century biological, cultural, and institutional revolution that is the focus of this book, it might be useful to begin with a bit of historical perspective from another educational revolution related to classroom management that occurred at the beginning of the 20th century. The adage is that

those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it. It's a cultural development that might be instructive on how we might effectively proceed in guiding the next century's revolution.

DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION

In retrospect, it seems such an obvious idea. Why, then, did it take so long for someone to think of it and so much longer for people to accept and incorporate it into our schools?

By the beginning of the 19th century, the U.S. Constitution had codified the basic principles that were to define and govern our representative democracy. But it took almost 100 years for a dominant voice to argue that the policies and practices that schools use to instruct and manage students should demonstrate the democratic principles that future voters must master. We're a social species living in a democratic society, and the knowledge and skills that intelligent citizens need to function effectively in that setting aren't innate. They must be explicitly taught and continuously experienced.

John Dewey's *School and Society* was published in 1899 and *Democracy and Education* in 1916. Dewey built on the previous work of others, such as the European educators Johann Pestalozzi and Frederich Froebel, but he became the 20th century's powerful American voice in the educational revolution.

Rereading his books, it all seems so logical. Why wouldn't a fledgling democratic society demand that its public schools be laboratories for democratic behavior—tuned to the cultural needs and abilities of students? Why use the 12,000 hours that K–12 students spend in school to demonstrate the competing authoritarian societal perspective that the founders of the United States rejected in the war for independence? One explanation is that although our nation's strength and success came from its creative and entrepreneurial spirit, we also needed a large, compliant workforce that would follow orders and stay *on task*—behaviors that authoritarian school management practices would help develop. It's a perspective that would appeal to business-oriented school boards.

Still, one would think that Dewey's ideas for participatory classroom management would have been enthusiastically embraced and instituted in a democracy, and in one way they were. The Progressive Education Movement led to a wide range of enthusiastic

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implementation strategies (such as the Gary Plan, the Dalton Plan, and the Winnetka Plan) that were widely hailed. I was born in 1927, and so I went to school during the period when these new approaches had an opportunity to become integral to the schools. Unfortunately, my schools, like most other schools at the time, didn't function on democratic principles. Far from it. We didn't even explore *representative* democratic values. It's not that they were bad schools, but democracy was something we studied in civics class, where we learned to write down how our total government was organized—but we didn't learn how to democratically organize our small classroom community.

By mid-century, when I entered the education profession, Progressive Education was in serious decline—severely buffeted by its critics. In 1938, when he was 79, John Dewey published *Experience and Education*, a somewhat poignant title for a book in which he analyzed what went wrong with his dream to incorporate democracy into education.

To simplify a complex issue, Progressive Education tried to do too much too quickly; it didn't effectively provide teachers with the knowledge they needed to incorporate the ideas, allowing its critics to redefine the movement and then criticize their own definition of it. These same factors led to problems that other 20th-century educational movements experienced, such as the science, math, and social science programs of the 1960s and 1970s; Values Clarification Programs; and the Free School Movement.

The interesting thing is that now, at the beginning of the 21st century, many of Dewey's curricular, instructional, and management ideas have quietly been incorporated into American schools. It's taken 100 years after the movement began, which occurred 100 years after the Constitution was in place! We could appropriately ask why it took so long.

21ST-CENTURY CHALLENGES

This book will argue that our profession is currently at a related transformational state. A biological science revolution has been under way for some time—with, as indicated above, a major escalation during this past decade. Furthermore, it might shortly explode with important new perspectives of what it means to be human at the

cellular and systems levels. For example, scientists are currently immensely interested in the development of a comprehensive brain theory that will be of the scientific magnitude of $E = MC^2$, in that it will spark a revolution in the brain sciences at the beginning of this century that will be analogous to the revolution in the physical sciences that Albert Einstein's relativity theories sparked at the beginning of the past century. It may profoundly alter our view of ourselves, as democracy altered our view of society.

Such a global brain theory will inevitably lead to the emergence of the 21st-century versions of such folks as John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and B. F. Skinner—who will translate the biological theories into teaching, learning, and classroom management theories. And why can't you or one of your students become that person?

Educators should thus begin now to explore how best to respond to the biological science revolution. It won't go away if we just ignore it. This exploration should include studying the errors of previous failed movements that sought to transform education, as well as identifying educationally significant cognitive science developments that will play important roles in the educational theory that will emerge.

And as if the biological revolution isn't enough to keep our profession busy, a parallel revolution is occurring in computer technology—which has gone through three separate revolutions in the 30+ years since the silicon chip was developed: from mainframe computer to personal computer to the Internet. And if you think that that's the end of that revolution, dream on! Imagine the classroom management issues that computers will raise as they become more integral to classroom activity.

In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) made a retrospective examination of the Progressive Education Movement, the dominant educational movement of the 20th century. Our immediate task is to begin a prospective exploration of the biological science and computer technology revolutions—which may well spark the dominant educational movement of the 21st century. It took almost 200 years for democratic values to be generally assimilated into classroom life. Let's hope that the biological science and computer technology developments begin to be generally incorporated into schools within the early years of the 21st century.

As suggested above, the exciting thing is that this is occurring on our watch, and so today's educators get to participate in the

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beginnings of all of the revolutionary excitement, turmoil, decisions, projects, plans, failures, and successes. Or else we can sit back and let others do it. If you work with colleagues who plan to choose the latter approach, encourage them to take early retirement, and so open up their professional spot for someone who will get involved. And don't criticize the educators of the past century for foot dragging if you similarly drag your 21st-century feet.

One never knows how a revolution will evolve. Could Albert Einstein have predicted the mid-century dropping of atomic bombs and the end-of-the-century video games? Atomic energy and the electronic revolution both emerged out of his theories. The Chinese word for *stress* has two characters. One means danger; the other means opportunity. Expect both within this emerging revolution in educational policy and practice.

Cultural and technological changes occur either *top-down* or *bottom-up*. Top-down means that an organization (such as a corporation or government) decides to change something and then simply decrees the change. Legislative decisions are a good example of how the process unfolds in government. The change gets implemented via majority vote, but it generally takes court cases and subsequent legislative tinkering before a major top-down change achieves real political consensus.

Bottom-up changes also begin with someone's idea. If it's a good idea, it will gradually and informally spread—otherwise it will disappear. The good ideas also tend to change in an almost Darwinian manner as they spread. An innovative idea may eventually achieve widespread use, but no one person or group will generally have completely designed its final state. No one *owns* it, and no one can regulate it.

The current standards/assessment movement is a good example of a legislatively mandated top-down innovation. Folks have tinkered with it for years, but it's achieved no widespread political consensus about its value or execution, and educators who are expected to implement it are among its most severe critics. Top-down innovations generally require coerced continued regulation and enforcement and often breed hostility.

Two excellent recent examples of very successful bottom-up innovations are rock music and the Internet. Rock music didn't begin in school music programs (which tended to focus on playing notes that dead guys composed). Young people wanted to play

guitars and improvise, and since school music programs didn't focus on either, they played in garages and basements. The adult society was appalled at the music because it seemed that most rock groups knew only three chords—and loud. But one could appropriately ask why the school music programs hadn't taught them about guitars and composition and improvisation if they wanted it *done right*. Rock music thus developed according to its own rules, and if someone today objects to the music and lyrics, that's just too bad. The adult society doesn't *own* rock music and its variants and therefore can't control it.

The Internet began similarly. Folks initially simply wanted to develop a simple inexpensive procedure to connect scholars and researchers. That concept expanded rapidly. Thousands of nerds intent on expanding and simplifying the system gradually and informally merged their creative efforts into the Internet and all the marvelous communication capabilities it has. And the nice thing again is that no one owns it or can tax or easily regulate it. Rock music and the Internet are thus popular democracy at its innovative best.

So don't complain if current school policies and practices frustrate you. Begin a bottom-up revolution within your own classroom or school, and nurture it to enhance its further growth. The multiple intelligences movement, cooperative learning, and portfolio assessments are examples of such emerging successful bottom-up educational innovations. It can and has been successively done.

COLLABORATIVE CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Classroom management provides the best venue for initiating a major bottom-up educational change. It isn't part of the high-profile curricular areas or of the politically charged state standards/assessment program, and it occurs continuously throughout the school day. Furthermore, like parenting, folks generally realize that there's no single way to do it. Classroom management thus provides teachers with a great opportunity to become subversive under the educational radar screen!

A collaborative classroom management model also offers the best venue for inserting the exploration of important social skills into the school experience. As indicated earlier, school provides a continuing 12,000-hour laboratory experience with serial sets of

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nonkin who have different values, interests, and abilities. It's the only such broad, extended opportunity young people have to explore social development. To have mastered collaborative skills in a democracy is especially important when political allegiances are evenly divided. For example, the 1999 close and contested U.S. presidential election pushed democratic integrity and restraint to the edge. What a tragedy it is to continue to squander such an opportunity for student civic development on an authoritarian classroom management model.

These factors enhance the constant nonthreatening exploration of collaborative classroom management possibilities. Thousands of teachers and students imagining and trying out new ideas and sharing them with others will eventually develop creative breakthroughs that will spread personally and electronically through the profession. Think of all the innovations in computer software that emerged in recent years as folks tinkered until they found a better way to do something.

Don't be dissuaded by those who see collaborative classroom management as an abrogation of professional responsibility. Remind them that the U.S. war for independence was fought to ensure participatory governance and that concept ought to permeate management wherever and however possible in our society. Collaboration doesn't mean a license to run amok. Democracies do have regulations and sanctions.

To those who tell you that students will misbehave if we don't control them, ask if their students always behave now. Remind them also that a democracy is characterized as much by disagreement as by agreement. Our country has learned how to agree and disagree on governmental management issues without being unduly disagreeable, and classroom life can function similarly if we commit to that goal.

Misbehavior isn't necessarily negative. Misbehavior is to a classroom what pain is to a body. Pain is a diagnostic system that evolved in our body to keep our brain informed about the location and nature of potentially dangerous events (such as damage to a foot, although the rest of the body may be OK). Much classroom misbehavior is similarly diagnostic. Acting-out students are informing the teacher that the lesson isn't working with them (although it may be fine and fun for the rest of the class). That's useful, albeit often distressing information for the teacher. Citizen protests and demonstrations are

similarly stressful to political leaders, but it's folly to view them only in negative terms or to ignore or repress them.

It's also not a given that learning can only occur in smoothly functioning, relatively quiet settings. Small children easily master complex video games—and such electronic environments are noisy and confusing. Adults are similarly fascinated by sporting events in which players have to think clearly and quickly in noisy, chaotic situations. This doesn't suggest that classrooms should be continually noisy and chaotic but rather that we probably ought to begin to think *out of the box* about the range of potentially positive classroom conditions that students should experience as they learn.

It's important, when contemplating a collaborative classroom management model, to realize that it's not the perfect solution to all management problems. For example, while *diagnostic* pain and misbehavior are useful, *chronic* pain and misbehavior aren't. Students who have continuing disruptive behavior problems may not relate easily to a collaborative model, but the adult versions of such students often don't relate well to their democratic responsibilities either. Democratic societies have coercive systems for such folks (prison being the adult version of childhood *time-out*). A teacher using a collaborative management model will certainly reprimand and punish students on occasion if they behave in a physically dangerous or culturally inappropriate manner. Democracies have both collaborative legislatures and coercive police.

The problem with an authoritarian model is that it's designed principally around the misbehavior of a small number of the students in a class. Most students relate reasonably positively to school. An authoritarian model requires the many students who are cooperative to operate under restrictions needed because of the uncooperative few. A collaborative management model focuses on the developmental needs of the many students who cooperate and deals separately if necessary with the few who don't.

I indicated earlier that the authoritarian management model probably emerged in part because our society needed a compliant workforce. The 19th and 20th centuries were industrialized, and much of our huge country's energy was expended on manufacturing and moving objects. Workers mastered a trade and often stayed with a company for many years.

The 21st century begins differently. Many in my own extended family design and move information rather than objects. Many don't

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go to work but rather work (on computers) at home or at least removed from the building where their employer is located. And many are self-employed. Those who work for someone else don't expect to stay with one employer throughout their career. I expect that your family circle is similar. What this suggests to me is that young people today need to learn not only how to be reasonably compliant but also how to become self-reliant. They don't need to be told what to do but rather need to learn how to become self-starters. They need to learn how to manage their energy, space, time, and movements within biological limitations and cultural expectations. For all these reasons, a collaborative classroom management model is an old idea whose time has truly and finally come.

So begin exploring collaboration wherever you're comfortable, and follow your own trajectory. Share what you're doing with other educators, and try out ideas that you get from them. No bureaucracy can stop thousands of educators (or budding musicians or computer nerds) intent on improving the current system. Don't be discouraged that bottom-up changes take time. Today's computers and the Internet (and rock music, for all that) are considerably different from what they were even 5 years ago. Realize that we're in this for the long haul. Recall John Dewey's regret that he tried to do too much too fast.

This book will help you begin, and Chapters 4 through 8 will focus specifically on the dynamics of a collaborative classroom management model. On the other hand, an exploration doesn't need a manual and explicit directions. All it needs is your strong desire to venture into something different and the collaborative imagination to figure out how to do it.

My journey down this path began when I was a sixth-grade teacher. Derek was a bright student who contributed much to the class. At the end of the year, he told me that he had enjoyed the year and that I had been a good teacher. He then smiled and continued, "You always let us vote on things, and we always voted the way you wanted us to vote."

I thanked him, but I was devastated later when I thought about what he had said. I hadn't realized until that moment how I had manipulated my students all year (and during prior years). My policy was to encourage class discussion of the issue at hand and then, before they voted on it, to summarize the various positions expressed. Derek was smart enough to realize that I typically (and

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probably unwittingly) biased the vote through my summary. He wasn't angry because he generally agreed with me, but he let me know that he knew what I was doing—even though I evidently didn't realize it.

What I was doing, of course, had little to do with developing democratic skills in my students. Rather, I was teaching them how to be influenced by celebrity endorsements in advertising.

From then on, I asked the students who held a position on an issue to summarize their position prior to our vote. So I learned something. You will too.