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Picking Battles, Finding Joy: Creating Community in the “Uncontrolled” Classroom

By Kerri Ullucci

We’ve all had our Andres. The child we both love and fear. The child who represents why you went into teaching, and why you’d consider leaving. Andre is the “problem child,” the student every teacher secretly hopes will be put in the *other* 4th grade class. And no matter how long you teach, it’s these Andres who challenge us most.

Everyone in my urban East Coast school knew Andre. When he came to me in the 4th grade, his reputation was much larger than his nine year old frame. I was warned by all his previous teachers: “Andre doesn’t do work. He’ll just sit there and stare into space. And angry! Watch out for the temper tantrums!” And while I tried to ignore their counsel, I couldn’t help but cringe when he entered class that first day.

Andre began the year by telling off the librarian. This was followed by him urinating in a cup and pouring it around the bathroom. When I attended a conference the third week of classes, he decided he didn’t like the sub and just walked himself home. We were in for a long nine months.

I had been teaching for several years at this point, and I made up my mind to buckle down with this child. He was not going to be another African-American boy labeled as poorly behaved and uninterested in school. Something was going to change. This would be my challenge.

The Carrot and the Stick—Behaviorism in the Urban Classroom

Despite how long you’ve been teaching, every educator has a handful of students

who perpetually push her buttons. The challenge of creating a strong, nurturing classroom community is especially difficult if you are an urban school teacher. I am not saying this because our children are inherently more wild or difficult to teach. Not at all. Rather, there is a mythology about how to best “control” urban children that infects many city schools.

As a supervisor of first year teachers in an immense West Coast district, I have seen how this deficit ideology infuses how we treat the youngest of children. Few public schools have democratically based, holistic approaches to classroom management, opting instead for behaviorist models. These models posit that learning is achieved through positive and negative reinforcements. Students learn new behaviors by receiving either rewards or punishments for their actions.

Take Celia, a child who is learning to control her outbursts in class. In order to modify her behavior, a teacher using a behaviorist model would either punish her when she yells out (losing recess time perhaps) or reward her when she does not call out (providing extra minutes of recess). One of the most popular behaviorist programs is Assertive Discipline.

Teacher control is the centerpiece of Assertive Discipline. She is directed to create rules and determine escalating consequences for all manner of misbehavior. Children are to be reprimanded every time they are off task, and those who are on task are to be constantly praised. Teachers keep track of all consequences given to children, often in public ways.

As a new teacher, this program can seem like a heaven-sent. And for those of us who work in urban schools, where discipline issues are the stuff of legends, behaviorist programs like Assertive Discipline seem to be a sensible answer. I admit, I bought in to

this approach when I started teaching. My colleagues used these tactics, and the children did perk up—momentarily—when offered a treat.

But I quickly learned that this approach wasn’t *teaching* children anything. It wasn’t changing the behavior of my “problem children” in any long term ways. And it was making children who were well behaved to begin with now expect rewards for their behavior. They might get in line when they were getting gumdrops, but no gumdrops=no line. I started to look at my thinking, my expectations, my beliefs about control, and I started to reinvent the community in my classroom

The “Uncontrolled” Urban Class

My opinions are not unique. Many teachers are uncomfortable with these prescribed discipline programs, intuitively feeling that something is not quite right about them. So what does work in an urban classroom? How do you help your Andres? How do you create a supportive classroom community that does not rely on reward and punishment?

After years of teaching, and now in my role as a teacher mentor, I have learned that the most powerful force in shaping community is our beliefs about children. Thinking about how we view kids is the first step in devising an anti-coercive, kid-respecting classroom. Schools expect—almost without exception—that teachers will control their students. This control extends to both the physical bodies of children and their behavior and interactions with others. What happens when control is not the primary concern of a teacher? What would the class look like then?

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Classroom Mantras

Every morning I taught, I began with the same little ritual. During the 30 seconds of quiet time between the Pledge of Allegiance and getting down to the business of teaching, I repeated a handful of phrases in my head:

“Every day is another chance.”

“We’re gonna find some joy in this room.”

“Pick ‘yer battles, Kerri.”

This was the backbone of my classroom management approach. But how did these phrases impact the day-to-day activities in my classroom? In doing this simple exercise, I forced myself to check the expectations, assumptions, and beliefs I have about these children and my relationship to them as their teacher.

Early on in teacher preparation programs, we learn that teacher expectations influence student success. That is, what the teacher believes about her children and how she interacts with them affects how well they will do in school. This seems like an obvious statement, but how many of us know teachers who refer to children as stupid, lazy or incompetent? How many teachers have you heard holler down the hallway and embarrass children in front of their peers over seemingly small offenses? How many educators forget that children are children, who make goofy, senseless mistakes not because they are malicious but because they are nine?

We are presented with two systems here. Behaviorism focuses more on the short term, the here-and-now of getting children to do what you want. And it is hard to argue against these models, because they do often have an immediate effect. But what happens when you stop “paying” children for their good behavior? What does this transaction teach children about making good decisions?

I worried that my 4th graders would see doing the right thing as a means to an end—be that computer time or Tootsie Rolls—rather than the way a just community interacts. By making good behavior something we pay for, we send a message that this isn’t something we expect children to do naturally. Coercion is seen as the only way to “make” urban children behave.

What I am proposing is a more long-term course of action, one that gets children to make decisions because they know it is the right thing to do, because they feel responsible to others in their classroom community, and they understand how to manage themselves *without others doing it*

for them. My goal in the classroom was not to control my children. Order was not maintained through fear or obedience, but through a real sense of obligation, affinity and respect for each other. I did not have any point system in my class. I did not have homework charts that gave stars for completed assignments, and classes did not receive parties for good behavior.

But Andre still flourished without these elaborate rewards and punishments. Instead, I worked diligently—and at times with great frustration—to devise a classroom based on the following beliefs about my role as a teacher, and the capabilities of my students.

I Will Treat My Students the Way I Would Want My Own Child Treated

Think about your child or one who is special to you. Imagine the way you want him to be reprimanded for forgetting his homework. You want him to learn the value of responsibility, but not in a way that tears at his self-respect. The same fairness, sensitivity, and high expectations we want for our own children should be reflected in the way we treat children in our care. So when Andre had his bathroom incident, I tried hard to imagine what I would do with my own child. I did not scream at the boy. I asked him what he was thinking. Then I asked him to mop it up.

What if teachers and administrators made decisions as if the outcomes affected *their* children? What would schools look like if we made all choices using this criterion? What would happen to textbooks? Suspensions? Standardized tests? The cutting of arts/music/theatre programs? By imagining all children as our children, perhaps we can find the extra patience and effort to care for all our Andres.

Be Critical of What You Are Teaching/ Kick the Curriculum Up a Notch

Let’s be honest. We’ve all sat in the back of a faculty meeting and corrected homework. Or scribbled in our plan books when we were supposed to be listening to a professional development seminar. Chances are, we drifted because we were bored or didn’t understand the relevance/importance/necessity of what we were hearing. We are not bad people, just ones who tune out when uninterested.

When I am visiting classes of my new teachers, I try to imagine what it must be like to be in first grade. Every lesson is from a textbook. Every day is scripted. Each reading lesson is identical in structure,

requiring children to chant phonemes day after day. They know exactly what is coming. Teachers, in these schools at least, are not allowed to tailor the curriculum to their children. Rather, they are straightjacketed by programs like Open Court, which, quite frankly, bore children to tears.

It should come as no surprise that children misbehave when this is what they experience each day. However, we don’t admit that children are bored. Rather than questioning what and how we teach, we label children—who are often acting the same way we do in faculty meetings—as lazy, unmotivated, or just plain incapable.

I am deeply sensitive to the fact that most teachers have their hands tied by state standards, scripted curricula, and mandated tests. But in small ways, think about how you can break the monotony and depersonalization of schooling. So while we might need to teach the basics of economics to first graders, we will do so in a way that expects competence from each child. And while we are supposed to teach the literature concept of setting using an excerpted paragraph in a workbook, instead we are going to read the whole picture book, and have the kids draw story maps of the different settings they see. Then they’ll discuss why the setting matters and how it affects the story. Then they’ll write about how *their* setting affects *their* life.

Pick Your Battles

At the beginning of the school year, I ask my novice teachers to make a list of all the student behaviors that drive them nuts in the classroom. I then ask them to pick the four or five that are most crucial to a well-running classroom. These usually include rules about calling each other names, physically hurting others, and disrespectful behavior. I then ask them to focus on just these, and toss the rest. The biggest obstacle to running a well-oiled classroom is micromanaging.

You will never be able to control all the actions of 30 children, nor do you want to. So while it was absolutely forbidden for my children to say “Shut Up!” to one another (the highest form of disrespect in my book), they could walk around to get pencils or supplies without asking; they could even go to the bathroom without my permission.

With kids like Andre, this is particularly relevant. Andres do a whole lot to irritate you. My Andre liked to tap his pencil during math. He also liked to walk around the room and sharpen said pencil on an hourly basis. I chose not to worry about

these two infractions. In the scheme of things, they were annoying, but not harmful. I didn't want everything that I said to Andre to be a reprimand or criticism. When he did all-out misbehave, I wanted him to really listen, and not tune me out because "all Ms. U does is yell at me."

Create Another Identity for the Child

Andre was the troublemaker, the smart aleck, the unmotivated. Someone gave him this identity. And after five years of schooling, he knew how to live this identity perfectly. One of the biggest challenges is finding another identity for the child who drives you crazy. This is where teaching is an act of perpetual patience. We are asking ourselves to forget about the million tiny transgressions, all the frustration, and find what is beautiful about a child. And we do this not because it is easy, but because *it is our responsibility* when we work with children.

By nine, a child cannot be written off as hopeless or incorrigible. There is something worthwhile in every student we have. Unfortunately, we teach in a time that stresses standardization and making children learn in very rote ways. It is often difficult to present lessons in which children's individuality and personal strengths can shine.

Andre was a very low reader. And while he could do math, he was easily flustered by word problems. One afternoon, despite school regulations, I gave the children fifteen minutes to "play" in class; children chose between chess, tangrams, construction blocks, and multiplication games. I wanted to see what children did differently.

Andre could build. Amazing multiple story buildings! He assembled tangram puzzles with breakneck speed, beating me—and I was trying! I convinced him to help other students build towers and bridges. Now he was the teacher, an expert in architecture. He saw himself as something other than the discipline problem. He saw himself as a competent member of our community.

Assumptions about Race

My mantra regarding race was not a simple, "don't make assumptions based on race." This issue could never be so clean. Unlearning racism is a complex process, and thinking one blanket statement could erase all bias is disingenuous. As a white woman who teaches low-income children of color it is crucial to check myself about how race plays out in the classroom.

I see this "checking" as happening on two levels. First, I have to acknowledge the

deficit models, the negative, what-these-children-can't-do beliefs that affect our teaching. I think it is impossible to grow up in the U.S. without internalizing these beliefs. So in really hard and messy ways, I needed to ask myself about the expectations I had. What do I think these children are capable of producing? Would I teach more affluent/white children differently?

Secondly, I need to think about what I really know about certain children, and what I think I know. My wise advisor warned me, "that the less you know, the more you make up." This is a particularly important consideration if you did not grow up in the community where you teach. What assumptions do you make of the students' intelligence? Their future prospects? Their families? And where do these assumptions come from? Movies? TV? Lop-sided news reporting?

I tried with great effort to separate out what I *knew* based on my *own* experiences versus what I was told based on others' interpretations. On the day to day, this meant asking, do I really know why Andre didn't do his homework, or am I assuming? Do I understand why Raf (my other "discipline" issue) is angry, or am I taking a guess? And what are these guesses based on?

Finding Joy at School

Imagine your workplace is a place you dread. Each day you are reminded of all the things you don't do correctly or are too unskilled to do. The work you do is too difficult, or too easy, and you feel perpetually frustrated. You don't understand how what you do matters, or how it's related to the real world. What would keep you going?

Children need to find some sort of joy, benefit, or belonging by being in school. This is not coddling them. It is simply being humane. Now, I am not saying the school should be entertaining every minute of the day. We are there to teach, not amuse children. However, school needs to be meaningful, and students need to find some modicum of success in the classroom.

This is an unbelievable challenge for teachers, when we increasingly are asked to rate and label children with test scores, API indexes, and tracking. In doing this, we ensure that some children are always failures. The bell curve demands it! But school can't just be a place where children are told all they need to do better and the myriad of ways they must be "fixed."

After Andre's building success, he became the class architect. Whenever something needed to be repaired, or crafted, Andre was my right hand man. Raf, who

was moved to my class after a brief stint in a Dominican Republic military school, found joy in his preschool sister. He adored her and was protective of our youngest children, especially on the playground. So I arranged for him to read to the little ones in kindergarten, including his sister. Not only did he find joy and success, but he was also able to change how others saw him.

Every Day Is Another Chance

As teachers, we need to be in the business of forgiveness. Just as our students make mistakes when they are learning to divide, or sound out blends, they'll make mistakes in behavior too. And after years of getting frustrated, this is how I have learned to look at these transgressions, as mistakes. Some kids make a lot of mistakes!

At times it is easy to see student's poor behavior as an attack against us, or as a child purposefully being fresh. At times, I am sure this might be accurate. However, by looking at these behaviors as mistakes we can find ways to solve them.

Often, we chastise children, but don't tell them what we want them to do instead. I found it is more helpful to say, "Look, Juana, it's not OK to take the markers off my desk without asking. Next time, ask me if you can borrow them first," rather than "Keep your hands off those markers!"

Don't be afraid to let kids in on the secret. Instead of assuming that kids will just pick up how to behave, discuss your expectations with them. My students had a bad habit of interrupting me when I was speaking with adults. They would come up close and just start rattling off whatever they needed. "OK folks, I am going to let you in on a secret," I informed them at circle time. "When you need my attention, just wait for me to pause and say, "Excuse me Ms. U." and you can let me know what you need. What I don't want you to do is poke me or just start talking." I did my most dramatic interpretation of the interrupting child flailing her arms and poking my hip to get my attention. I then had them all role play the "rude child" and the "respectful child." Problem solved.

Don't Ask Kids To Do What We Don't Ask Adults To Do

Early on in my career, I decided I would not make demands of children that I would not make of adults. This did not win me many friends amongst administrators. Adults don't walk down the hallways in straight lines. We do not remain silent while waiting. We often need to go to the

Personal Perspective

bathroom or get a sip of water at times other than recess. If grown people don't do these things, I would not expect children to.

So I shared this philosophy with my kids. And I asked them what adults did when they were in the hall. "They whisper," replied Tamila. "They walk regular, not running," added Carter. So that would be our plan. We would behave in ways that would be respectful to the community we shared; however, I refused to micromanage them.

"Something Bigger"


As a teacher, it is hard to break the notions of control that are so prevalent in our schools. Well-behaved classrooms are quiet. Good teachers keep their students in silent,

straight lines. But I decided—and it was a real challenge—that this wasn't about me. It was not about how I control, dominate and coerce nine year olds into making me look good. It had to be about something bigger.

The "something bigger" is a classroom based on children being prepared for life. Not a life that expects children of color to misbehave and poor children to be unruly. It is not a life that requires control, domination and rigid structure in order to get the littlest of things done. Control is not our safety net. Being in control does not equal being a good teacher, a fair teacher, or a kind teacher. It might mean your classroom is run as precisely and orderly as boot camp—but is that what an eight year old deserves?

The point of classroom management is

to ensure a productive environment in which children are challenged, respected and able to grow. That's it. We don't have discipline to show how in control we are as teachers or how we can get children to bend to our will. Yes, we have difficult children who try our last nerve. Andre is permanently imprinted in my spirit as the biggest challenge of my teaching career. But by finding him an identity he could be proud of, in a space that was fair and respectful, Andre learned other ways of being in school. By stressing a management philosophy that values the goodness and competence of children, I can not only be at peace within my classroom, but also be at peace with myself.



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