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Judicious Discipline

by Paul Gathercoal and Ron Crowell

Democratic classroom management is necessary to the success of character education programs.

Judicious discipline provides the democratic approach that is often overlooked.

The issue of character has emerged once again as a major topic on the U.S. educational scene. In the complex, diverse, contentious world of the dawning millennium, it is only natural that character education, or the lack of it, would return as a curricular issue. Many believe that today's students often have few socially acceptable values and morals, that they lack even rudimentary social skills, and that many come from homes with few models of what it is to live in a civil society. Furthermore, because we lack defining policy, consensus, or an agreed-

upon approach, many methods and procedures for teaching character are being touted.

U.S. education has focused on character development from its inception (Field 1996). The very first law dealing with public education in 1640 made the development of character a central aspect of education. However, U.S. education has increasingly turned away from character since the 1930s. In fact, in the past two or three decades educators have largely excluded the teaching of character from the curriculum. Some attribute this situation directly to the reaction

against the "values clarification" movement of the '60s and '70s. Educators too often tried to make education value free—a logical and behavioral impossibility—and consciously moved away from teaching anything that looked like character education.

Character education, as portrayed today, is one approach to a much larger set of issues. At the heart of the desire to help our children have "better" character is their moral development. Judicious discipline offers an approach to democratic classroom management that enhances the implementation of any character-building curriculum. We believe that this approach is essential to the implementation of good character education programs in our schools.

Judicious Discipline Defined

Educators have always believed that teaching citizenship is an important aspect of their educational mission. Judicious discipline (Gathercoal 1997) takes that belief one step further—to acknowledge and respect students as citizens. Judicious discipline is a philosophy and framework for classroom management and school discipline. It is a citizenship approach that teaches students about their rights and responsibilities for living and learning in a democratic society, based on the U.S. Bill of Rights.

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Judicious discipline presents educators with a model that respects the rights of every student and balances these rights with those of the rest of the students in the school—a balance maintained in a state of dynamic equilibrium. This model is best put into action when educators teach students about their individual rights, *and* allow students to explore their individuality by exercising their rights within the school and its classrooms.

The human rights guaranteed to every individual by the Constitution of the United States are freedom, equality, and justice. The rights and interests of a school's society include four compelling state interests that represent legal reasons why educational institutions operate and maintain safe, disciplined, and proper educational environments. These components serve as a framework for rules and expectations. Students and educators cooperatively develop behavioral guidelines for their own teaching and learning situations based on these four interests:

- property loss and damage: an interest that acts as steward for the care and appropriate use of individual and state-owned property;
- threat to health and safety: an interest that serves a fundamental purpose of government to protect the health and safety of students who attend public schools;
- legitimate educational purpose: an interest that keeps in countenance administrators', teachers', and the educational institution's license to make arbitrary decisions based on sound educational practice and the mission of the school; and
- serious disruption of the

educational process: an interest empowering schools with the professional responsibility to deny student rights that *seriously* disrupt student activities.

When students are taught about the need for balancing their rights with the rights and interests of society, they learn that there is always an appropriate time, place, and manner for exercising their individual rights. The rules and expectations students develop will naturally reflect an understanding of appropriate individual behavior. In addition, students will have addressed notions of social justice and will have done much to generate an atmosphere in their school and classroom that fosters the pursuit of academic excellence.

Judicious discipline requires "front loading"; it doesn't work well unless expectations are in place and developed by the community of learners. To get started, teachers develop classroom and school expectations by rewording the four listed interests into positive behavioral statements and then asking students to help define what these statements will look like in various teaching and learning situations.

When students develop the rules of the school or class within this democratic structure, the community owns the expectations. As a result, educators may not feel personally violated when rules are broken. The educator takes on the role of a mentor or advocate trying to help a troubled student come to terms with a problem situation. In this way, educators maintain their ultimate goals.

When educators use this approach, work-related stress is reduced through the lack of student/teacher confrontations, and a greater feeling of professionalism

results. As McEwan (1990, 40), a classroom teacher, commented:

The most immediate effect of my . . . reading Judicious Discipline is my classroom management. The entire atmosphere of my classroom and the relationships I have with my students has been radically changed. My old emphasis on "discipline" and "deadlines" had been replaced with compassion, understanding, and awareness of the best interest of the individual. It's remarkable to me how much I am suddenly enjoying teaching and how often my students are finding me to be an adult to whom they can turn for understanding.

Students, too, will feel greater self-worth as they are empowered with taking responsibility for their own behavior. As a consequence, judicious discipline helps to build a mutual respect between the educator and the individual student.

Character Education Enhanced

Much of the character-building curricula are well-scripted prescriptions for teaching about specific ethics and values. Some employ high-profile people who endorse the curriculum, its process, and substance. Most character-building curricula are marketed well and generally have the best interests of our society at their core. They are teacher-friendly, and they complement and work well with judicious discipline.

Judicious discipline is not a stand-alone model for classroom management and discipline. It must be supplemented with other

cognitive strategies and teaching resources to be implemented optimally. Likewise, character-building curricula cannot work without a democratic management system like judicious discipline, because citizen's rights and responsibilities are encountered daily. These character-building curricula certainly will not work if a traditional, morally bankrupt, obtuse disciplinary procedure is at work in the classroom. Whichever approach is used, teachers must understand their mission.

Public education exists to preserve and promote literacy and democracy. The ends of education are to assure that students succeed to the best of their abilities, and lead a healthy, personally enriching lifestyle. Although meaningful and humane goals, they are hardly important if not achieved in the context of a democratic society. We must keep the ends of education in mind as we weave our argument for character education based on the principles of judicious discipline. Our means must match the ends of education; they are intrinsically linked. What we do in the classroom inevitably impacts the ends of education for every student in that classroom. For example, isn't it absurd to think that we can prepare students for living and learning in a free, democratic society by teaching them in autocratic classrooms? Character education will work only if it is founded upon the principles of democracy.

The educator's role is evolving to include democratic approaches to school and classroom management. This shift to a democratic style maintains "the same legal and perceptual role in regard to external authorities but changes the educator's internal actions and

work within the school community of faculty, staff, students, and parents" (Glickman, Allen, and Lunsford 1994, 216). The rationale for making this shift to a democratic leadership style is educationally sound. Judicious discipline is currently the only model for orchestrating a thoughtful classroom based on principles of democracy and operating at the principled level of moral development (Wolfgang 1995).

Students need democratic models operating in their daily lives and opportunities to exercise their democratic rights and responsibilities. It is utterly unrealistic for educators to believe that their students will develop to the higher levels of moral development as a result of meting out rewards and punishments in hopes of reinforcing "good" behavior and discouraging the "bad." Judicious discipline helps educators provide ethical and moral leadership every day.

Character-building curricula generally legislate the qualities of good character. Most character-building curricula include at least these six pillars of good character:

- trustworthiness,
- respect for others,
- responsibility,
- fairness,
- caring, and
- citizenship.

If character education is to be successful, the teacher must display these attributes in his or her own learning and living. Judicious discipline helps the teacher maintain the integrity of these qualities while teaching all students. It provides a framework and a "language of civility" that will help guide students in behavior and decision-making processes.

Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic Motivation

Often, character-building curricula will use rewards and punishment to encourage good character. Rewards and punishment (negative consequences) are at the lowest levels on any taxonomy for moral development. Isn't this antithetical to the process? This is why we wanted our readers to keep in mind the ends of education and how the means and the ends are

intrinsically linked. If we are truly interested in developing good character in students, then the process must involve intrinsic rewards. When we rely on extrinsic motivators, acts of good character are dependent upon the reward being present or the negative consequence being absent. The lesson learned by the student is to avoid the unpleasant and seek the pleasant. If the rewards are not forthcoming, you can do what you like.

when you like, and however it feels best for you. Judicious discipline, on the other hand, operates at the principled level of moral development. The teacher acts as a professional, the student's mentor. As Gathercoal (1997, 107–108) argued:

When students make academic mistakes, good teachers use these mistakes for diagnostic purposes and employ effective educational strate-

Figure 1.

Reasons for Using Judicious Discipline with Character-Building Curricula

Character Education Curricula	Judicious Discipline
Tells students what is ethical and how they should behave.	Provides a framework and “language of civility” that guides students in their behavior and decision-making processes.
In a word, “legislates.”	In a word, “educates.”
Uses rewards and punishments.	Uses a mentoring process.
Operates at the lowest levels of moral development.	Operates at the highest levels of moral development.
Teachers need not practice what they teach.	Teachers must practice what they teach.
Simple to implement—provides a quick fix.	Hard to implement—provides long-term benefits.
Is confrontational, adversarial, and autocratic.	Is cooperative, community-oriented, and democratic.
Encourages codependent student/teacher relationships.	Encourages autonomy and respect in student/teacher relationships.
Encourages lower-level thinking skills in classroom situations that use rehearsed social scenarios: recall, explanation, application.	Encourages higher-order thinking skills in real school scenarios: describing, explaining, predicting, and making reasoned choices (evaluation).
Provides the educator with little professional autonomy.	Provides the educator with a great deal of professional autonomy.

gies to help students overcome their learning difficulties. Professional educators are usually patient and understanding with students and know that academic accomplishments take some time to develop. It would only follow then, that the same professional approach toward behavior problems would be equally as effective.

Judicious discipline uses intrinsic motivation and celebrates good citizenship. Rather than establishing and maintaining a codependent relationship with students, the teachers in these classrooms empower their students who then develop a desire to be strong in character.

Character-building curricula offer little opportunity for students to experience higher-level thinking. In fact, these curricula often encourage lower-level thinking skills. Students are asked to parrot responses to ethical dilem-

mas with rehearsed social scenarios, legislated by those in authority, and thrust upon students as correct answers. These exercises in character building use recall, explanation, and some application. On the other hand, judicious discipline encourages students to develop higher-order thinking skills through real social situations. They are invited to describe, explain, predict, and make reasoned choices in a democratic classroom.

When students find themselves in a problem social situation, the teacher who practices judicious discipline will approach them as a professional educator. The teacher will probably ask, "What seems to be the matter?" The students then have the opportunity to tell about the situation, recalling what happened, explaining perceptions of the situation, making predictions about what is likely to happen, and suggesting possible choices based on recollections and predictions. Now they are practicing critical

thinking. Isn't that what education is about? Educators will not get there by providing students with "canned responses" to vicarious social situations.

For schools serious about character education, judicious discipline can provide the foundation—and, with some modification, good character-building curricula may help. Character education is more than a lesson or two each week. If we are really serious about preparing students to live and learn in a free, democratic society, we have to do more. Educators must be judicious educators and live what they are teaching.

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