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Book Review: From Disrupter to Achiever: Creating Successful Learning Environments for the Self-Control Classroom

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BOOK REVIEW

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From Disrupter to Achiever: Creating Successful Learning Environments for the Self-Control Classroom: James Levin and John Shanken-Kaye. Iowa: Kendall/Hunt 2002. 331 pp.

Levin and Shanken-Kaye have written a text, "From Disrupter to Achiever", a major contribution to the literature focusing on how to provide positive intervention in a disruptive classroom. The book is presented to the reader as a new model that challenges traditional beliefs and approaches about behavior management in the classroom. The authors focused on how to create a successful learning environment by promoting positive behavior through respectable interaction between teacher and student with the aim of developing student responsibility.

The purpose of the new model introduced by Levin and Shanken-Kaye, is to inculcate in students, the importance of personal accountability, integrity and duty to others. The authors also seek to generate in teachers a desire to re-evaluate previously acquired knowledge about classroom management. The goal is to replace the traditional approach with a new paradigm that challenges traditional methods of dealing with disruptive and non-compliant behavior in the classroom. The authors also want educators to analyze the outcome of traditional methods of classroom interventions. The authors criticize the traditional model as being analogous to "animal husbandry", in which educators use a system of reward and punishment to ensure compliance to teacher expectation.

The authors opined that the traditional model reinforces non-compliant behavior. A disruptive student is often labeled as a "bad kid", and labeling usually aggravates the problem rather than ameliorate it. Labeling leads to negative reaction toward a non-compliant student, therefore, when a so-called "bad kid" allegedly violates teacher expectations or school rules, the violation is dealt with using aggressive punitive interventions with retributive intent rather than an alternative measure that will not have lasting negative implication for the student.

The authors show that the traditional model has failed because “over 14% of high school students drop out of school prior to completion” (p. 1). In many instances the rates of juvenile detention prove that the traditional method of intervention is a failure. Levin and Shanken-Kaye called for teachers to use common sense. Teachers should not assume that students know how to behave just as teachers should not assume that students know how to solve mathematical equations without teaching the subject matter of mathematics to students. Like any subject matter within the curriculum, teachers should teach their students about acceptable behavior. This approach will allow the teacher to establish a predictable frame of reference for the type of intervention that works in the classroom.

Levin and Shanken-Kaye described the nature and use of teacher authority to influence student behavior by referring to “referent authority, expert authority, legitimate authority and coercive authority. Referent authority is characterized by teacher behavior that communicates trust, care, respect and support. Expert authority is characterized by teacher behavior that focuses upon effective pedagogy. Legitimate authority is characterized by teacher behavior that emphasizes the legal position of the teacher and strict adherence to rules and procedures that are developed solely by the teacher. Coercive authority is characterized by teacher behavior that attempts to influence students using rewards and punishment. Each authority base was analyzed as to its effect on teachers’ beliefs and behavior. Which authority base should teachers use, because it is positive and effective”? (p. 75).

The importance of the various types of authority is to give teachers a situational option that can be utilized depending on the classroom situation. As you begin to read the excerpt taken from the text, I invite you to ask yourself three questions.

1. Do you think there is a discipline problem?
2. If so, who is exhibiting the discipline problem?
3. What is the disruptive behavior?”

“Now imagine a student in a class that he finds boring. He decides to catch up on some extracurricular reading. The teacher calls on

the student to answer a question. The student is startled and unable to answer a question. The teacher says, "Jerry, last week when you came to class and read, I just ignored it. I refuse to ignore your rude behavior any more. Of all the students in this class, you are the last one that should be reading. Put those papers away immediately, get up front, and at the very least, pretend that you are learning something. If you can't, you can leave this room immediately." (p. 33)

Levin and Shanken-Kaye contended that the "techniques that produce negative emotional responses do not increase the likelihood that a student will behave appropriately or learn accountability. Contrarily, they are likely to produce a desire for revenge and a feeling that the teacher is to blame for any consequences experienced by the student due to teacher behavior. These outcomes are often a result of peer pressure to answer in kind and a concrete cognitive orientation that greatly reduces the student's ability to ameliorate the emotional wound" (p. 33) Furthermore, Levin and Shanken-Kaye provided the reader with an array of scenarios and suggestions that they consider to be useful when a teacher is working with a non-compliant student. They emphasized that the "self-control classroom" model is not about management, not about rewards, and not about punishment. The ultimate goal of the Levin and Shanken-Kaye approach is to help teachers develop the knowledge that is necessary for creating a successful learning environment for students.

Levin and Shanken-Kaye are in agreement with Bender (1994) by suggesting that, teachers must put the social, emotional and behavioral, characteristics of students into consideration when putting together their educational plans for students. Students who exhibit behavior problems often disrupt others and also undermine their own learning progress due to a series of problems that may include hyperactivity, distractibility, impulsivity, low self-esteem, poor self-concept and other social skill deficits. Therefore, it is vital to train teachers on how to identify behavioral problems early and to help students develop pro-social behavior. The authors provided a series of step-by-step, intervention techniques that

teachers should use in the classroom and other settings where students are likely to exhibit disruptive and non-compliant behaviors.

In my estimation, Levin and Shanken-Kaye should have factored in the full implications of time constraints and the limitations posed by inadequate or scarce resources in many school districts. Teachers only have limited time with students, even when the teacher has the skill to help a particular student; the teacher may not be able to provide the full range of interventions due to other demands on the teacher's time. A classroom teacher is usually confronted with a myriad of problems daily, including meetings with law enforcement officers or social service agencies, attending meetings with uncooperative parents, trying to implement the curriculum and dealing with disciplinary issues regarding students. These problems take-away from teacher time-on-task and creates stressful work environments. The problem is worse in poor districts that do not have the tax base to generate the revenue that is necessary to provide in-service training for teachers, nor have the capacity to procure the resources vital for classroom intervention.

In conclusion, the Levin and Shanken-Kaye approach is a positive contribution to special education literature. However, I believe it has limited applicability especially in urban school districts. The authors did not address how the "new model" can be effectively utilized in the inner city schools or in poor districts that are experiencing extreme non-compliant behavior from students who are members of neighborhood gangs and are in the classroom of many teachers that are afraid of these students. The situation is made worse when some of the behavioral problems in the inner city classroom are likely to be injurious or deadly. The extreme of non-compliant behavior is gang warfare brought to the classroom by students whose membership in gangs is based upon proving that the way to attain respect and status is to "act-out" against whomever they perceive as representing authority, such as classroom teachers, principals or central office administrators and law-enforcement officers. The authors did not

address the fact that many parents also reinforce non-compliant behavior as a cultural imperative necessary for survival in the neighborhood where the student lives.

Thus, non-compliant behavior becomes not only a status symbol, but also an attribute of neighborhood personality, including when the student is at school. Nevertheless, the works of Levin and Shanken-Kaye is a worthy contribution to the effort to address a major educational issue, i.e. classroom disruption in all school systems.

At its core, the book, *From Disrupter to Achiever*, forces the reader to consider the idea that the student's behavior, positive or negative, may be a result of the teacher's own behavior. In essence, this book identifies the teacher as a factor to be considered when studying or analyzing student behavior.

This book has five major sections and they are: *Introducing a New Paradigm* (Chapters 1-2), *Foundations* (Chapters 3-7), *Establishing Successful Learning Environments* (Chapters 8-12), *Maintaining Successful Learning Environments* (Chapters 13-17) and *Reestablishing Successful Learning Environments for Students Who Exhibit Common or Chronic Discipline Problems, While Protecting the Learning Environment for All Students* (Chapters 18-26).