Challenging Educators' Mental Models about Motivating Students

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Abstract: *Largely because of its behaviorist roots and despite several progressive education movements, external control has been the primary motivation technique used by educators since the dawn of formal schooling in the United States. Decades of recent research, however, has led to a paradigm shift of sorts, suggesting that by challenging their mental models about the causes of student behavior, educators might learn to motivate students differently and more effectively, thus, enhancing students' opportunities for social and emotional growth. Based on the theory and research regarding the relations between motivation and behavior management and my own experience as a high school principal, I argue that educators can better facilitate learning by abandoning external control as a behavior management technique and employ more productive motivational strategies like compassion and behavioral freedom.*

PRELUDE

I worked with a teacher whom I will call Mrs. G for many years. She developed quality relationships with students but also held them accountable for their roles in maintaining good relationships with her. Mrs. G used her position and relationship with students to help them understand the importance of having a vision of how they wanted to be perceived and who they eventually wanted to be.

Mrs. G once contacted me about an interaction she had with a particular student. It was very unusual for her ever to contact me about a problem with a student, so I took her concerns quite seriously. The student was a girl named Bri who had a reputation for intense behaviors and inappropriate language in her interactions with faculty and staff.

This particular incident happened very early in my own administrative career, and with everything that typically overwhelms a new principal, I had forgotten about Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954). Maslow theorized that human needs can be depicted as a hierarchical pyramid with physiological, safety, love and belonging needs at the base and esteem and self-actualization needs at the top of the pyramid. According to Maslow, basic needs near the foundation of the pyramid must be satisfied for a person to ascend the pyramid and meet higher-level needs. Additionally, as higher-level needs are met, increased learning becomes possible.

Instead of first considering the motivation of students' behavior as unfulfilled needs described by Maslow, I often felt like it was up to me to solve an angry student's outbursts through techniques consistently employed in schools such as Skinner's (1938) theory of operant

conditioning. According to Skinner, behaviors that are responded to by unpleasant consequences, typically detention and suspension in a high school setting, are less likely to be repeated.

However, Gordan (1974), found "a system of rewards and punishments to be ineffective" (Gordan [1974] as cited in Bucher & Manning, 2001, p. 89) for modifying behavior and was of little use in motivating students to learn. According to Gordon, "teachers should realize that they cannot accept responsibility for someone else's behavior and should insist that students accept the responsibility to discipline themselves" (Gordan [1974] as cited in Bucher & Manning, 2001, p. 89). Similarly, Glasser's (1998) Choice Theory is predicated on the idea "that the only person any of us can control is ourselves" (p. 75). Passaro, Moon, Wiest, and Wong's (2004) research, which was framed using Glasser's Choice Theory, underscored the validity of his wisdom and stressed that a punishing system of suspension or removal from class actually puts students in control of that system. "If what a student wants is to get out of school, he can easily achieve that result" (p. 3).

Because a system of rewards and punishments essentially puts students in control of their behavior to the point that they can purposefully get themselves suspended if that is their choice, "one might expect that teachers would commonly enact autonomy-supportive instructional behaviors and only rarely enact controlling ones. This does not, however, seem to be the case" (Reeve, 2009, p. 159). Reeve's deduction accentuates the need for educators to seek out alternatives to unpleasant consequences for modifying student conduct that would help students take responsibility for their behavior and also play a role in improving it.

BACK TO BRI AND MRS. G

Serendipitously, not long before the incident between Bri and Mrs. G, I had attended a professional development workshop in Des Moines, IA that merged several theoretical ideas from Maslow, Gordan, and Glasser to offer responsibility planning as an alternative to punishment and coercion for modifying student behavior. Responsibility planning posits that a system of rewards and punishments is ineffective, and that behavior modification is better achieved by working to meet a student's unmet needs. Once a student has taken responsibility for their behavior, a caring adult and the student can collaborate on a plan to improve the behavior.

A foundational axiom of responsibility planning is that, when a negative interaction takes place between a teacher and a student, the relationship has likely been damaged. Since punishments are ineffective, the operant conditioning practice of an unpleasant consequence does not effectively modify behavior; instead, an unpleasant consequence, like suspension, disengages the student from school and can lead to low academic performance and antisocial behavior (Bohnenkamp et al. (2021). An alternative to an unpleasant consequence, then, is for the teacher and student to repair the relationship through a meeting that results in a mutually agreed upon verbal or written responsibility plan.

Based on what I had learned about responsibility planning, I suggested to Mrs. G that her relationship with Bri was damaged, and I asked her how she felt about meeting with Bri to try to repair it. Mrs. G, too, knew that supporting Bri was more complicated than could be resolved through Skinner's traditional operant conditioning, and to her infinite credit, Mrs. G. agreed to a meeting with Bri instead of the more institutional unpleasant consequence of a suspension.

At an agreed upon time, Mrs. G came to my office, and I had one of the administrative assistants summon Bri. When Bri walked in and saw Mrs. G, she sat on the opposite side of the office, as far away from Mrs. G and me as possible, and she turned her chair a quarter turn away

from us, facing the wall. I didn't know what Mrs. G was thinking so I started the conversation, "Bri, I understand there was an incident between you and Mrs. G." Bri did not say a thing. I continued, "Bri, Mrs. G is just trying to do her job, and she does not. . ."

Mrs. G interrupted me. "Bri, what is going on? We have had a good relationship. One reason we are here is because I was not sure how to approach you after the things that were said." Mrs. G went on to tell Bri about the potential she saw in her and how the incident was especially troubling because of the positive relationship they had so far experienced. The meeting continued with Mrs. G talking to Bri and Bri continuing to face the wall. After perhaps a minute, though, Bri's shoulder began to shake some, and I thought I detected a bit of a sob. Then something completely unexpected happened. Bri turned to Mrs. G and said, "Mrs. G, I am so sorry. I never meant this to happen with you." Bri was a tough girl, and despite having mediated far too many conflicts between Bri and various staff, I had never seen this side of her before.

Mrs. G pulled her chair over by Bri. Bri turned towards Mrs. G, and they were both apologizing, hugging, making plans for how Bri would come back to class and be successful. All of us. . . and I mean all of us. . . were crying. I had hopes that we could find common ground with Bri and restore her relationship with Mrs. G, but I never dreamed of anything like what was unfolding before my eyes. This meeting completely changed how I viewed student management, and it was essentially the genesis for helping my staff build better relationships with students and rely less on punitive measures for dealing with problematic student behavior. I will be honest and say it was not completely the end of Bri's behavior problems, but it was the end of any problems she had with Mrs. G because they had developed a process to support Bri.

In retrospect, I realize that traditional measures for student discipline never "felt" right to me. The meeting Mrs. G and I had with Bri confirmed what I had suspected but had not really understood very well. Thanks to Mrs. G, the meeting with Bri helped me understand that students can see opportunities for accepting responsibility for their actions as initial steps toward becoming the people they want to be.

APPEALING TO CONTEMPORARY THEORY AND RESEARCH

Contemporary theory and research would identify Bri as a trauma-affected student today, but the term didn't even exist when I knew her. Trauma-informed classrooms and trauma-informed schools have gained prominence in recent years by defining trauma more broadly and showing how students' learning can be impeded when they have experienced trauma. McInerney and McKlindon (2014) wrote a very powerful article replete with data, behavior charts, and examples of trauma-informed schools where detecting and addressing trauma in students' lives are part and parcel of school curricula. In the introduction to this article, they discussed the need for educators who want to serve trauma-affected students successfully to reconsider what they have always believed about managing untoward student behavior:

> By adopting a trauma-informed approach, schools undertake a paradigm shift at the staff or organizational level to recognize, understand and address the learning needs of children impacted by trauma. (p. 1)

The significance of McInerney and McKlindon's (2014) point here seems understated, and the concept of "a paradigm shift" deserves some unpacking. Too many educators are unable to let

go of the mental model of external control that has informed their attempts to motivate their students throughout their careers.

Fortunately, legitimate trauma-informed training programs have been valuable for facilitating the paradigm shift McInerney and McKlindon argue educators must embrace to fully realize the impact of trauma on learning and the negative consequences of punishment and coercion for trauma-affected students (and all students for that matter). When school leaders, teachers, specialists, and staff are not willing to give up their long-held beliefs about external control and insist that punishment and coercion successfully motivate students, trauma-informed training cannot reach its full potential.

MENTAL MODELS AND THEIR DISCONTENTS

"Put simply, our mental models dictate how we understand our world" (Gerasimova, 2017, p. 1). Magzan (2012) explained that mental models present a barrier to change because schools and other organizations operate as if the world is "stable, linear and predictable" (p. 58). Senge (1990) described the negative impact of not interrogating our extant mental models as follows: "New insights fail to get put into practice because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting" (p. 175).

Examining and challenging mental models is central to the paradigm shift indexed but not fully explained by McInerney and McKlindon (2014). From the genesis of public schooling in the United States, the principles of operant conditioning have been the predominant motivation techniques taught to educators. For example, if you read the introduction to almost any educational psychology textbook, you will notice that behaviorism has a strong presence. This pervasive mental model of utilizing external control remains largely unexamined by most school leaders and teachers because they have been exposed to few, if any, examples of alternative motivational strategies. Additionally, even though B. F. Skinner acknowledged that, when practicing control, one should employ only positive reinforcement (Fancher, 1979), teachers rely "frequently on extrinsic motivators to spark students' engagement in learning activities, tending toward pressuring-inducing language, neglecting to provide explanatory rationales for their requests, and opposing students' complaints and expressions of negative affect" (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Barch, & Jeon [2004] as cited in Reeve [2009], p. 159).

In this regard, Singh and Dali (2013) found that aspiring principals acknowledged the need for collaborative and collegial relationships in their schools. However, these future leaders felt that preparation programs could clarify the role of empathy in leadership roles. Due to the predominant mental model of external control in educator preparation programs and subsequent professional development opportunities, practicing and aspiring educators do not always feel empowered to be empathetic, and they rarely figure out how to eliminate coercion and punishment from the cultures of their schools. Nor do they usually feel empowered to challenge the norm of external control and to use more compassionate supervision or discipline strategies such as those espoused by theories of emotional intelligence, trauma-informed instructional practice, growth mindset, etc. As well, there are hardly any resources in education preparation programs that teach motivation techniques that lead to creating more compassionate school environments. If progress is to be made toward producing more caring school cultures, then initial preparation programs and professional development for educators will need to be quite purposeful about including knowledge about coercion-free techniques, compassionate behavior management strategies, and trauma-informed instructional practice.

THE MYTH OF EXTERNAL CONTROL

A key misconception held by most practicing and aspiring educators, and most people for that matter, is that external control is useful for managing behavior. Although nearly all teachers and principals justify their practices as being for the benefit of *students and others*, almost none are aware of their reliance on external control or the damage to *students and others* caused by external control. The truth is that punishment, a regular form of external control implemented by principals, teachers, and parents, can be dramatically harmful, especially for children affected by previous trauma. In relation to this claim, Fabelo et al. (2011) advised that students who disengage from school soon come into contact with the juvenile justice system. External control, in reality, meets only the needs of those imposing control and does not address the needs of *students and others* very much, if at all.

To best benefit *students and others*, educators (and people in general) must learn and exercise more practices that allow for the behavioral freedom of all people in our social worlds. The work of Glasser (1998) is useful here. Among other things, Glasser wrote: "We choose to do what we believe will best control the world around us so that it becomes closer to one or more of the pictures we select from our quality world. Our biggest problems arise when we try to control other people" (Glasser, 1998, p. 75). Glasser's theory posits that all behavior is a matter of choice and that trying to control others' behavior is a waste of time because "the only person any of us can control is ourselves" (p. 75).

Nearly all of the examples Glasser supplies in *The Quality School* demonstrate how controlling behavior by school leaders and teachers affects students in negative ways. With limited revisions, Glasser's work can be adapted to show that some principals depend on an interactional style that relies almost solely on external control while other principals enact an interactional style grounded in emotional intelligence and compassion. Importantly, these two different styles exert radically different effects on students, teachers, and other school personnel.

A TALE OF TWO (KINDS OF) PRINCIPALS

Glasser's comparison of the behavior management strategies of Boss Principals versus Lead Principals is instructive here. Boss Principals set tasks and standards without consulting teachers or students. Instead, Lead Principals engage teachers and students in discussions of desired behaviors and provide time for behavioral adjustments. Lead Principals also make continuous efforts to fit the tasks to the skills and the needs of the teachers or students.

Boss Principals do not compromise; teachers and students must adjust to the situation as defined by these principals. In contrast, Lead Principals ask teachers and students for their perspectives and input, and they engage teachers and students in discussions of behaviors appropriate to certain contexts.

Boss Principals tell rather than show, and they rarely ask for input for how something might be done better. Alternatively, Lead Principals support teachers and students in their efforts to improve, sharing the responsibility for improvement with them.

Boss Principals dictate solutions and determine the relative success of those solutions. Instead, Lead Principals do everything in their power to create a noncoercive, non-adversarial atmosphere and to provide teachers and students with problem-solving tools and strategies. When teachers and students resist, Boss Principals use coercion to make them do as they are told. In contrast, Lead Principals utilize coaching techniques to help teachers and construct and reconstruct their own understandings of problematic issues.

A useful measure for distinguishing a Boss Principal from a Lead Principal is how the principal applies Maslow's (1954) Hierarchy of Needs when dealing with students' and teachers' unwanted behaviors. A Boss Principal uses fear and coercion to control students and teachers with punishments such as detention or poor annual evaluations. Although punishment never meets the needs of students or teachers, Boss Principals meet their own need for control when using punishment to control others' behavior.

Lead Principals, however, understand that for students and teachers to improve their behavior, they must take responsibility for that behavior and participate in a plan to improve it. A Lead Principal who takes the time to help students or teachers construct their own understandings of undesirable and unproductive behaviors meets the students' or teachers' needs far better than a punishment that never required them to consider how they might improve their behavior.

Much of the value of Maslow's tiered approach to meeting needs is that empathy and social and emotional intelligence are built into every tier. To conclude, principals who effectively employ Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and are conscious of putting student and staff needs before their own quite naturally cultivate more compassionate school cultures and better facilitate development and learning for trauma-affected students as well as for all students, all teachers, and all other school personnel. So, to reiterate something I said earlier, it is time for a paradigm shift from behavior management and motivational strategies grounded in behaviorism to behavior management and motivational strategies grounded in theory and research on social and emotional learning, trauma-informed instruction, and self-actualization.

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