

Mutual Respect in the Classroom: A Functional Definition

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From time immemorial, adults have lamented the fact that children don't respect their elders. Careful examination of this complaint often reveals that having respect for an adult means doing what the adult wants or that which meets with his approval. Yet this definition poses a problem. As teachers, we are often informed that we must respect the child (Dreikurs, 1968). Does this definition imply that we should only do what the child wants or what meets with his or her approval? Of course not. This kind of respect is the respect inherent in a master-slave relationship. To employ this definition leads us to the classroom struggle to determine who is going to be the boss in the classroom—teacher or child? The teacher sees submission as cooperation, while the child sees cooperation as submission. A tug of war to determine who can make whom do what—who is going to be boss—ensues. One cannot, unfortunately, learn and fight simultaneously with the exception of learning how to fight.

What then is respect? We can resort to the dictionary definition, but it is an abstraction. Respect, according to this definition, is something people have for something or someone. Since Adlerian psychology is a psychology of use rather than of possession, I prefer to define respect in terms of how one demonstrates it. One demonstrates respect by regarding others and treating them as if they had equal worth. This practice does not mean that we regard every child as possessing intelligence equal to ours (in some instances they use their intelligence in forms superior to us) or experience equal to ours. It does mean that we desist from treating children as if they were idiots, beasts, or infrahuman. In doing so, we release ourselves from the obligations to be ever vigilant to keep the untamed beasts caged and from talking down to our pupils. Our respect for them is also expressed through our faith that they can learn, that they can exercise judgment, and that they can make choices. Always the wise choice? No, but then do we adults always make wise choices?

Regarding children as worthwhile means that we listen to children's communications. They are constantly emitting signals through behavior (Mosak & Shulman, 1977), through language (Mosak & Gushurst, 1971), through

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gesture, through games and play (Bader, 1936), through compositions (Bruck, 1946; Seidler, 1932; 1935), and through their classroom work (Mosak & Schneider, 1975). Respect for them means that we pay attention, that we attempt to understand them, not merely to sit in judgment on them. Children need not agree with us nor we with them. We respect their right to an opinion. Our country was built on a tradition of dissent. Treason is a crime only when it becomes an act. Our democracy does not penalize ideas as treason. As a sobering thought, we might consider that even our superior age and experience does not *necessarily* make us wiser. I once told a patient that he should not fear seeking another job since he had 10 years of experience. He contradicted me with, "No, I've had 1 year of experience 10 times over."

In a similar vein, teachers must have respect for themselves, which implies that teachers must regard themselves as worthwhile. This sometimes proves difficult because many teachers become anxious or depressed when they find themselves deficient in one respect or another. To reinforce these feelings they often create the fantasy that some or all other teachers are totally competent and can handle any problem that might arise in the classroom. They are often loath to seek help because these deficiencies might be exposed. Certainly we could regard ourselves as worthwhile if we were perfect. The test is whether we can regard ourselves as worthwhile even when admitting that we are imperfect (Lazarsfeld, 1936). If we can, then we can respect our judgment even if we do err occasionally, and we need not fear taking action in the absence of some guideline or the guarantee that we are right. We can then listen to our inner promptings and generally trust them even if we occasionally go astray.

Similarly, a child shows respect for us by regarding us as worthwhile; thus, it behooves us to behave as worthwhile people. Instead of yielding or yelling, we should remain firm and calm. If we behave as the punisher, the enforcer, or the jail warden (students in some schools serve detentions), if we don't play it straight with children, we will be perceived as the enemy. People rarely have a good thing to say about their enemies and have little obligation or inclination to treat them well.

If teachers wish to change their classrooms from "I versus you" to "we" types of climates, it is certainly possible; but they must expect certain problems to emerge. In many instances, the children, on the basis of their previous experience, may not believe that the teacher is sincere or that changes are genuine or permanent. Some of the nonbelievers may create tests for the teacher to ascertain whether he or she is acting from conviction. Moreover, when people change their behavior, there frequently is a pendulum swing. Consequently, some children may display exaggerated "disrespect," first, to test the teacher and, second, to exercise their new-found freedom. If the teacher can weather this without too much inner turmoil and without squelching the child, the "disrespectful" behavior will usually be discarded.

Actions that are permitted rather than prohibited generally lose their attractiveness.

A classroom climate of mutual respect is reflected in an aura of friendship and genuine cooperation, one in which the teacher and the children see themselves engaged in a common enterprise. It is the antithesis of the usual educational situation, in which teachers endeavor, sometimes futilely, to make students do more while pupils use their creativity in devising ways to do less. In a climate of mutual respect, we can not only accomplish the educational objectives, but we can echo the Psalmist, "Lo, how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity."

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