Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 13
Issue 1 *Reaching the Hard to Reach*

Article 12

1997

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Recommended Citation

Steffel, Susan (1997) "Discipline Through Community," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 12.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1469>

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Professional Book Review

Susan Steffel

Discipline Through Community

My teacher education students are always asking how to deal with discipline issues in the classroom, and although I reassure them that there are few problems that arise with the workshop classroom, they remain uneasy. I have read many books dealing with discipline and classroom management, but I've not been comfortable recommending any of them. Alfie Kohn's *Beyond Discipline: From*

Compliance to Community is finally a book that makes sense. It has value for veteran, student, and preservice teachers alike.

If you are familiar with the work of Alfie Kohn, you will find this book just as readable as the others. Written in an informal style, full of common sense and humor, Kohn talks to the reader using plenty of examples and anecdotes to illustrate his points.

If you are like me, you have always been uncomfortable about using traditional discipline strategies in a workshop classroom. Kohn acknowledges this conflict by pointing out how the basic assumptions of the two approaches about the nature of children work at cross purposes.

He criticizes the traditional approaches to classroom management that have as their goal keeping students quiet and submissive. In these classrooms, the adult is certainly the one in charge, and students are convinced that they should be compliant. Traditional discipline programs usually offer step-by-step approaches that either threaten, trick, or outsmart students into behaving. None of them leaves any room for respecting the student, and all certainly conflict with what we know are essential elements of a classroom that promotes meaningful learning.

Kohn suggests that if we create a classroom community where students feel respected and involved in their own learning, few discipline

problems will arise. The ideal classroom he describes is, in fact, the student-centered workshop model that is well-known in the English language arts. Seeking out what he referred to as "extraordinary classrooms," where teachers were engaged in interesting and creative projects, Kohn intended to observe how these non-traditional teachers handle misbehaving students. To his surprise, he discovered that within these classrooms there were few behavior problems and concluded that when students are involved in meaningful activities related to learning, the behavior would take care of itself.

Chapter One examines beliefs about the basic nature of children and explains that traditional discipline strategies reflect a belief that children need to be told what to do and would misbehave when left to their own devices. Kohn finds it paradoxical that we promote "a curriculum that urges problem solving and critical thinking" used with "a management system that requires compliance and obedience" (12).

Chapter Two points out that student behavior may reflect more about what they are asked to do than about the students themselves. Instead of instantly blaming the kids, we should examine our own lessons and activities to determine whether or not they are meaningful and interesting. As Kohn shares from his own classroom experience, his students didn't act up to receive

attention or power, but "the students were acting up mostly to make the time pass faster"(19). Instead of continually looking for new methods of discipline, he says we should look for a new curriculum!

Chapters Three and Four deal with threats, bribes, rewards, and consequences, all part of the punishment system. Kohn states his position clearly. "Punishment makes somebody suffer in order to teach a lesson" (24). Used to effect compliance, punishment has several negative outcomes: it teaches children that you threaten negative behavior with something worse, it sets up a negative relationship between the student and teacher, and it seldom allows the student to think in broader terms about the consequences of his/her actions, except how they immediately affect him/her.

We use punishment, however, because we all experienced it ourselves. It is what we know, and it is easy and usually has a quick response. It makes us feel powerful. Furthermore, it is expected not only by our administrators and colleagues but by our students and their parents. Kohn notes the shortcomings of using punishment where teacher control is the ultimate goal. "Rewards and punishments are instruments for controlling people" (58). For many, the goal is obedience instead of learning. Rather than control, we should strive to build connections. When dealing with misbehavior we should ask ourselves "what can we do to help?" and not "what consequence should you suffer?" (115). "What can we do for you?"—not "What can we do to you?"(115).

Chapter Five argues that what teachers really need to do is give up control of their classrooms. Chapter Six focuses on the students taking charge of their own learning, and Chapter Seven discusses the classroom as a community. Not only does classroom community reduce behavior problems, but also promotes positive behaviors: "The stronger that community feeling was, the more the students reported liking school and the more they saw learning as something valuable in its own right" (103). If a sense of community increases the value of learning for students, why work against it? Kohn finds it ironic and counter-

productive that so many classrooms emphasize competition. "Don't be surprised if participants nominate competition as the number one community destroyer—not only awards assemblies but spelling bees, charts that rank students against each other, grading on a curve, and other things that teach each person to regard everyone else as obstacles to his or her own success"(106). He cautions against any activity that promotes competition and adds, "Few things stifle creativity like the fear of being judged or humiliated" (103). Chapter Eight addresses solving problems together and the important role of decision making in education. "It is experience with decisions that helps children *become* capable of handling them" (96).

Kohn concludes with ten suggestions for gradually moving toward a student-centered classroom. "Talk less, ask more" (126). He continues, "There are only so many hours in a day, and more of them should be devoted to creating a classroom where problems are unlikely to occur than to rehearsing responses to those that do" (136). He cautions that the role of the teacher will be very different from the one that many of us are used to. We need to risk, to give up the sole authority of the classroom, and to learn to effectively negotiate learning in a community where we function alongside of our students. Kohn recognizes how foreign and frightening this change appears and cautions that such a drastic change as this must be made "gradually, respectfully, and collaboratively" (142).

The book closes with an appendix where Kohn answers ten questions most frequently asked of him.

It is refreshing to find a discussion focused on collaboration and community as an answer to discipline, and Kohn's model closely parallels the whole language, learner-centered classroom. He states clearly what works and why. Although at times I found myself frustrated because I felt he wasn't saying anything new, I realized that this was an important contribution because the discussion isn't linked specifically with any particular subject matter. Kohn provides a generic approach to discipline that emphasizes building a learner-centered environment throughout the

schools. I found myself enjoying his discussion and underlining something on almost every page.

It is a thoughtful, well-documented (130 sources) discussion that raises some very necessary questions. Moreover, it is an enjoyable read. I recommend Alfie Kohn's *Beyond Discipline* and suggest that you may also enjoy some of his other books which include:

No Contest: The Case Against Competition. New York, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1986, rev. 1992.

The Brighter Side of Human Nature: Altruism and Empathy in Everyday Life. New York: Basic Books, 1990.

You Know What They Say . . . The Truth About Popular Beliefs. New York, New York: HarperCollins, 1990.

Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes. New York, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.

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About the Author

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