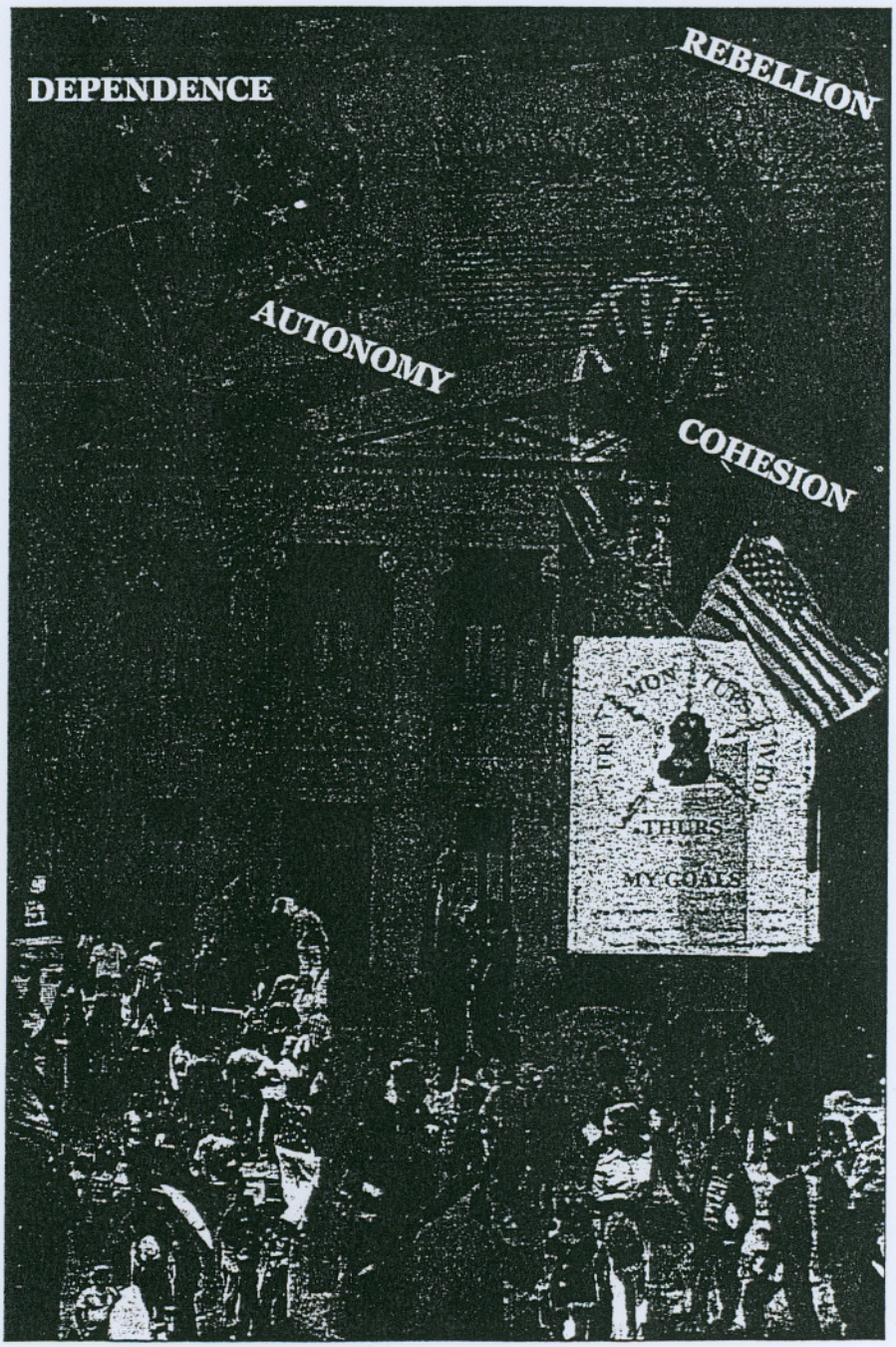
Creating Peaceful Classrooms

Judicious Discipline And Class Meetings

CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Our current national conversation concerning school violence and student discipline is often focused on reactive measures. Ms. Landau and Mr. Gathercoal suggest a better approach.



BY BARBARA McEWAN LANDAU AND PAUL GATHERCOAL

KEEPING schools safe while preserving productive learning environments is an increasing concern for educators everywhere. Teachers and administrators are seeking strategies that will help students learn to act respectfully and responsibly. Researchers who are also teachers, administrators, and specialists in Michigan, Minnesota, and Oregon are documenting how the constitutional language of rights and responsibilities, incorporated into a democratic management framework called Judicious Discipline, can support equitable, respectful, and safe classroom environments. Recent studies have focused on incorporating the language of citizenship rights and responsibilities into class meetings to teach

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Illustration by Robert Mayo

positive goal setting and peaceful conflict resolution.

An Overview of Judicious Discipline

Judicious Discipline is a comprehensive approach to democratic classroom management that is based on the constitutional principles of personal rights balanced against societal needs.[1] This framework gives students opportunities to practice exercising their own rights and their responsibilities to protect the needs of others to be safe, healthy, and undisrupted. What makes Judicious Discipline unique is the constitutional language that is used to promote reasoned decision making and a peaceful school climate.

Teachers who are using Judicious Discipline begin by teaching students about their personal freedoms. Young students might be taught simply that they have the right to be themselves. Older students might be told that the rights they have in school come primarily from the First, Fourth, and 14th Amendments.[2] Some teachers introduce these rights as part of a social studies unit. However, in middle or high schools where teachers might never be responsible for teaching social studies, Judicious Discipline is equally effective as the framework for all management decisions.

The next step is to teach students that rights in a democracy must always be balanced with social responsibilities. Judicious Discipline offers four compelling state interests as the basis for classroom rules: health and safety, property loss and damage, legitimate educational purpose, and serious disruption. Adaptations of the four interests translate into classroom rules such as "Be safe. Protect our property. Do your best work. Respect the needs of others." These four rules are sufficiently broad in scope to address any management issue that might arise at any grade level or in any setting.

After rights and responsibilities have been introduced, students can learn to govern their own behaviors by assessing their actions in terms of Time, Place, and Manner (TPM). Students are asked or ask themselves, "Is this the appropriate time for what is happening? Is this the appropriate place for what you are doing? Is this the best manner?" Students are encouraged to evaluate their own actions in terms of basic societal expectations.

The current studies examining the effectiveness of Judicious Discipline all show evidence that, when the language of citizenship rights and responsibilities is used to mediate problems, students and teachers can use personally neutral, socially accepted terminology for peaceful conflict resolution. Research consistently indicates that this constitutional framework for decision making contributes to a decrease in dropout rates, in acts of violence in and around schools, and in referrals to the office, while also resulting in an increase in levels of daily attendance.

Rights in a democracy must always be balanced with social responsibilities.

Our current national conversation concerning school violence and student discipline is often focused on reactive measures. Judicious Discipline does not wait for problems to occur. Teachers who use this constitutional framework for classroom rules and decisions are "front loading" the expectations for behavior by teaching them through class discussions, group activities designed to create rules based on constitutional concepts, and class meetings designed to resolve classroom conflicts peacefully in a democratic forum.

A Recommended Structure for Class Meetings

Using the language of rights and responsibilities is only the first step in fostering safe school climates. To be most effective, these concepts must be revisited during regularly scheduled class meetings. The structure for class meetings that is most compatible with Judicious Discipline includes the following basic elements, drawn from several sources.[3]

1. *Determine who can call a class meeting and when it should be held.* Some teachers who use Judicious Discipline make it known that any student in the class can call a meeting whenever he or she feels one is necessary. Other teachers determine a specific time, place, and manner for meetings. Either approach, or some combination of the two, works well as long as the meeting schedule includes topics suggested by students and ensures that they will have genuine input into solving problems.

2. *Seat students and teachers so that they can see the faces of all participants.* How students and teachers are positioned says much about power relationships. Students often sit in a circle on a rug or, at older levels, at their desks. Sitting in rows can have the effect of excluding students or enabling students to exclude themselves.

3. *Establish the expectation that names will never be used in class meetings.* The purpose of class meetings is to discuss issues, not individuals. Using names is an accusatory action that makes people defensive. It also causes ill feelings. This rule should be clearly stated and its rationale understood before any meeting ever occurs.

Students will almost certainly need to practice how to discuss issues and not people. Teachers should plan on providing firm guidance in this area. It is simply not appropriate to use class meetings to put students on trial, particularly when so many inappropriate behaviors are associated with confidential issues such as family problems or learning disabilities. While other items on this list can be adapted to suit the needs of individual classrooms, this one element must be faithfully followed.

4. *Establish the expectation that the meeting will stay on topic.* This is not a time for students to tell personal stories about themselves or their families. If students are wrestling with difficult personal problems, they need an opportunity to speak privately with a teacher or a counselor.

5. *Never coerce a student into participating during a class meeting.* Every student should have the opportunity to "pass" when he or she feels the need to do so.

6. *Maintain class-meeting journals.* Immediately following each meeting, both teachers and students should take a few minutes to record their thoughts about what took place. Topics for journal entries might include concerns, clarifications, delights, and topics for future discussion.[4]

Democratic class meetings help students

practice the skills of compromise and mediation. Teachers can use this format to model respect and trust by actively listening to and acting on the ideas shared by their students.

As a general rule, the younger the student, the more "concrete" and brief the meetings should be. For example, when discussing behavioral expectations with 5- or 6-year-olds, it is best to cite specific examples and use clear models. Structured role playing, story telling, or using puppets or flannel board figures can help young students learn how to answer such questions as "How should we behave when someone isn't willing to share with us? How can we tell someone when we are angry without hitting or yelling?"

For older students, meetings can be less frequent and discussions more abstract. A sample topic might be the problem of keeping up with homework while participating in extracurricular activities or working at an after-school job. Regardless of the educational level at which they are conducted, class meetings help students learn how to develop and achieve goals.

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Results

The studies of Judicious Discipline being carried out in Michigan, Minnesota, and Oregon each have a slightly different focus, but all are finding positive outcomes.

Michigan. In southern Michigan, the administrator and faculty of an elementary school adopted Judicious Discipline and class meetings as part of their school improvement plan. Five months later, positive effects were already evident when one group of third-graders demonstrated a knowledge of peaceful conflict resolution. When asked what to do when they feel angry, they were quickly able to cite at least 20 peaceful alternatives to fighting because this topic had been explicitly addressed in class meetings and practiced on a daily basis.

Minnesota. The studies in Minnesota have focused on assessing student attitudes toward school and how they are being affected by Judicious Discipline. During the 1995-96 academic year, a pilot study of a program combining Judicious Discipline and class meetings was conducted in a sixth-grade-only school. The study used a questionnaire to determine the stages of social development evident in the students who participated in the program.[5] The four possible stages were:

- *Dependence*. Students are generally dependent and fear punishment. Motivation is extrinsic and based on praise and encouragement from teachers and parent/caregivers.
- *Rebellion*. Noise levels tend to be high and trust levels low. Aggressive interactions and put-downs are common. Behavior is extrinsically motivated by peer-group approval and moderated by fear of punishment.
- *Cohesion*. Students are friendly and trust one another and the teacher. There is little disruptive behavior. Breach of class norms brings strong group disapproval.
- *Autonomy*. Individuals are self-directed, able to seek and give support but also able to function well without it. Students take responsibility for their own learning, and disruptive behavior is virtually nonexistent. Students rely on self-awareness and empathy rather than rules to choose behavior.

Once the study was under way, two homeroom teachers consistently held class meetings throughout the year; 10 homeroom teachers did not. Questionnaires were administered at three times during the school year. At the beginning of the 1995-96 school year, the survey results indicated that most of the students were at similar stages of social development. By February 1996, however, differences in survey results began to emerge, indicating that students participating in class meetings felt more empowered and had a greater sense of belonging to the group. The final questionnaire results, gathered in May 1996, showed that the teachers conducting class meetings continued to maintain high levels of student autonomy, while the teachers who had failed to continue using class meetings saw their students regress to levels of rebellion and dependence.[6]

Oregon. The study being conducted in Oregon is designed to assess whether attributes of resiliency can be taught. Research into resiliency is largely motivated by the desire to discover why some students who come from difficult home situations struggle in school while other students from equally challenging circumstances succeed despite the hardships they are facing.[7]

> Researcher Bonnie Benard characterizes the resilient child as one who is socially competent, with problem-solving skills, and a sense of autonomy, purpose, and future. Benard's . . . research identifies three key facts . . . that produce resiliency in children: 1. The presence of at least one caring, supportive adult in the child's life; 2. the communication of consistently clear and high expectations to the child; and 3. the provision of ample opportunities for the child to participate and contribute in meaningful ways.[8]

Teachers who are participating in the Oregon study use a combination of Judicious Discipline and class meetings to foster characteristics of resiliency. During meetings they establish clear and high expectations and respond to behavioral problems in a caring manner. They give their students the opportunity to participate in reasoned decision making in order to share responsibility for governing the classroom.

The Oregon study is part of a larger investigation of resiliency being conducted by researchers from extension agencies associated with universities in Nevada, Oregon, Wyoming, California, and Colorado. In the Oregon study, the principal investigator has been working closely with three elementary school teachers, two of whom are team-teaching at the intermediate level in a small rural school and one who is located in an urban school that serves an economically deprived, culturally diverse population. The risk factors of poverty, racial inequality, alcoholism, and drug abuse are all present in the Oregon settings.[9]

The participating Oregon teachers use class meetings as a time to help their stu-

dents practice goal setting and participate in problem solving. In one classroom, students were given the opportunity to determine the best use of a new cupboard the teacher had installed. In another class, several meetings included discussions on how to care for the pet rats occupying various cages in the room. In both cases, the student input was listened to and acted upon.

The teachers also use the time to teach constitutional rights or to present legal cases affecting student rights. The impact of these discussions was evident when Bonnie Tinker, a member of the family involved in the landmark Supreme Court case protecting First Amendment freedoms for students in public schools,[10] visited one of the classrooms. She was treated as a celebrity by the students, who listened to her presentation intently and then clamored for her autograph.

Using Class Meetings To Teach Goal Setting

During the class-meeting process in all participating sites, students are encouraged to set goals for themselves and to determine how they will attain those goals. While individual goals are kept private, there are frequent discussions of how to set and achieve goals. Teachers ask such questions as "How are we doing on our goals?" That way students can discuss their process of setting and attaining goals without revealing a goal that they might not want to share publicly with others.

In one Minnesota classroom, a general goal was set for students to be more cooperative when working with a specialist in their building. While the students did not share their individual ideas of how each would contribute to achieving this goal, they did talk in general terms about how to get along with this person. At no time did their classroom teacher allow them to make disparaging remarks about the other teacher. Rather, they all acknowledged the fact that things were not working well in the other classroom and that life would continually present such challenges. Then, based on that premise, they determined how they might cooperate to resolve the problems.

In one of the Oregon classrooms, the students were concerned that their physical education teacher was not allowing them to get drinks as often as they felt they needed during class. The students invited the teacher to attend a class meeting and explained their concerns to him. He, in turn, discussed his need to have them engaged in curriculum activities rather than getting drinks during their class time. Through discussion, they reached a compromise that was satisfying to all of them.

As one student reported in a journal entry, "Something that is going well is that [the physical education teacher] is letting us have more drinks. Usually he lets us have one drink and it's in the elementary wing where the water is warm. Now we get drinks in the high school end where the water is cold."

Researchers in all three states found that a common topic for discussion is behavior on the playground during recess. Quoting from one student's journal, "Almost everyone gets bullied at recess. Most people have a hard time dealing with it, so I think everybody will feel much better after talking about it." After one of the participating classrooms discussed the topic, another student wrote, "We talked about playground behavior and ideas for next year's fourth-graders' playground behaviors and how to handle sixth-graders on the playground. We did good."

One of the Oregon teachers developed a structured approach to individual goal setting. She created a worksheet called a "Goal Wheel." The hub of the wheel provides students with a space in which to draw "a picture of me making my goal." Below, there are three blank lines for students to write down their goals. The rim of the wheel is divided into five spaces, one for each day of the school week. In those spaces, the students keep a daily record of their progress toward achieving their goals. If a goal is achieved at the end of the week, the student sets a new goal. If not, the goal is either continued or revised in some way to make it more achievable. The goals may seem mundane, but all of them contribute to a classroom that functions more effectively. For instance, one student's goal was to have his P.E. shoes on in time to go to the gym. Another student set the goal of being ready to work by the time the second morning bell rang in her classroom.

The positive effects of the class-meeting process are evident in journal entries such as: "At class meetings we have time to talk about problems and concerns. We also decide how we want to do things. Class meetings are good for learning new stuff. They are also good for solving problems."

Conclusion

The Minnesota, Michigan, and Oregon teachers using Judicious Discipline have all seen positive results, primarily reductions in acts of fighting or other angry outbursts. In addition, the consistent use of class meetings based on the framework of rights and responsibilities has provided students with an opportunity to discuss issues of common concern peacefully. In Oregon, this process has been used to promote the characteristics of resiliency by enabling students to practice goal setting and to have authentic input into the management of their classrooms. While the studies are continuing, the initial data indicate that the combination of Judicious Discipline and class meetings promotes citizenship and supports safe, productive learning climates.

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1. Forrest Gathercoal, *Judicious Discipline*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Caddo Gap Press, 1997).
2. See Barbara McEwan, *Practicing Judicious Discipline: An Educator's Guide to a Democratic Classroom*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Caddo Gap Press, 1994).
3. See, for example, William Glasser, *Schools Without Failure* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991); and Alfie Kohn, *Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1996).
4. Barbara McEwan, Paul Gathercoal, Marina Donahue, Lori Greenfield, and Anne Marie Strangio, "Empowering Students to Take Control of Their Own Decisions: The Synthesis of Judicious Discipline, Class Meetings, and Issues of Resiliency," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, 1998.
5. The Social Development Group Research Branch of the South Australian Department of Education, *Developing the Classroom Group* (Adelaide: South Australia Education Department, 1980).
6. Barbara McEwan, Paul Gathercoal, and Virginia Nimmo, "Applications of Judicious Discipline: A Common Language for Classroom Management," in H. Jerome Freiberg, ed., *Beyond Behaviorism: Changing the Classroom Management Paradigm* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999).
7. John Dacey and Maureen Kenny, *Adolescent Development* (Madison, Wis.: Brown & Benchmark, 1994).
8. Thomas Kneidek, "The Mid Kids: Riding the Waves from Childhood to Adulthood," *Northwest Education*, Fall 1996, pp. 2-9.
9. Dacey and Kenny, op. cit.
10. *Tinker* v. *Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 393 U.S. 503 (1969). K