

Overview

Classroom Control

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“If you don’t like it, get out!” I said that to a student in one of my classes the first day I taught high school English in the late 1950s. He was sullen and hostile, so I told him sternly in front of the entire class that if he didn’t want to be there, he should leave. He got up quietly and walked out, and I never saw him again. That didn’t trouble me (it actually made me feel more in control) because I had 149 other students to worry about. But I have thought about him many times since. Did he leave school entirely, or did he find a sympathetic counselor who put him in another class? Why was he so negative? I suspect now that his attitude had little to do with me.

I wasn’t concerned about the young man at the time because I knew that to survive I had to be in charge. I had taught one year of junior high, but I wasn’t sure I could handle older kids. More important, I had a mission: I wanted those students to appreciate the power of language and to think about important ideas. I wanted to be like the English professors who had taught me—knowledgeable, perceptive, a little superior—and I did *not* intend to put up with adolescent insolence.

A few years later, as a junior high principal, I was still quick to judge; I once told a pregnant high school dropout to stop having a group of junior high girls come to her house over the noon hour. When she asked why, I said, “Well, you’re hardly a moral example.” “No,” she answered, “I suppose not.”

I hope that in your career you have never said such hurtful things. If you have, though, I hope you remember your words and actions as painfully as I remember mine—not because we need the guilt, but because thinking

about the effects of what we have done may help us be wiser and gentler the next time.

Compassion is the starting point, but even more necessary is knowing a better approach. William Glasser (p. 38), who has devoted his career to the study and treatment of human relationships, has discovered a framework—control theory—that offers constructive possibilities. The name may suggest the latest formula for “taking command in the classroom,” but in fact control theory holds that we *cannot* control others; we can only control ourselves. Teachers and students who understand that, and who realize that individuals’ control of themselves is linked to human needs that we all have, are in a better position to live positive lives—and to help others do the same.

In the last 10 years we have heard with increasing frequency a familiar refrain: “Schools are trying to do too much. Just educate the children, and leave the rest to others.” Alluring advice. Unfortunately, as any teacher or principal knows, when you are face to face with students, you cannot ignore the fact that they are troubled, confused, or depressed. Oh, you can try to dismiss students’ concerns or even demean them as I did, but you will probably not teach much, because the students will be in no condition to learn. Our primary goal is intellectual activity; as we deal with drugs, sex, violence, and unhappiness, we must not lose sight of that. But if we want students to learn academic content, we really don’t have a choice. We must also help them cope with life. □

Ron Brandt

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