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Glasser and Kohl

How Effective Are Their Strategies To Discipline?

John Martin Rich

DISCIPLINE IS A serious problem in schools today, according to polls of both the public and educators. And while there is no shortage of advice about how to handle the problem there are few consistent, systematic, theoretical approaches which effectively relate theory to practice.

This gap, however, has been partly filled by the approaches of William Glasser and Herbert Kohl. Both have developed theories of discipline and practices for remediation of problem areas. These theories, however, have not received much attention because readers focus more frequently on their other ideas: namely, Glasser's Reality Therapy and Kohl's ideas of teaching.

Neither Kohl nor Glasser bases his theory upon an appeal to authority or the use of punishment. Rather, both place discipline within the wider context of a learning environment and the life of the student; but, their differences are greater than their similarities.

Kohl is essentially a child-centered educator with a highly developed political consciousness; Glasser is a psychotherapist who tries to apply certain reality therapy

Few readers are familiar with the approaches of Glasser and Kohl to classroom discipline, believes this author, who first surveys their ideas on discipline and then evaluates them by reviewing both their strengths and weaknesses.

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principles to classroom situations. Reality therapy is neither child-centered nor authority-centered; it is, however, far more structured and teacher-directed than Kohl's approach. Each approach also provides a different view of the learner and divergent techniques for handling discipline problems. We will refer to Kohl's system as a natural development model and Glasser's as a deficiency model.

Natural Development Model

Kohl is committed to open education and child-centered learning. What is important, he believes, is to discover the student's needs and build a learning environment which emerges from these needs and fosters them. This means that the teacher must be responsive to the way students naturally grow and develop.

For Kohl the emphasis is on observing, listening, and understanding youngsters so that a suitable and flexible environment can be established. "Openness, naturalness, and closeness," along with "consistency and strength," are necessary traits in working with young people, even though, admittedly, difficult to develop.¹ One does not permit personal problems to become an excuse for abandoning students or expecting them to handle problems that adults may not handle well. Although it is threatening to some teachers, students should be treated as "moral equals." This means that the same rules apply to both teacher and students. The open teacher does not bully but is responsive to criticism and changes behavior whenever the criticism is sound.² The teacher should also have the strength to admit failure.³

Kohl believes that the total classroom environment as well as teacher-student relations are important; therefore he does not hesitate to modify classroom arrangements and timetables. Classroom furniture can be arranged to ensure greater privacy, which Kohl considers necessary for student development. Private places are needed for both small-group work and solitary places for thought. This privacy can be built into classrooms by using fabrics, rug dividers, clothing closets, and the like.⁴

The student should not be squelched by unnecessary regulations, which should be reviewed by teachers. Why, for instance, must students line up the same way every day, raise their hands, or not talk to each other?

1. Herbert Kohl, *On Teaching* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), p. 100.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

3. Kohl has candidly admitted his failures and how he profited by them in the following books: *36 Children* (New York: New American Library Signet Book, 1968); and *Half the House* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974).

4. Kohl, *On Teaching*, pp. 115-16.

In an open classroom the teacher has to abdicate some power; yet this does not mean permissiveness, for the teacher should express feelings forthrightly about student behavior and teacher concerns.

The teacher's objective is to create an environment where trust and responsibility can evolve.⁵ Each teacher must decide to what extent the school system will permit an open classroom. Compromises—with one's principles, other teachers, and administrators—are necessary in order to survive; but in some schools survival is undesirable and therefore it is better to resign or be terminated.

Despite the fact that the teacher should question practices and techniques, there are some limits which should be set. Students should not be permitted to bully or injure another, injure or maim themselves, interfere or prevent others from working, or destroy another student's work or classroom materials.⁶ It is the teacher's responsibility to see that these rules are consistently enforced, although ideally it is the responsibility of the entire class. At one time or another each student in an open classroom will attempt to test these limits; it is the teacher's task to respect the student's strength while consistently enforcing these limits. When a discipline problem arises which concerns the entire class, the best way to handle it is by using a fable or story which can thereby be discussed without anyone being embarrassed.

Thus, for Kohl, discipline evolves out of open classroom interaction fostered by the teacher's naturalness, consistency and strength, traits which do not resort to numerous rules but rely only on establishing outer limits beyond which student welfare and growth would be endangered.

Deficiency Model

Glasser uses a deficiency model to explain discipline problems. Disciplinary problems, he believes, arise out of need deficiencies and can be overcome by fulfilling certain essential needs. The deficiency model is part of Glasser's Reality Therapy, which states that anyone requiring psychiatric help suffers from an inability to fulfill needs. One reason that people do not fulfill their needs, Glasser claims, is they deny the reality of the world around them; therefore they must learn to face reality and be shown how to fulfill their needs. Needs are fulfilled by being involved with people—at least one person but preferably more; and these other people must be in touch with reality and able to fulfill their own needs. "Therefore, essential to fulfillment of our needs is a person,

5. Herbert Kohl, *The Open Classroom* (New York: New York Review Book, 1969), pp. 80-81.

6. Kohl, *On Teaching*, p. 82.

preferably [sic] a group of people, with whom we are emotionally involved *from the time we are born to the time we die.*"⁷

All people have the same needs, but they vary in their capacity to fulfill them. Reality therapy focuses on helping patients fulfill the need to be loved (from friendship to conjugal love) and the need to feel worthwhile to others and to self. The two needs are interrelated insofar as one who is loved will usually feel worthwhile. Even though there may be persons in our lives who claim to care for us, one may not care for them or be able to accept their love.

Responsibility is a key to understanding reality therapy. Glasser presents a stipulative definition of responsibility as "the ability to fulfill one's needs, and to do so in a way that does not deprive others of the ability to fulfill their needs."⁸ Therefore, with this definition in mind, the responsible person has good mental health and the irresponsible person is mentally ill. (Glasser prefers to do away with psychiatric terms associated with the mentally ill.)

Glasser approaches classroom discipline problems by insisting that the teacher should try to change behavior rather than attitudes; for if we wait for additidual change it stalls behavior improvement, but not the converse. The student must first succeed in one important aspect of life in order to succeed in general.

Irrespective of the child's background, Glasser believes that it is possible to succeed in school—and school success, he claims, gives one an excellent chance for success in life. But deficiency needs of love and self-worth preclude success. These needs are related to the concept of identity which enables each individual to feel of some importance. One gains an identity through the home and school, and the acquisition of a successful identity motivates the student toward goals. Parents should help their children but let them take responsibility for finding personal goals; this can be facilitated by relating the good feelings about oneself to reasonable goals.⁹

In handling disciplinary problems, the teacher should help the student plan a better course of behavior; and once a student makes a commitment to change, then no excuse is accepted for failing to do so. Punishment, Glasser contends, is usually arbitrary and does not work. Discipline, in contrast, asks the student to evaluate and take responsibility for behavior.

7. William Glasser, *Reality Therapy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 8.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

9. William Glasser, *The Identity Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), Ch. 8; and Glasser, *Schools Without Failure* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), Ch. 2.

The teacher should make learning experiences relevant by relating subjects to the lives of students and avoid conveying the idea that there is one right answer and that everything worthwhile can be measured and assigned a value. Glasser is opposed to tracking, grades, sarcasm, and ridicule.

Students should have a voice in developing and applying classroom rules; there should be reasonable rules that are firmly enforced and supported by brief, periodic classroom meetings to discuss discipline problems. Although he favors abolishing rules whenever students show sufficient maturity to do without them, he believes that a permissive classroom is destructive for unsuccessful students because it generates student antagonism and a feeling that the teacher does not care about them.

Glasser believes that the teacher should relate personally to the student and set firm disciplinary limits. Minor disciplinary problems can be handled in homeroom meetings; special groups, however, are necessary to handle major problems. Few meetings should be held with parents about discipline because parents usually get upset and punish the child. Whenever such meetings are held they should be restricted to finding ways to solve the problem rather than finding fault. "Teachers have the responsibility for making education relevant and interesting; students have the responsibility *to attend class, to study, and to learn.*"¹⁰

Appraisal and Conclusions

Besides the fact that Kohl and Glasser are utilizing different models and assumptions, another difference is that while Kohl sees the system and the teachers creating many of the disciplinary problems, Glasser views student failure (caused by inability to fulfill needs) as much or more the responsibility of students as it is the parents and teachers. This difference stems largely from Kohl's child-centered approach as opposed to Glasser's behavioristic tendencies.

Both positions offer teachers, counselors, and administrators useful ideas about discipline and provide a more integrated and consistent view than usually found in the literature; on the other hand, there are certain weaknesses which should be noted. Kohl's approach provides a flexible, open classroom setting in which the teacher displays such positive traits as responsiveness, openness, naturalness, closeness, and toughness. The teacher observes the natural development of youngsters and tries to provide an environment which will best nurture it. One is

10. Glasser, *Schools Without Failure*, p. 201.

left with the impression of a humane atmosphere where there is much freedom to learn, explore, and create. Most likely, especially under Kohl's guidance, the students will find it a happy atmosphere and will usually enjoy their school experiences. Discipline is a natural outgrowth of such a healthy learning environment.

But the natural development model tends to break down in several places. If we provide an atmosphere where the child can develop naturally and only few disciplinary limits are set, it is still not evident where the teacher will end up by following the sequences of developmental stages as they unfold; moreover, as some potential develop they conflict with others and some criteria are needed for adjudicating the conflict. The teacher needs to offer direction and make critical decisions about what growth tendencies are to be nurtured and which are to be curbed. Growth itself exhibits and sets limits on what the child can do; it does not prescribe, however. The need for direction is not rectified by Kohl's vague statement that "the main goal of schooling is to enable young people to get out of school able to do something they value and can give to others."¹¹

Student interests play a large role in determining Kohl's curriculum. But such interests cannot determine content because students have interests which are educationally undesirable (such as tying tin cans to a cat's tail), and there are things which they need to learn in which interest may be largely absent (e.g., learning computation and writing skills). The task is actually that of taking sporadic interests of youngsters and broadening and deepening them in those activities in which they ought to become interested. Kohl attempts to do this to some extent, but he still views the curriculum as emerging out of student interests.

Kohl's role for the teacher, admirable as it may be, is difficult for many teachers to emulate. It is demanding to teach in an open classroom and manifest "consistency," "strength," "naturalness," and "closeness" in which teacher and students are moral equals. Most teachers prefer a more structured classroom environment wherein teacher-student relations are more clearly delineated. Until there are more successful programs preparing teachers for open classrooms, Kohl's type of teacher will be a minority.

Glasser's model also has a number of significant strengths and weaknesses that should be carefully considered before implementation. Glasser's program, in contrast to Kohl's, is more structured and more easily put into practice; it is clearly stated and reasonably well organized. Another strong feature is that it shows how to cultivate disci-

11. Kohl, *On Teaching*, p. 102.

pline without resorting to punishment. Glasser also recommends that the teacher should relate personally with the student and teach relevant material. Kohl would concur with Glasser about punishment and generally about the teacher's role, except Kohl would emphasize in greater detail the precise traits of openness needed.

One of the chief differences, besides the matter of Glasser's structure, is the emphasis upon students making a commitment to be "responsible" for their behavior. Glasser achieves a greater balance than Kohl for learning failures by having both teachers and students share distinctive responsibilities; whereas Kohl seems to believe that bad environments, created by teachers, administrators, parents, and the community, are the cause.

Glasser's approach, however, is afflicted with several related problems. He talks about people denying reality and therefore having to be taught how to face it. But to talk in this manner is to glibly gloss over some exceedingly complex problems which philosophers have struggled with for generations. What he probably means is that when an individual is acting responsibly, then that person is surely in touch with reality. This way of phrasing it, however, tells us more about psychological adjustment than resolving any questions about what is reality.

In contrast to Freud, Glasser wants to judge maladjustment and school failures in moral terms. This raises two questions over which there currently is a division of opinion. Is it ethically right to do so? And even if not unethical, is it pedagogically and therapeutically sound? Since Glasser is deviating from established practice here, he should offer a more complete and adequate justification.

Central to Glasser's system is the needs deficiency model. These needs, Glasser holds, are deficiency or basic needs rather than derived needs (activities or processes used to satisfy basic needs, such as learning to handle money, cook, etc.). In making statements about what an individual needs, the need actually exists to fulfill some objective ("he needs to learn to read in order to hold a job"). In such cases a need is only recognized as such if it fulfills a desired objective. Whether an objective is desirable is determined by a set of values or a philosophy of education. Glasser, unfortunately, has focused primarily upon the needs and not the objectives, and has spoken of objectives often in negative terms of eliminating school failure rather than a set of positive outcomes supported by a justifiable set of values.

Glasser fails to demonstrate that the two needs he cites are actually deficiency needs and that their fulfillment will overcome psychiatric problems and school failures. Psychologists who use a needs approach often disagree on basic needs. For instance, Abraham Maslow has

postulated a hierarchy of needs which largely differs from Glasser's approach.¹² Some psychotherapists would also disagree that a deficiency in affection or love from another significant person or a group will inevitably lead to emotional illness or, in Glasser's term, "irresponsibility."¹³ Empirical evidence is mixed. Some research studies do not support the use in classrooms of Reality Therapy methods for improving self-concept; whereas other studies do provide some support.¹⁴

In conclusion, both Kohl and Glasser offer significant alternative approaches to classroom discipline and their models can be used with profit so long as the above shortcomings are kept carefully in mind.

12. See Maslow's *Motivation and Personality*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

13. See Rational-Emotive Therapy, as developed by Albert Ellis in *Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1962); and *Humanistic Psychotherapy* (New York: McGraw-Hill Paperbacks, 1974).

14. Donald F. Shearn and Daniel Lee Randolph, "Effects of Reality Therapy Methods Applied in the Classroom," *Psychology in the Schools*. January 1978, pp. 79-83.