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The Classroom as a Laboratory for Life

Ages nine through fifteen are a Twilight Zone between childhood and functioning adulthood.

I have devoted most of my professional life to focusing on improving student behavior, school discipline, and the reduction of violence in schools. I am the coauthor with Allen N. Mendler of *Discipline With Dignity* and *As Tough as Necessary*, both best-selling books.¹ I have also raised three children who are now fine young adults, and I experienced all of the travails those difficult years between nine and fifteen can bring. It was exciting to think that I could write a very practical book that might help teachers and administrators work with young people in school settings.

Frustration replaced excitement when I started writing. It's one thing to desire that young people develop responsibility. It's quite another for youngsters to want to be responsible.

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I often tell teachers that students between nine and fifteen live in the twilight zone between being children and functioning adults. I pictured those students who sit in the back of the class, seemingly as far away from responsible behavior as they are from Mars. I envisioned them trying some of the strategies I had in mind for this project. I easily imagined the sly comments and jokes that would spread like a virus through the class, destroying the activity.

The same question replayed over and over in my mind. *Can students actually learn to be responsible through a designed classroom curriculum or set of strategies?* Responsibility cannot be learned by reading about it, nor can it be learned through class discussion. The only test for responsible behavior is conducted after the fact, by looking at the results of students' choices.

Thus, the conditions for direct teaching and learning about responsibility are not generally congruent with classrooms. This is not to say that students do not learn about responsibility in school. They learn about it every day. My question was whether students could learn to be responsible through structured class activities.

In all honesty, I still do not know the answer to this question, but I sincerely believe that students can, and should, practice skills that lead to responsible behavior. I believe these skills can be taught in the classroom. And I believe great progress can be made, even with the Martians in the back of the room, by gently yet firmly encouraging practice with the skills. After all, soon these half-children, half-grownups will be expected to be mature, responsible, functioning adults. The more tools we can give them, the better.

In some ways, learning about responsibility in a school setting makes a great deal of sense. If we view the classroom as a laboratory for life, then it becomes a wonderful place to try various experiments. Laboratories in science are safe places to try experiments, because negative consequences are minor and learning is often major. The same is true for experiments in responsibility. Lessons learned on the street could

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have major negative consequences, but in the classroom, the negative consequences are relatively harmless.

Many of the activities in this book encourage students to examine their behavior in the classroom and use classroom interactions as a conceptual framework. This design allows students to experiment in a relatively safe environment. Examples and strategies are offered to help students transfer learning to the world outside of school. I am proud to offer these activities and strategies as helpful steps in that direction. The more you can aid students with the transfer process, the more likely the essence of the lessons will take root and grow.

This book reflects the strong underlying belief in children that has earmarked my professional presentations and writing for the past thirty years. Young people make the best decisions they can, based on the information they have. They are not perfect little creatures; neither are they inherently malicious or destructive.

Early teenagers, for instance, may look like trouble, but that doesn't mean they are. When my oldest child was a junior in high school, I gave him permission to have a small end-of-the-year party. He invited about twenty classmates, but 100 showed up. My house overflowed with teenagers dressed in various uniforms from punk to preppie. I was uncomfortable, a little frightened, and suspicious, especially of the weirdest looking of the group.

My son and I came to an agreement that about eighty kids had to go. He asked a number of his friends to help him thin out the crowd. I was more than a little surprised to find that some of the most helpful and most courteous of the group were the boys whose appearance scared me most. I learned a powerful lesson that evening: Even adults who genuinely like teenagers can be frightened by them when they gather in numbers. I remembered times when I was a teenager that I thought adults hated me because of my age, my clothes, and the way I spoke.

How many shop owners, police officers, restaurant managers, or teachers go out of their way to make early teenagers

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feel welcome? Teenagers, especially, need a supportive environment with people who understand their needs and the great changes they are going through. Ask adults if they would relive their teenage years, and you will rarely hear an affirmative answer. Teenagers, even the most troubled teenagers, respond positively to teachers who care about them, who listen to them, who take a stand for them.

The issue of “rights versus responsibility” is germane to the goal of this book in a social sense. In order to have rights and to ensure that those rights are preserved, students must honor their responsibilities. For example, to retain the right to stay out until 9 P.M., an early teenager must show that she or he will get home in time or keep parents informed of any problem—easier these days when many young people have access to cell phones.

This book focuses primarily on responsibility in a personal sense. When the word is broken into its related parts, it becomes response-*ability*, or the ability to respond. Therefore, responsibility will be used here to describe how choices are made and how to understand the meaning of those choices. Ultimately, students who make good choices demonstrate responsible behavior in the social sense.

The activities presented here are designed to help students make better choices through greater understanding of their own power and their role in creating what happens to them. But like all activity-based books, the lessons require much more from the teacher. It is not enough to follow the steps. Three additional ingredients must be added to the recipe: energy, enthusiasm, and the internal passion for learning that all great teachers have. These lessons and strategies will come to life with teachers who see them as experiences to be fully felt, who understand the difference between a writing assignment called a *journal* and keeping a record of insights and personal growth. Teaching responsibility can be as dull as doing a grammar activity, or it can influence the lives of students in valuable and long-lasting ways.

OVERVIEW

The book begins with a strategy (Strategy 1) designed to introduce the issue of responsibility. The next three sessions are related to the concept of locus of control. Strategy 2 develops the general concept of locus of control and introduces students to the differences between internality and externality. Strategies 3 and 4 deal with the sub-skills of predicting and planning.

Strategy 5 presents a model for learning from mistakes—one of the great benefits of the application of locus of control. Strategy 6 focuses on effective communication, thereby increasing personal responsibility for interacting with others.

The last two strategies are related to developing the classroom as a community. Strategy 7 focuses on allowing students to design rules for each other and for the teacher. The final strategy (8) explores how students can experience more joy from school when they perceive themselves as active members of a classroom community.

There are significant differences in the way various cultures view and teach responsibility. My way of confronting this issue has been to deal with concepts and skills that are, by and large, universal to most groups. Do not be alarmed if the goal, the structure, or the vocabulary of a given strategy does not feel comfortable to you. Simply modify the words, alter the structure, or go on to the next strategy in the book.

NOTES

1 *Discipline With Dignity*, Richard L. Curwin and Allen N. Mendler, ASCD, 1993, revised 1999.

As Tough as Necessary: Countering Violence, Aggression and Hostility in Our Schools, Richard L. Curwin and Allen N. Mendler, ASCD, 1997.