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Redefining "Well-Behaved" in the 21st Century Classroom

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Thetheauthors, all part of a third grade team at a traditional public school, often engage in critical conversations about pedagogy and why things are done the way they are done in schools. They want to challenge the status quo that has been reproduced in education for so many years. Recently, they began talking with each other about being "well-behaved" in the elementary classroom and realized that this term is deeply connected with each of their experiences and development as educators.

Sharon

I had never given a thought to the term well-behaved until I heard another teacher use it recently when talking about my class, and suddenly, I paid great attention to the phrase. "I really like the ideas that her students have," she said after observing my science lesson, "but the students aren't very well-behaved."

Her last sentence replayed in my head hundreds of times. And suddenly it was joined by the voices of many others who had said similar things about my students. It was often written on substitute notes. "I'm sorry

we did not get through all the work you left. Many students were not very well-behaved." Other teachers used it to scold students in the hallway. "Get into a straight line please. The younger children are watching you, and you need to be well-behaved." And I've heard it used many times by guest speakers or docents on field trips. "Wow! Your class was so well-behaved!"

Something happened the last time I heard it. Those words, which had always been fleeting to me before, clung tightly. I wondered what, exactly, that teacher's words meant, and if my students really did have a problem. The video of my class that she had observed showed my students engaged in a scientific discussion. They weren't raising their hands. They were sitting on their knees and moving around. And they were sometimes interrupting each other. But I thought they were behaving perfectly. They were behaving like scientists.

When I thought and talked about the definitions for the term, I realized that each is subjective and is a social construct. Who decides what is proper and appropriate behavior? It was when I really thought about this, that I realized my problem. My definition of being well-behaved includes actions like sitting on your knees, not raising your hand, sharing a comment with someone next to you, and even interrupting each other. This is what I do when I learn. This is what I do when I am excited about what my brain is doing. When I get excited about an idea, I turn and whisper something to a colleague and I might interrupt someone to present another side of an argument.

The difference between an eight year old and me is that I know how to do those things in a way that is still "polite." I keep my whispers short and I interrupt with only a word or two—just enough for the speaker to realize that I want to share—and then I let them finish their thought. I am able to do these things because I have many more years of practice than my students in how to maneuver academic conversations. I want to teach my students how to interrupt politely, and I want to join in their excitement as they grapple with a partner when it might not be the best time. I want to teach my students how to behave well in a way that supports and inspires their life-long learning and curiosity.

I know that students don't come to school ready to have perfectly well-managed collaborative conversations. However, because this is

something that I really value, I choose to make space in my planning to teach this to my students. I don't expect that they will start off perfectly, and I resist the urge to ask students to raise their hands because of this. For me, learning how to have a conversation is as important as the learning that comes from the conversation. So, we work as a class to notice and name the nuances involved in effectively talking with one another. And, we do this work every day of the year. We talk about what to do when two people start talking at once, how to ask for someone's attention, and how to interrupt politely. We make it a point to notice those students who haven't gotten involved and we invite their thoughts into the conversation. We learn to value equal air time by really listening to the thoughts of each other and learning from what they are saying, and we ask for clarification if we don't understand because that is what we really desire. This work is difficult. It requires that I often narrate our conversation and let the students know what is really working and why. But mainly, it requires that I leave space for students to make mistakes, that I expect they will, and that I welcome the teaching that can come as a result of it.

Sarah

I was fortunate to have powerful pre-teaching experiences with educators who created democratic, responsive classrooms. I learned so much from these experiences, and so I am passionate about creating a student-centered classroom where students have agency and are a valued part of the learning community.

I have found, however, that what I interpret as students being engaged in their learning is often interpreted differently by others. At the first school in which I worked, I struggled to enact the values and strategies that I had learned in my teacher education program because the people I worked with thought so differently. There were teachers at my school who had excellent classroom management that I was encouraged to imitate. Students in these classes sat in their assigned seats and listened while the teacher taught at the front of the room. They raised their hands when a question was asked. Their classes always walked in straight and quiet lines. They did have wonderful classroom management, but I yearned to create a different kind of classroom environment.

Last year, in my second year teaching, I moved from fifth to first grade. It was quite an adjustment, but I was continuing to develop my democratic classroom approach to teaching. Creating this type of classroom environment takes many weeks and sometimes months (Charney, 2002). A week or two into the school year, my principal observed my classroom while we were practicing classroom procedures using interactive modeling (Wilson, 2012). While debriefing the lesson, my principal told me I needed to get my class under control. I explained why I did not want to control my class and talked about how the students were engaging in the process of learning how to behave in productive ways and to care about each other. My principal acknowledged that this had worked for me with fifth graders but may not work for first grade. She encouraged me to use a clip chart in order to have something concrete. She explained that young children may have more trouble self-regulating or understanding how to thrive in a democratic classroom. I reluctantly implemented the chart and a corresponding reward system since I felt this was the expectation. However, I felt I was not being true to myself, and I was not doing all I could do to help my students develop into kind and productive members of our classroom.

Later on, my principal told me she admired how I had grown as a teacher for making the change, but I wasn't sure I had, in fact, grown. I was unhappy about the mixed messages I was sending to my class throughout the day. On one hand, I was honoring my students' individuality and emphasizing the importance of student voice during Morning Meeting, and on the other I was showing them I was the ultimate authority figure who dictated where their clip went. I was trying to build a desire to learn and to behave in a way that promoted learning, and then I was rewarding them at the end of the day for finishing on the top of the clip chart. I wanted them to develop intrinsic motivation, but I was reinforcing their behavior with extrinsic rewards. I felt like a phony, and this made me deeply reflect on my philosophy of education.

I realized that during my first years of teaching, I was not allowed to engage in the involved process of teaching my kids to have agency and ownership of their behavior. Helping kids to develop as active learners requires time and space. I wondered why we expect students to meld with our behavior expectations right away. This should be something we teach and practice just as we do with academic concepts.

My students and I begin each day with a Morning Meeting where we gather in a circle, greet each other, and either share events from our lives or play an inclusive activity. These moments are filled with joy and, at times, loud celebration. When we move into math, we are learning this requires us to engage differently with one another as compared to Morning Meeting. We create space to discuss this difference and share ideas on how to do this. We must leave room for this teaching in the beginning and all throughout the year.

Melissa

I spent a lot of energy my first years of teaching keeping students in line, sitting "criss-cross applesauce" for the fear that a colleague or administrator would walk by and see my students in chaos. Most of my language with students centered around ordering them to do things since I expected them to do the wrong thing. I believed teaching was about managing children because I feared losing control. If I didn't punish them, there would be chaos! I wrongly equated learning with being quiet. I began to wonder why I was asking my students to behave in certain ways.

I felt a need to control because I had a false sense of authority among my students. My students gave temporary compliance to either avoid punishment or receive a reward. None of their silent stares and "sitting still" revealed learning. Nor did it reveal trust. In the end, we didn't have community. Community is what I wanted, but I didn't know how to do this because everything I learned as a child and as a student in my teacher credentialing program was that children needed to be controlled. I began the long road of working towards community with my students. This meant I needed to be the one to change: change what I believed children were capable of, and change how I responded to students being themselves.

The day I took down my color-coded behavior chart, I knew I would need to begin to rely on my students, instead of an artificial system, to build community. In the beginning of the year, I invited my students to co-create how we needed to use the materials in our classroom instead of dictating how to use them. During those first weeks, my students had many arguments about sharing markers; glue sticks were left without their tops; and pencils were placed in various locations that other students couldn't find when they needed them. While all of this

unfolded, I refrained from stepping in to tell the students how to take care of the materials. Instead, I observed how my students expressed their frustrations with each other, how others tried to solve their conflict, and thought of questions to ask them so we could create some solutions together. I needed to remind myself during those times that in order for my students to take ownership of their classroom and feel a sense of belonging in our community, they needed to be the ones to co-create it.

After the exploration of materials, we all sat in a circle. I asked them, "What do we need from each other so we can all use the materials to learn?" This time I chose to listen and stop commanding. I listened as one who was being taught. In order for my students to believe that their voices mattered to me, I had to respond to their voiced needs. This question helped our conversation focus on how we were a community that needed to rely on each other and find solutions that would help us work together. As students shared a variety of ideas on how to use the materials, I wrote all their ideas down and asked questions like, "What would that look like?" or "Would you explain what you meant by…?" After deciding on a few solutions, we agreed that we needed to test these ideas and check in with each other periodically to see if they were working or if we needed to make adjusts to them.

As my students and I began to trust one another and explore ideas together, there was still conflict and frustration. I needed to remind myself of what I really wanted with my students. If I wanted community, I had to understand that conflict and frustration were opportunities to make choices together, find various solutions, and create space for all voices to be heard and understood. The process was the point.

Each year thereafter, I've invited my students to make more decisions than the year before about what we needed as a community. I have learned to trust my students' voices. The democratic process of listening to their insight into problems we encounter and ideas to solve them works, not because I say so, but because it helps my students to experience the value of learning and caring since they feel cared for. My students feel cared for when their ideas are treated like they matter because they impact our learning environment.

Our experiences are coming together to shape our new definition of the term well-behaved. We are learning that well-behaved looks different at different times, and that we must leave space to teach this throughout the year. Our world has shifted, and employers are no longer looking for factory workers who can passively follow directions, but instead want creative problem solvers, critical thinkers, and idea creators (Trilling & Fadel, 2012). Richard Riley, the Secretary of Education under Bill Clinton said, "We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist... using technologies that haven't yet been invented... in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet" (as cited in Trilling & Fadel, 2012, p. 3). As teachers, we have changed our standards and our pedagogy to prepare our students for these things, but have we changed the way we manage our classrooms? If we want our students to be 21st century learners who contribute to a global society, to be able to think critically and work collaboratively and be adept problem solvers, then we must not only redefine our standards of what and how we teach, we must work collaboratively to redefine the way that we teach students how to be well-behaved.

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