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CHOICE THEORY

An Effective Approach to Classroom Discipline and Management

Effective classroom learning cannot occur unless teachers are able to develop and implement effective discipline and management systems. The characteristics and nature of classrooms require that teachers acquire and use higher-level managerial skills, which significantly enhance the quality of their instruction and leadership.

Classrooms are multidimensional, in that they are crowded with people, tasks, and time pressures. Many people, all with differing goals, preferences, and abilities, must share resources and accomplish a variety of tasks.¹ Managerial skills are not like simple recipes or strategies that can be memorized and applied as needed; rather, they are a complex set of skills whose effective use depends to a great extent on teachers' personal philosophies and teaching styles, on their knowledge and understanding of pedagogical principles, and on the composition of their classes.²

BY ELVIN GABRIEL and
LIONEL MATTHEWS



The ultimate objectives of classroom discipline and management systems are: (1) to create and maintain environments where learning is nurtured, valued, and efficiently implemented; and (2) to develop self-discipline and self-control in learners. To accomplish these objectives, teachers need to adopt relevant instructional and management strategies that are derived from scientifically tested and verified theories. Choice Theory, the focus of this article, has been implemented successfully by teachers and administrators in elementary, middle, and high school environments.

What Is Choice Theory?

Choice Theory was developed by William Glasser, a renowned American psychologist and psychiatrist. He theorized that behavior is a choice made by an individual, based on his or her feelings and needs, and is therefore not determined or controlled by external circumstances.³ In other words, the power lies within each person to determine how he or she will respond to the demands of the social and physical environment. Humans thus should not be perceived as victims or slaves of circumstances, but as self-determining beings who take responsibility for the consequences of their choices.

Choice Theory suggests that teachers cannot directly control the behaviors of students, since students choose how to react to their feelings. Teachers can help students identify the circumstances that trigger their behaviors, which in turn empowers them to change their reactions to those feelings. As they do so, their behaviors will change.⁴

Key Concepts in Choice Theory

Choice Theory holds that five core concepts are foundational to classroom management and discipline:

1. **Basic Needs**, such as survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun.
2. **Quality World**, which includes people, activities, values, and beliefs that are most important to each human being.
3. **Reality and Perception**, which suggest that people act based upon what they perceive to be real.
4. **Comparing Place**, which builds on the notion that the purpose of all behavior is to create a match between what people perceive and what they want; and
5. **Total Behavior**, which has four components: acting, thinking, feeling, and physiology. Changing any of the five components will affect the others as well.⁵ This article emphasizes ways in which teachers can implement two of these key concepts—**Basic Needs** and the **Quality World**, to establish classroom order and decorum.

Basic Needs

Choice Theory asserts that human beings have five basic needs: (1) Survival, (2) Love and Belonging, (3) Power, (4) Freedom, and (5) Fun. These constitute the source of all internal motivation and guide all human behavior. When teachers understand these needs, they can transform their classrooms into places where students desire to learn, produce high-quality work, and behave responsibly.⁶

The need for **survival** (which includes food, shelter, and physical comfort), is basic to human functioning. However, there is also a psychological component to this need, which focuses on order and security.⁷ Teachers can help students fulfill their survival needs by encouraging them to: (1) eat nutritious meals; (2) exercise regularly; (3) drink at least six glasses of water each day; (4) get plenty of fresh air; and (5) get adequate amounts of rest and sleep. Teachers also need to make sure that the lighting, seating arrangement, air circulation, and temperature of the classroom are conducive to learning. Teachers may satisfy students' need for order and security by maintaining behavior guidelines that support safety and respect; and developing consistent classroom procedures and routines that provide students with a sense of order and security.⁸

The need for **love and belonging** is perhaps the most important need in Choice Theory, and it is critical to relationship building between students and teachers. Students who are not loved and accepted by teachers and/or peers are likely to behave in ways that disrupt the learning process. Thus, teachers and administrators must create caring learning communities where trust, respect, and tolerance are nurtured. Some of the ways that teachers can do this are by: (1) greeting all students as they enter the classroom; (2) allowing students the opportunity to know them personally by sharing their outside interests, their personal convictions, and information about their families and personal history; (3) regularly engaging students in team-building activities; and (4) teaching students how to work cooperatively.⁹

The need for **power** is fulfilled through personal growth, developing knowledge and skills that enhance the quality of human life, encouraging higher achievement, and increasing students' feelings of self-worth.¹⁰ If their need for power is not met, students may act in destructive ways—intimidating, controlling, and dominating teachers and peers through bullying, fighting, stealing, and destroying school property. Teachers can satisfy this need in students by: (1) giving them a voice in the classroom, (2) soliciting their input regarding classroom rules and behavioral guidelines, (3) allowing them to generate questions that guide the direction of the curriculum; (4) holding

regular discussions about the relevance of the curriculum to students' lives; and (5) teaching to accommodate a variety of learning styles.¹¹

Making wise choices is the essence of the need for freedom. Teachers must create opportunities for students to make informed choices about areas and issues that pertain to their academic and social development, such as: (1) establishing their seating arrangements; (2) selecting team members for cooperative learning activities or projects; and (3) participating in the choice of assignments (topics for essays or class projects, outside reading, and odd- or even-numbered math problems).¹²

The need for fun encompasses a number of experiences including joy, pleasure, satisfaction, play, humor, merriment, amusement, and engaging in activities that one enjoys.¹³ It is a by-product of having friends (love and belonging), possessing autonomy (freedom), and feeling safe and secure (survival). Teachers may satisfy this need by (1) providing opportunities for play, (2) inspiring creativity, (3) reducing stress; (4) helping children learn to cooperate and negotiate with others; (5) engaging students in brain teasers and other types of academic games¹⁴; and (6) motivating students to participate in various leisure activities.

The Quality World

The Quality World is a conglomeration of cognitive and visual pictures and perceptions that represent what people have found to be meaningful in their lives, which they use in deciding what they would like to experience repeatedly. This Quality World is the core of their lives because in it are the people, things, and beliefs they have discovered that most satisfy their needs.¹⁵ If something is not part of one's Quality World, it may be difficult to pursue it or experience it. One of the primary reasons why students find it difficult to adjust to the expectations of the school environment is that they lack a mental image of schoolwork in their Quality World.¹⁶

Students who continually disrupt the flow and momentum of classroom instruction and activities may not want teachers or schoolwork in their Quality World because they do not find these encounters and experiences to be meaningful or rewarding. Teachers who do not understand the impact of students' Quality Worlds on their growth and development may use *laissez faire* or coercive discipline and management approaches, which can further alienate and marginalize those students.

Students are most likely to invite teachers to be a part of their Quality Worlds when they perceive that teachers have their best interest at heart. How can teachers create an environment that will encourage students to invite school personnel into their Quality Worlds? This will occur when teachers,

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school administrators, parents, and community leaders share common goals and work collaboratively. It is important for these stakeholders to share the same purpose, philosophy, and vision for the achievement of quality in learning and instruction.

An important part in this process is training for administrators and staff in using contexts and concepts of Choice Theory to improve the climate for teaching and learning. This training will equip them with the tools and skills to effectively apply the following principles to create a quality school:

1. Help students to understand the subject of quality. Engage them in this discussion through coursework and extracurricular activities each day. Students will thus realize that evaluating the quality of what they do is an important part of learning.

2. Encourage students to strive for quality in how they dress and style their hair, in the language they use to express themselves, the music and movies they like, the television shows they watch, and the items they buy. Engage them in discussions of what it takes to become a quality person.

3. When students have developed a clear understanding of the definition of *quality*, ask them about the term as it relates to school, and more specifically to the subjects they take and the assignments they do. Encourage them to suggest ways to integrate quality into their school work.

4. Have students evaluate every aspect of their activities at school, such as their participation in extracurricular activities, their efforts to keep the surroundings clean, their commitment to assist other students and their teachers, and their attempts to enhance school spirit.

5. Teach students that success or failure depends in large part on their willingness to evaluate the quality of their work and to take steps to improve those areas that are lacking.

6. Avoid coercive and punitive forms of discipline, since these methods increase students' resistance to modeling desirable behaviors. Help them to take ownership of their problems and find acceptable ways to solve them.

7. Do not tolerate destructive behaviors that may put staff, administrators, and other students at risk. Students engaging in such behavior should be sent home and arrangements made for them to receive tutoring for the duration of their suspension. They should not be allowed to return to school until they create a detailed plan for complying with the expectations of the school and for evaluating their progress.¹⁷

8. Schedule regular classroom meetings to provide an effective means of resolving problems of individual students or the whole class, and for getting students to participate cooperatively in group activities. Having a regular schedule for meet-

ings encourages students to become positively involved with one another, their teacher, and their school.¹⁸

The ultimate goal of Choice Theory is for students to develop self-discipline and self-control through (1) building and nurturing quality relationships with their peers, (2) making informed choices about their learning and development, and (3) taking direct control over their actions and thoughts. This goal will be realized when teachers, administrators, parents, and the community work collaboratively to provide learning environments that promote the academic, social, mental, and spiritual development of students.

The Choice Theory approach to classroom management does not deny the importance of external influences on behavior. It rather emphasizes that such factors are not as significant in behavior change as factors relating to the students' basic needs. Central to this reality is human beings' capacity to make choices and exercise control over their lives. This self-deterministic feature of human cognition and behavior is radically different from the deterministic assumptions of behaviorists like John B. Watson and B. F. Skinner, who viewed the external en-

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vironment as a major determinant of behavior.¹⁹

Seventh-day Adventist teachers who embrace the biblical view that God created humans as free moral agents cannot but appreciate Choice Theory's emphasis on the capability of humans to control their lives. They thus should ensure that their classroom management and discipline practices reflect this philosophy by empowering children under their tutelage to exercise free will. The extent to which teachers choose approaches that favor self-development over imposed discipline may reveal the extent to which they embrace this theory. The following statement by Ellen White provides a powerful reminder to all teachers, parents, and administrators of the importance of nurturing the free will capacity of children:

"The discipline of a human being who has reached the years of intelligence, should differ from the training of a dumb animal. The beast is taught only submission to its master. For the beast, the master is mind, judgment and will. This method, sometimes employed in the training of children, makes them little more than automatons. Mind, will, conscience are under

the control of another. It is not God's purpose that any mind should be thus dominated. Those who weaken or destroy individuality assume a responsibility that can only result in evil. While under authority, the children may appear like well-drilled soldiers; but when the control ceases, the character will be found to lack strength and steadfastness."²⁰



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