The Beauty of Losing Control

by Jane Bluestein, Ph.D.

There's one in every school: a teacher with the reputation for having fantastic control in his or her classroom, the one to whom "teachers in trouble" are invariably sent to observe.

During my first year of teaching, that teacher, for me, was Miss Claiborne. She was a veritable institution and had been at our school forever. She knew every child and every family, and everyone knew her for her reputation as a disciplinarian. Miss Claiborne's classroom certainly appeared to reflect the ideal. Kids were on task and quiet enough not to be disturbing anyone else's learning; movement and interaction were efficient and task-related.

As a first year teacher, I realized quickly that establishing good classroom management techniques had to have top priority before I could accomplish anything else. I looked next door to Miss Claiborne's room for an example and found an environment of seemingly well-controlled children who had few choices about how to behave. I admired Miss Claiborne and the ease with which she seemed to manage her classroom. Her style worked for her.

However, my students realized before I did that Miss Claiborne's style did not work for *me.* Their lack of response to my attempts at control eventually showed me that there is nothing more inconsistent— or pathetic— than trying to be someone you're not, even when you're convinced that that's what you really should be.

I began to realize the limitations of trying to fit into a mold. I couldn't seem to inspire fear and obedience, and in the back of my mind I wasn't quite sure I wanted to. While I knew that getting kids on task, putting an end to the constant power struggles and building a positive classroom climate was critical for getting through the year (much less the curriculum), I believed that the only way I could pull this off was to get my kids "under control." So imagine what a shock it was for me to realize that, despite what seemed to be going on in Miss Claiborne's classroom, people simply do not control other people.

Obedience vs. Responsibility

We have all managed, at times, to inspire cooperative behavior from other people in our lives. But are we "making" them cooperate? Even when it seems like we're controlling other people, in actuality, it is their decision to comply with our wishes because doing so will meet their needs. Miss Claiborne appeared to have total control because her students found "listen to teacher" to be more need-fulfilling than any other option. My students did not.

But was control the goal that I was really seeking? Or was there something else more important? When children choose the behavior we desire, they have made that choice because doing so meets some personal need. At a rather basic level, we might look at their apparent cooperation as being the result of their obedience or sense of responsibility. (I'm referring to obedience as a response to the anticipated reaction of another person, rather than obedience to a set of internal values or principles, for example.)

Now if our priority is generating a particular behavior *no matter what,* then we probably don't care much about the child's motivation, although if we look beyond the immediate outcome (the students' behavior), there are some important issues to consider. Since the behavior of the obedient child and the behavior of the responsible child will probably look exactly the same, we may even wonder why we would care about why they're doing what we want. But as I've long since discovered, it matters quite a bit.

Since obedience, in this context, is motivated by the reactions of other people, obedient children will comply either to satisfy the need to the need to please or the need to avoid punishment, disapproval or some form of abandonment (including the withdrawal of affection). The commitment to the child's cooperative behavior resides with the adult; the child is less committed to the task itself than to avoiding a painful or unpleasant outcome. Obedient children often lack confidence in their ability to function without authority. They may be weak decision-makers, insecure about taking the initiative and have difficulty making constructive choices. They will behave as long as they are told what to do, and as long as pleasing the teacher is need-fulfilling to them.

But since all healthy, developmentally-normal humans require, in addition to structure and limits, a sense of autonomy and freedom (generally beginning around age two), obedience is likely to break down. At some point, the need for personal power— or peer approval— becomes important, and even the most compliant students may eventually resist an adult's control. This conflict can breed resentment, passive resistance and rebellion.

There are a few other dangers in promoting obedience over responsible, cooperative decision making. Obedient kids are susceptible to peer pressure. If it appears that these children are unduly influenced by their peers, this shouldn't come as any surprise. After all, these children have been conditioned to believe that their safety and worth depend on pleasing whomever is important to them, and doing what they are told to do. Further, a sense of disempowerment— whether an actual lack, or simply the perceived lack of options and autonomy— can be a factor in depression, or addictive, compulsive or self-destructive tendencies.

This wasn't particularly clear to me as a 22-year-old novice, but I knew that I wanted my kids to be able to think and make constructive choices. It did not seem likely that simple obedience would help me achieve those goals. (My first glimpse that obedience might not be all it was cracked up to be came from seeing how Miss Claiborne's kids behaved when she wasn't there to supervise or scold.) While at times obedient behavior could seem attractive and convenient, it certainly wasn't the kind of conditioning I wanted to be driving my students when another child urged them to "smoke this" or an adult invited them to "get in my car."

But if not obedience, then what? At first glance, it seemed like the only other option I had was to let them run wild and be disobedient, and I knew that under those circumstances, I couldn't expect to get much teaching done that year. It took me a long time to get past the all-or-nothing thinking that limited my options to having either compliant or obnoxious kids, but in time, I discovered a third option: responsible, cooperative behavior that is motivated by something besides my anger or approval.

I now see that children who behave out of a sense of responsibility instead of obedience do so because they are committed to outcomes bedside the teacher's reaction. These students may well be motivated by the opportunity to make choices, by the task itself, by other meaningful activities they can access when their work is done, or by their self-perception as a responsible, self-motivated individual. This is very different from the obedient child who is always looking over his shoulder to make sure he'll get teacher's approval, or avoid teacher's anger, punishment or even disappointment.

When I offered my students input and options, and could let go enough to give them some control (within limits that didn't drive me crazy!), I encountered students who were far more capable of self-management than I ever would have imagined. I found that choices within limits—

particularly when the students were sure that any of the available options were OK with me— met their needs for power and safety. They ended up being much more cooperative and committed to the tasks at hand than they had been under the strictest or most threatening approaches I had previously attempted.

I also learned that children who operate from a value system based on something besides the need for external approval or emotional safety are better able to make decisions, have greater confidence in their ability to function without authority, are less vulnerable to peer influence, and are less likely to exhibit dependence and helplessness. Perhaps more importantly, they are likely to experience fewer internal conflicts and less stress in their relationship with their teachers, which (from a perspective of brain-friendly classroom environments) can interfere with learning and performing.

By observing many classrooms over the years since I started teaching, I have also found a great deal of difference in the way teachers with obedient children and teachers with responsible children behave. Teachers committed to developing responsible students were far less critical, controlling or authoritative than teachers who demand obedience. Rather than telling students to do something "because I said so," these teachers offer logical and rational reasons for the requests they made (which also helps the students connect their behaviors to the outcomes of their behavior. And teachers who strive for responsible students are also less threatened by their students' need for power and independence. By offering opportunities for self-management, these teachers maintained their authority in the classroom without having to spend time competing for control.

I gradually learned to trust the children's ability to make decisions. Although it was difficult to allow children to experience negative outcomes of some of the choices they made, I had to be willing to let them learn from their mistakes (except in life-threatening situations, which, to be truthful, were exceptionally rare). I found I was less likely to make decisions for my students and more likely to encourage decision-making based on their personal needs and experiences. I was less likely to take a student's choices personally and became far more adept at following through without warnings, reminders or asking for excuses. And even though my students became increasingly independent and self-motivated, I realized that I was still an important part of their education and personal growth.

A Matter of Consistency

It's not easy to change our teaching behaviors. Many of us grew up in the shadow of authoritative adults as role models, and with apparently successful teachers like Miss Claiborne. Trying new methods of interacting in the classroom can be difficult, but powering, especially at the expense of students' autonomy or dignity, can be

exhausting and frustrating. Even when these endeavors appear effective, the long-term effects just aren't as rewarding as less authoritative alternatives.

But learning to encourage independent behavior was only one of my problems. I needed to resolve the question of how to be consistent, too. This meant more than simply following through on what I said I was going to do, although that is certainly important. The concept involves an entire philosophy about life, people, needs and interaction.

Too often, I've encountered teachers who complain that their students never take the initiative, have little self-control and rarely act responsibly, and then I discover that these teachers never let these kids interact, get out of their seats or make a move on their own. We can't have it both ways. Being consistent means committing to a belief system and operating from that system as regularly as possible. It means that our behaviors truly reflect our goals and beliefs.

For example, if I believe that children are capable of making decisions and need to do so in order to develop that skill, I must actually provide frequent opportunities for them to make choices. If I believe that children learn by experiencing the outcomes of their choices, I need to quit intervening, either by rescuing them, asking for excuses or giving them warnings once they've crossed the line, or making things worse by criticizing, advising or blaming. And if I enjoy working with children, I do not prevent that enjoyment from entering into our interactions out of fear of losing control.

Consistency, for me, has come to mean developing a system of classroom management that doesn't compromise my personality or personal values, and it means setting and following standards for my behavior that I want to see in my students. It means treating children with the respect and kindness I want in return. It means being responsible for my feelings, words and actions and resisting the temptation to make excuses, attack or blame someone when I blow it. By keeping my behavior consistent with my value system, I am free to laugh with students, explore their interests, apologize for bad days and demonstrate love and trust without compromising my boundaries or standards. Many of these behaviors were new for me and required a great deal of commitment, practice and even courage to pull them off. However in the long run, I knew that the self-management skills my new behaviors were building would serve my students long after they had moved beyond my class.

Praise and Conditional Approval

Having come this far, I felt I was closer to understanding and motivating the kinds of behavior I wanted to encourage in children, and to creating the kind of atmosphere where we could all be ourselves and enjoy learning. As I became more confident, I began to examine some of the management techniques I had observed or had been encouraged to use. I was particularly interested in whether or not these techniques were consistent with my goals of inspiring responsible, self-motivated behavior. One technique in particular, positive reinforcement, had always come highly endorsed. But the way I (and other teachers I observed) used this technique raised some disturbing questions.

The main problem, as I soon discovered, was that positive reinforcement was originally intended to encourage a student to continue or improve a particular behavior, something they're *already* doing. I had been encouraged to use this technique not to recognize existing behavior, but to *elicit* behavior that students were not yet exhibiting. For example, by publicly praising one student's cooperative behavior, I was told I could get the more unruly students to settle down.

So early on, facing a classroom of disorder, I would zero in on the one child who was actually doing what I wanted him to do. In a louder-than-normal voice, I'd proclaim, *"I like the way Bobby is sitting."* Occasionally the others would look at Bobby and perhaps one or two would sit down, but for the most part, my "positive reinforcement" had little effect on my class— and after a while, wore pretty thin on Bobby, who quickly realized the other kids were having a whole lot more fun than he was.

Unfortunately, the sporadic "successes" I had with this technique, the overwhelming support I had for using this trick, and the absence of anything better in its place motivated me to try this all year. Then one day I actually heard what I was saying. Here I was, praising Bobby with the hope that the rest of the class would follow suit. There was a strong implication that *"if the rest of you would act like Bobby, you too, will please me and gain my conditional approval."* Once I realized that those who actually settled down were sitting so I'd "like them too," I realized that I was, once again, reinforcing obedience, people-pleasing and dependence on teacher approval— exactly the opposite of what I wanted.

I started to take a look at praise, and discovered a lot of manipulation behind what, on the surface, seemed like innocent and well-intention words. In praising Bobby, I was delivering an unspoken but obvious message that Bobby's behavior was good and acceptable while the behavior of the other students, clearly, was not. By using "I like..." as part of my praise, I was also implying that the main value of Bobby's cooperative behavior was in it's positive effects on *me.*

And there were some situations where praise actually had a negative effect! Telling the entire class that *"Susie wrote the best story in the class"* does less to reinforce Susie's story-writing capabilities— and may, in fact, draw unwanted and embarrassing attention to Susie— than it does to simply inform everyone that they aren't quite up to Susie's talents. In addition, students who get used to being praised for good behavior may even perceive an absence of praise as criticism!

This discovery was rather traumatic— a fact I noted years later when, as a teacher educator, I witnessed a sense of horrified betrayal from teachers when they confront the hidden dangers in this technique. Certainly I needed a way to motivate cooperative behavior when it did not exist, but I also I needed a way to acknowledge cooperation without relying on praise, judgments and conditional approval. Recognizing that these were two entirely different situations, each requiring a different set of teacher behaviors was a very big step.

I started by focusing on reinforcement. First, I went a lot less public with my acknowledgements. If I wanted to recognize Susie's writing talents, I'd go directly to Susie, either verbally— just between us— on in a note or a comment on her paper. Next, I switched to recognition in place of praise, using a statement of an observation, without any judgment of the student's value or even the worth of the behavior. I began saying *"I see you brought your library book back"* instead of *"I like the way..."* I forced myself to quit using statements like, *"You're so good because..."* or even *"I'm proud of you that you remembered,"* (which also suggests my feelings about the students would not be quite as accepting had they forgotten).

This really started working when I learned to connect the child's choice to the positive outcome of that choice: *"Now you can take another library book home."* Remember, the real reason I want the kids to finish their work is so they can go on to the next book, so they can go to the enrichment center, so they can do some other activity— not so that I will feel happy or less frustrated!

Tokens and Motivators

Another method I tried early on was giving tokens as tangible rewards for a desired behavior. I believed that tokens could be effective in shaping a student's actions and often appeared to work quickly. The problem was discovering a way to keep this reward-systems management from managing me! Between making tokens, managing their distribution and the kids' endless desire to cash them in, I barely had time to teach!

In actuality, I found this approach to be the least effective— and the least necessary— of just about anything I tried. And in working with other teachers, I've seen that tokens are often used in the same ways as praise, and often just as arbitrarily, to reinforce teacher-pleasing behavior. Far more effective than tokens, particularly to modify in-class, off-task student behavior, is a contingency with "activity reinforcement," the opportunity to do something interesting, fun or personally fulfilling when something else is done.

In order for any reinforcer to work, it has to be meaningful to the student. That isn't always easy with 30-odd students. Additionally, sometimes in a misguided attempt to be "fair," the thought of offering different reinforcers to different students seems to violate the notion that all students should be treated equally. Not so. We've gotten so used to thinking that "fair" means "same" that we sometimes forget how different our students can be from one another. For example, some kids will do Spelling first because it's their favorite subject, while others will make the same choice to get it out of the way. It would be pretty silly— not to mention redundant— to send all 30-odd kids off to run an errand when many would be just as happy getting to check some papers, help out in another classroom, listen to music while they're working, put something away, do an art or enrichment activity or clean off your desk instead.

If you're concerned that you're bribing the kids, consider the fact that grades, recess, eligibility, graduation and the threat of a phone call home are all bribes! It's just that these bribes are more familiar and accepted. There is no such thing as unmotivated behavior. (Would you come to work every day without the prospect of a paycheck, your benefits, your job satisfaction and enjoyment, or the opportunity it affords you to learn and grow?) Isn't it reasonable that kids would be motivated by positive consequences, just like we are? And isn't it time to broaden our selection of what we have to offer kids— especially since many of the bribes we use most often can seriously compromise the emotional climate in a classroom or are only marginally effective at best?

Primary was the realization that motivation was often just a matter of finding out what was meaningful to the students. And often, all I needed to do was ask. I used informal checklists, inventories and interviews to get a better sense of what interested my kids. The key to this process was using the information I obtained. If I found that my students liked to play a certain board game, preferred doing seatwork with background music, or were particularly interested in dinosaurs, I had the foundations for some very effective contingencies (using positive, meaningful outcomes to motivate cooperative, on-task behavior). This inspired cooperation and commitment in a big way.

Focus, Feedback and the Power of Positive Payoffs

Schools can be terribly negative places— for kids and adults. Deliberately changing these patterns is challenging for any teacher, much less the new kid on the block who's trying hard to fit in. But being positive helped me avoid some negative teacher behaviors, particularly around the kind of feedback I was able to offer. I would hear myself criticizing my kids' work or behavior, and started wondering if there wasn't a better way. I started getting tired of looking for mistakes, errors or omissions when I would review their work, wondering if maybe the real

point of looking over the papers and projects they were turning in might be only to find out what I needed to teach them next!

I soon realized that focusing on the positive doesn't prohibit dealing with the negative. *"Let's work on capital letters today"* is a much more positive approach than, *"You've had capital letters a hundred times before! What grade are you in!?"* I even realized that I got a lot more mileage out of commenting on what the kids had done right and building on their strengths and successes, than on simply marking off what they'd gotten wrong (which, in the long run, generally taught them very little).

It took me a while to realize that I had been tied to the illusion that, as a teacher, I had more control over students' behavior than I actually did. *"They did their seatwork because I told them they'd miss recess if they didn't,"* I'd say, imagining my threat to be the force behind their positive behavior. Wrong! They did their seatwork because going to recess was more important than missing recess for not doing their work. (A privilege I would never withhold at this point based on what I've learned about the relationship between movement and learning, but that's another article!)

Although it may sound the same, there is a huge difference, emotionally and psychologically, between doing something to gain access to a positive outcome and doing something to avoid a negative outcome. Either way, the choice is always theirs. Faced with a variety of options, we all will choose the one we perceive as being the most need-fulfilling. The key for me was the realization that I was capable of making it more likely that the students would make the most positive choices, and that I could do so without using threats or anger.

Students, like adults, need to perceive that there truly is some meaningful reason for choosing a particular behavior. This reason can be anything that makes the cooperative choice appear more need-fulfilling. Setting up contingencies with positive and meaningful consequences allows us to recognize and, when possible, accommodate a variety of student needs and preferences. Often, this intention— motivated by the "win-win" question, *"How can we both (or all) get what we want?"* is enough to build an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual respect. This is not the same as "giving in" in a win-lose power struggle. We all need a sense of control, and children are no exception.

In one instance, a third grade teacher assigned the task of taking care of the classroom game shelf to the child who had the most trouble remembering to put things away. The teacher was initially skeptical about allowing an "irresponsible" student the privilege of being a classroom caretaker, and was concerned that she was actually rewarding messy behavior. However nothing else had worked and she was desperate to circumvent the chaos this child was capable of creating!

After explaining the responsibilities, the teacher was amazed to see that not only did the student see that other children returned the games to the shelf, but that she also monitored her own behavior to live up to her responsibilities. The teacher had found a way to communicate trust in the student's competence. That translated to involvement, which ultimately led to commitment— and a whole new set of positive behaviors!

Another teacher was able to increase on-task behavior simply by inviting her students to choose which tasks they wanted to do first. Yet another teacher inspired students to do a difficult, previously resisted, math assignment by allowing them to choose the 10 problems they liked from the 15 that were on the board.

Dealing with Disruptions

Even with the best contingencies, kids will get off task, distracted and, at times, downright annoying. Rarely do we truly need to react negatively, much less punitively or explosively. When we have a host of positive consequences available conditionally— for example, when a student finishes her work, as long as the group is working nondisruptively or after the materials from the last activity have been put away— we have some leverage to maintain accountability without punishing. Simply restricting the availability of the positive outcome until the kids come through on their end is usually instructive— and incentive— enough. Whether that means not being able to take out a new library book, not getting credit for an assignment or not having access to a particular privilege while a task remains unfinished, we've kept the door open for students to renegotiate the choices they have made. Especially when the outcome is need-fulfilling, they tend to make better choices the next time around.

Now this approach does not prevent us from intervening when there is a risk to the safety of a child or even the environment. If a child is about to do something potentially dangerous, destructive or harmful, whether out of curiosity, inexperience or anger, all bets are off. The problem is that at this point, we're in a survival mode (especially if we're dealing with an out-of-control child), which isn't where we typically do our best thinking. Our goal is to create an environment in which children can get their needs met without slipping into rageful or destructive behavior. Prevention is always the key.

There are constructive, preventative ways of dealing with conflicts and disruptions, before the behavior slips from a threat to an actuality. For example, imagine the various ways of handling a situation in which two students are fighting over a book each wants to read. Teacher A takes the book away and separates the kids, telling them to write an essay about why it is wrong to fight in class. Teacher B takes the book away and tells the kids to go work on another task instead. Teacher C takes the book and arbitrarily gives it to one student, telling the other she can have it after lunch. And Teacher D also takes the book,

but does so telling the students in a calm, matter-of-fact manner that the book is being taken so that it doesn't become damaged, adding, *"You may have the book back as soon as you decide how they can share it peaceably."*

All four teachers have achieved one goal: preserving the safety of the book. Though Teachers A, B and C may have put an end to the arguing, they each took the responsibility for the solution of the problem. What does this teach kids about how to solve problems? Many teachers report that this approach simply warns kids to be a little sneakier and more quiet about their arguments. These approaches are familiar and expedient, but they're not likely to produce the long-term growth we say we're looking for.

Now Teacher D may not have gotten an immediate end to the argument, but these students have the opportunity to negotiate (and take responsibility for) a solution. The teacher intervened to protect the book and to set the guidelines by which the students can work things out, peacefully, independently, constructively and without causing problems for anyone else. The lesson here is quite different, since the teacher gave the children time, space and her trust to discover a solution in which everyone involved would "win."

Following Through

When we've set up boundaries or contingencies with positive consequences for cooperative behavior, we'll see the immense value of following through whenever the teaching or learning process is disrupted. Let's say, for example, that you've allowed students to work together as long as they don't keep you or anyone else from doing their job in the classroom. You know this is a highly motivating contingency— the kids love to work with their friends. But one group gets a little carried away and you suddenly realize that you can barely hear the children in the group you're with which you're working.

In many classrooms, this is grounds for a warning. *"What's the rule?"* we'll ask, or *"What did I tell you about getting so loud?"* In all likelihood, someone will tell us what we want to hear, and for the moment the kids pipe down. But what have we just communicated about our boundaries? If sitting together is truly contingent onnot creating problems for anyone, and they've just created a problem by getting too loud, a warning invalidates the contingency and, even more significant, undermines our authority and credibility. It tells kids they don't have to take us seriously or cooperate until we get mad enough to enforce our boundaries, which is crazy-making for everyone involved.

The good news is that when you have a boundary— that is, a contingency that allows a desirable or positive consequence for the kids under certain conditions— you've got a way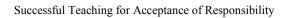 to assert your authority without punishing, without disempowering, and without making anyone lose. In fact, you don't even have to get mad. What you do have to do is discontinue the privilege until another time. You might say, *"This isn't working. You four need to find somewhere else to work now. Let's try again after lunch (or tomorrow or next period)."* Notice that there's no judgment, no shaming, no sense of *"OK, I've had it! I'll show you."* You're using your authority to enforce a limit—not to punish the students or make them wrong.

Immediate follow-through not only communicates that you're serious about the limits you've set, but it also helps kids learn to make more positive choices. Because it does not violate anyone's dignity, this approach is far less likely to generate the resistance, excuses, whining and defensiveness that many of us have come to expect any time we attempt to put our foot down.

As I moved from reacting punitively to setting up contingencies and following through when things didn't work out, I discovered that I could detach myself emotionally from the conflict without withdrawing from the child. I learned to deal with the event, not the individual or the personality, with what would happen next, rather than the morality of what had already occurred. I could use my authority to focus on boundaries and outcomes, instead of seeking to use punishment to exercise my power.

The strategies and ideas suggested here are the culmination of nearly three decades of personal experience and observations, trial and error and the wisdom of hundreds of teachers worldwide who have been gracious enough to share their own struggles and successes. These techniques promote a positive classroom atmosphere in which social, psychological and emotional strengths can develop along with the cognitive learning that takes place. And best of all, these ideas allow us, as teachers, to step back from the frustrating and time-consuming role of trying to control students when such efforts are best left to encouraging the growth and self-management capabilities of the students themselves. I have been pleased with the results of what I've learned over the years, and looking back, I can honestly say: Miss Claiborne, move over!

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