Rethinking Discipline: A Look at Community-Making from Central Academy

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Schools are the only institutions in our nation specifically charged with the two-part mission of enculturating the young in a social and political democracy and introducing them to the organized bodies of knowledge that discipline and enrich our lives as citizens, workers, parents, and individual human beings. (Goodlad, 1979)

As we walked through the halls of our school, I was struck that Jamal honestly knew the school, its members, and the daily happenings as well as, and in places better than, I did. We had been through so much together, that a part of our relationship seemed like two old friends. But Jamal was only in fifth grade. I was the school principal. And Jamal's history at our school was fabled.

At approximately 330 students, we are the only elementary and middle school of choice in our urban, public school district. Our elementary school is comprised of approximately four classes each of Early Primary (grades K/1), Late Primary (2/3), and Intermediate (4/5). Our seventy-five student middle school (grades 6/7/8) is also multi-aged. Our elementary classes are self-contained and students stay with the same teacher for two years, first as a "younger" stu-

dent, and the following year as an "older." Our middle school day is divided into 2 large learning blocks of integrated time for Humanities, and Math/Science.

Socio-economically, approximately 57% of our students are on free or reduced lunches, with the remainder of families ranging from working class to professional incomes. Our racial distribution is comprised of white (70%), black (17%), and multi-racial (13%). Approximately 13% of our students have identified disabilities. Family make-up runs the gamut from two-parent and single parent homes, grandparents raising their grandchildren, to homes with two mothers and homes in which children are being raised by friends of the family.

In short, we are a richly diverse community in which all families have one trait in common: they have all elected to have their child/children attend our school. Students, family members, and staff frequently describe our school community as, "We are a family at Central Academy." However, at this point in time, our "family" was experiencing some major dysfunction.

"OK. You tell me. Let's look in some classrooms, Jamal. Where do you think you can learn?" I asked him. At my wit's end, I was willing to put him in any room, at any grade level, that he identified as a place conducive to work for him.

Jamal's history included more incidents than I could begin to list. Among them were: setting fire to the carpet in his Late Primary classroom by inserting a paper clip into an electrical outlet; stealing a large amount of money from a teacher's purse; causing chaos in many different rooms; running from rooms and hiding in the school while multiple adults stopped everything to look for him; and repeatedly making even the calmest teacher so angry that the teachers' glowing red complexions and wide-eyed looks of fury preceded any explanation of why Jamal was suddenly at my door.

In fairness, his history also included repeated examples of times when he demonstrated an innate ability to help younger students, a true concern for others, and a sincere love (on some days) for playing his violin.

At one point, I had furiously hauled a foot-thick collection of files about his adventures prior to, as well as during, my tenure as principal of our school to the office of the head of psychology for the district. Thumping the files loudly on his desk, I had asked the administrator, "You tell me. Clearly this student needs help." My thoughts at the time were that Jamal was clearly an unidentified SBD (severe behavioral disability) now known as ED (emotionally disturbed) student. In response to my request, however, I was told that the district had done a study which showed that as a district we had over-identified students (particularly African American males) as ED. Much to my chagrin, I was turned away, which meant we had to continue trying to resolve what the problem was. In retrospect, it also meant that we had to look at our responses to Jamal, not at a label and a placement in a special class.

When I had arrived at our school a year earlier, I had rapidly and agonizingly become aware of the discipline history of the school. Although at that time our school was barely over 250 students, the discipline reports for the 3 years previous to my arrival numbered at over 300, over 400, and over 800, respectively.

I knew that what we needed if we were to successfully reverse this pattern called for transforming the culture, both for adults and students. Fullan (2001) calls this process reculturing, and posits that it takes "developing relationships, building knowledge, and striving for coherence in a nonlinear world" (p.44). While much has been written about leading adults through this kind of change, I honestly believed that to be successful, we would also need to help transform our students' ways of making sense of their school lives.

To begin, we needed time to step back and think together. Twice every year, our entire staff voluntarily takes a couple of days of our own time to gather on a weekend and work on various instructional issues for our school. These days, known as Retreats, truly help us to move forward professionally. We prioritize a list of items that we, as a teaching and learning community, need to reflect upon and discuss. From that list, we generate an agenda, which helps to focus our discussions and decisions. All of our decisions are arrived at via consensus, and we all need to agree upon plans of action.

At our fall Retreat that August before school opened, I asked teachers to help with setting the agenda. The number one issue for discussion, in fact the only issue, which the teachers collectively suggested was discipline.

I came to that meeting, not with answers, but with questions. A firm believer in Alfie Kohn's (2003) theories about discipline and competition, his questions were some of the first we discussed together.

> … our first question would not be 'What do I do to make them stop?' but 'What's happening here?' And, even though the answer will often lead us away from the classroom, perhaps into the home, teachers nevertheless would do well to follow that question with another: 'Is it possible that decisions I've made and things I do might have some relation to what's happening here? (p.xv)

We decided together that we needed to become a village, each of us looking out for everyone's children. We discussed Shelley Harwane's analogy (1999) of the neighborhood in which she was raised where grandmothers and aunts sat on the windowsills overlooking the street where all of the children played. If someone were doing anything she shouldn't do, one of the aunts or grandmothers would immediately call out to the child in question, correcting the behavior, and help the child understand that she was a full member of that community, complete with high expectations and love.

Together, we decided on some school rules that we all would follow, and then spent a far greater period of time examining our own ways of looking at non-compliance. The conversation was not one that made everyone feel comforted.

"Our relationships with students was something that we had always prided ourselves on," Jennifer remembered. "We had 'Mega Skills' in place (a series of positive actions/beliefs that were to be taught throughout the school), but we wanted someone who would come in with a structure that looked more like 'If this, then that.' We

wanted it cut and dry. We wanted a disciplinary system that stated for every [bad] behavior there would be a specific consequence."

"We just felt things were so out of control. We felt the kids were running the building – but not in a good way, through manipulation and fear, not through the positive terms we used in Mega Skills."

At that Retreat, we decided, together, to begin looking further than just at the actual disruption, trying to find what the student might need. Amazingly, the students sometimes knew themselves.

As I walked with Jamal, he suddenly stopped at one of our Intermediate rooms. "I can be good in there," he stated quietly. I must admit; I was surprised. This was not the room I would have picked for him.

Still not sure, I asked, "Why do you think this is the room?" Solemnly and patiently, Jamal explained to me, "Look at who's in this room. I can be good with these kids."

When I looked in the room, I saw our usual heterogeneous two-year grouping of students, both academically and behaviorally. What he was identifying for me was that there were no kids in this room who would encourage his misbehaviors, or make him want to show off. Against my best judgment, I approached the teacher that day after school, asking if I could place him in her room.

Looking a bit stricken, she nevertheless asked what he might need to help him in her classroom. One of the things we had noticed was that when Jamal ran and hid from us, he inevitably found small spaces to squeeze his body into. Perhaps something in the smallness or dark of the space was comforting for him. So we did the obvious, and asked him if that would be helpful. Although he wasn't certain, he thought it might be. I suggested that we could find a "retreat" somewhere in the classroom that would be just his. Whenever he felt the need, he could go there to calm down.

Our phys ed teacher quickly made a skirt that we attached to a round table in the room. The skirt completely covered the entire circle of the table, with two overlapping edges creating the entrance. Jamal chose to outfit his "retreatment" (as he called it) with a flashlight, pillow, and some books. The rules were that as long as he was

not in trouble, he could go there at any point and read. Of course, we also were just fine if he went there and simply quieted himself and chose not to disrupt the rest of the class. Amazingly, the "re-treatment" center worked wonders for him as well as for the rest of the class, who came to respect it as Jamal's territory.

Watson and Ecken (2003) point out that in "social, emotional, and moral domains, … children are more dependent on the help and guidance of their caregivers" (p.182) than they may be in cognitive domains. They posit that some students have not yet developed an ability to trust, while others may have "no ability to regulate or com-municate their emotions; [not knowing how to] keep their behavior organized in the face of strong emotions" (p.182).

They suggest that instead of trying harder to control behaviors of these students, we work to re-evaluate our own expectations of them, striving to "match our demands to their capacities" (p.182), while working to help them grow in their understanding and social/emotional skills.

They further posit that

> If … we try to control their behavior with rewards and pun-ishments, we will end up in a perpetual battle. Our level of external control will escalate, and that will feel oppres-sive to them and to us. If ever-increasing levels of control fail, eventually we will declare our students incorrigible … reinforc[ing] their lack of trust and justify[ing] an adversari-al approach to the world. (p. 182)

Of course, the trick in all of this is how to balance these needs with the needs of the community for a calm and organized class-room or school environment.

As we discussed our plan at the Retreat, I asked if sending stu-dents to the office had worked for them in the past. Many teachers shared that they felt that some of our students didn't really care if they were in trouble.

Kim later reflected, "I don't think our staff, including me, took enough ownership of the discipline part. I think writing up a dis-

cipline referral and sending a student to the office was a way we actually felt we could control the situation because we removed the problem for the time being."

Those who worked in and around the office reflected that so many students would gather and wait in the office, they seemed to simply keep each other amused. There was consensus that the office for some kids had become a badge that you earned being "cool."

I shared with them that once a student is sent to the office, there are only a few things I can do. Most of these things like detentions or simply sitting in the office don't work. A couple of the things such as suspensions and expulsions are things we simply don't want to do, because we then send students home to either roam the streets or watch TV. Not much of a deterrent, and certainly not something to help the student grow in understanding and coping skills.

But, I reasoned, we are only limited by our imagination if we work proactively within the classroom before the student gets to the point of disrupting the entire class. I shared that I would much rather come to any classroom before that point to work with a student than to wait until after the disruption.

We agreed to a common system and set of expectations. We agreed that none of us would take offense if another teacher corrected one of our students, and that we would all be a village in caring for every student, whether the student was in our class or someone else's.

Things weren't perfect. We still had Jamals. But that year, we made real improvement in the climate at the school and in the classrooms. We also began to redefine non-compliance and question whether we really wanted to work toward compliance. We began to reflect more and more around issues of community building, and to set that as our goal.

When school was out after that first year, our entire staff voluntarily trained during their summer break for three days in TRIBEs (Gibbs, 2001). This programmatic system of learning and working together collaboratively as a community meshed well with the way we looked at students and learning.

We also decided that summer to begin to use the concept of the classroom as a community in which students and teachers begin to know more about each other, our experiences, and our perspectives. Each of our classrooms agreed to hold regular classroom meetings sharing experiences and collectively problem-solving social and behavioral issues that arose. This served to remove the teacher from the position of disciplinarian and center of control to that of a facilitator of student social growth and understanding.

The following August, we met once again for our fall retreat. We talked about something we now call border crossings. We recognized that our students come from various family cultures and situations. We, as mostly middle class white teachers, cannot and should not expect that our perspective is the only valid one out there. But, because we all need to work and learn together, developing some expected ways of doing things together was not unreasonable. Care simply had to be taken that we consider the student's perspective as we discussed expectations and agreements.

During that meeting, we all agreed to stand at our doors each morning and greet our students as they arrive. This gives teachers a minute to carefully look into the eyes of each student entering their classroom, checking for signs of how the day may be going thus far for that student. It also gives the students a chance to potentially cross a border from one established culture at home to the collective culture at school.

Kim perhaps says it best, "Our students come to us with so many different experiences and expectations from home. The way one child reacts to or views a situation can be completely different from somebody else, including from those of us 'in charge.' Who is to say that our way/perspective is the right way?" Kim continues:

> Before our discussions, I would immediately think I was right and the child needed to understand why. I thought it was good that I was at least teaching them why! My new outlook is that the student may be right, not me, so I need to take the time to hear what he says. Taking the time to hear and value the student's perspective has improved disci-

pline overall because it impacts the culture in the classroom. When students trust that you are truly hearing them, they begin to also learn to listen to other's perspectives, including mine, which makes it easier to not only avoid conflicts, but to also solve them.

Standing at the door greeting our students has become a tradition in our school. Every morning, the hallway is full of adults greeting students. "Good morning!" rings out across the building. Older students often stop to talk with, and get hugs from, former teachers. Younger students adapt quickly to this ritual, and seek out their own set of hugs and greetings.

Both parents and visitors to our school who observe this opening of the day often remark about the impact. One mother, new to our school, looked at me uncertainly one morning and said, "You know, even if you're in a bad mood, you couldn't stay that way for long around here."

Thinking about the changes in the climate of the school, Jennifer later reflected, "Look at our mornings! That one small thing helped change our climate so much. Even students I've had before [in other years] know I'm watching and that I still care about them. Sometimes just getting that extra hug in the morning can help the student with the rest of the day."

At that second August Retreat, we also realized the importance of looking for small details that can alert us to a student's need for more support. "I've learned to look for when things are first beginning to escalate in a student," Jennifer shared, "and try to step in at that point."

Jamal's rule was that he could go to his retreat at any point, but not once he had blown up or caused a class disruption. This meant that the teacher needed to watch and step in when things were beginning to get overwhelming for him.

We also reflected on our discussions around our classrooms and school as a community, and our work in discipline. As we thought about it, we began to realize that we could use our time together in class meetings to bring students to a stronger sense of commu-

nity and responsibility to each other. We have developed our circle meetings as times to not only share about "cares, concerns, and appreciations" (Gibbs, 2001), but to also sit together to solve social issues in the class.

If a student does something hurtful to another student, or to the rest of the class, she is doing something as a part of the community. As such, we have learned to carefully bring these incidents to discussion.

Our rules are simple. Adults or students may call a class meeting. Once we meet, we must follow the rules: you can only speak when it is your turn as we go around the circle; everyone has the right to speak or pass when it is their turn; there are no verbal or visual put-downs; and everyone must listen respectfully.

An example of how this might play out was when one student in Kim's room consistently did not follow rules in phys ed class, frequently losing his temper over how the phys ed teacher called specific goals or moves on his part. The class became upset, and asked for a class meeting. Sitting in our usual circle (all students and adults can see each other and no one sits any higher – or more powerfully – than others) the class went around the circle sharing "I-messages" about how they were feeling about Randal's reactions in gym class.

"It was our circle meeting with everybody telling him how they felt, which brought him to tears, and truly impacted his behavior in the gym." Kim reflected.

It's important to note that we carefully work with students to develop non-threatening "I-statements" for expressing their concerns. Rather than saying, 'You did this and that was really bad,' the students might share statements such as, "Randal, when you get angry in gym and yell at the teacher, it makes me feel really sad.' Or 'Randal, when you get angry and throw the ball at someone in gym, I feel kind of angry too because I know we'll have to stop our game while the teacher talks with you.'

After students share how they are feeling about the situation, they go around the circle to help problem solve. At this point, conversation focuses on the positive, and how they might individually

or collectively help and support the situation or student. Even students who are causing the problem feel the collective support in this round, and frequently end up contributing ideas of their own to the solution. Then, the group decides upon and commits to a course of action. If this involves a specific student's behaviors, it is important that the student first get to say what she is willing to do, picking one or more of the many options suggested. The class then works together to change situations, often reporting back in other circle times about how they feel they are doing.

We have also developed this same routine into what we call "Mini-tribes." At these meetings two students who are having social issues, each pick a good problem solver. Our students have added a new, wise rule that says the problem-solver picked cannot be your best friend or a relative, but must instead just be someone who is very good at listening, hearing all perspectives, and solving problems.

The students follow the same protocols, with the exception that the beginning of the meeting has one student say his perspective of the situation. He is to say the totality of the entire story. When he is done, he cannot add any more pieces of information or feelings. Then, the other student shares her side. When she is done, nothing more may be added. From that moment forward all contributions are on problem-solving, and the students go around the circle using the normal protocol.

These meetings can be held in a corner of any classroom or hallway. We seldom need to have an adult present, except at times for the beginning of the sharing when both parties tell their perspective. From that point on, students have become very adept at finding solutions together. Frequently, they not only want to share their solution with their teachers, but also with me.

Interestingly, as our thinking changed around community building, our discipline problems also tapered off dramatically. We still have discipline issues, and some students with rather severe developmental lags in social and emotional skills. But the number of discipline issues themselves are dramatically different than they were at the beginning. We now have approximately 330 students. Last

year we had fewer than 30 official discipline write-ups. Amusingly, this has led some folks outside our school to question whether we're actually reporting all of our issues. We're reporting accurately; we're just thinking and acting far differently!

Watson and Ecken (2003) posit that not only do students

> …need to learn to regulate their emotions and control their behavior in the face of strong emotions, but they also need to know how to set worthy goals and how to cognitively guide their behavior in accord with their goals. (p. 217)

When students and adults learn and work together in a community each day for most of the year, they also need to learn how to grow together as community members. For some students, this may mean simply learning how to be a member of a community, looking beyond their own individual needs to the collective good of the group.

Since each of our students comes from very different cultures, family situations, and experiences, each of them will not only need to have his or her perspective heard, but each will also need individual support at his or her own developmental level in this process of social and emotional growth. Just as we differentiate for individual student needs academically, this calls for the same kind of differentiation around behavioral growth.

"I've come to realize," Jennifer shared, "that there is no end-all solution to each behavior. I thought there should be a prescription. But it's not like a pharmacy. And that's hard because [a pharmacy] would be easy."

Instead, we need to view each individual situation in light of the culture, experiences, and social/emotional developmental level of the student. That, in itself, dictates that each situation is different, and brings its own unique needs to the table.

Can students (and adults) handle this kind of differentiation? With discussions, careful reflection, and commitment, yes. We have frequent conversations with students around the issue of glasses.

When one student in the room develops a need for glasses, should the entire classroom then wear the same prescription glasses? Would that make it fair? Or would that make it more difficult for each of us to work with our own needs, and move forward in our learning?

Perhaps the hardest converts to this way of thinking are adults. Teachers, by their nature, want to be fair. But how they define fair is at the core of this discussion. Fair does not necessarily mean same. Certainly life hasn't provided the same experiences, family situations, or cultures to each of us. And what a dull world it would be if it did! Fair, for us, does mean looking at the needs of the whole child in- the-moment, and helping to provide the supports needed for each of our students.

"The whole idea of the need to differentiate discipline being as important as our differentiating instruction really started to make complete sense to me," Kim reflected. "That idea is with me every time I start to deal with a discipline situation. I first ask the student to give me his perspective on the situation, while also considering what I know about the student's background, home life, etc." Kim continues:

> It is sometimes very hard not to jump right into an accusa-
> tory role, based on my own perspective! As a matter of fact,
> I do sometimes still jump into that role and then need to
> backtrack once I realize what I'm doing. That is something
> that I didn't consciously do before we began having our dis-
> cussions. I always have to consider why a student may be
> reacting a certain way and how I should respond based on
> what I know about him."

Perhaps a good example lies back with Jamal that first year. Would the other kids in the classroom think it 'fair' that he was permitted to go to his retreat at any point in time? Why did he get a retreat, and why didn't each of them get one? Class discussions during circle time began to focus on how each of us is different, with the need for different support systems – both physical (as in glasses)

and academic and social. The teacher and I actually held our breath a bit, waiting to see if the students would accept both Jamal and all of his supports into their classroom.

Toward the end of the year, James, one of the students in the class, discovered that several long research projects he had completed on one of the class laptops had been erased. Human nature led many of the students (and if we're to be totally honest, the teacher and me) immediately into the 'who did this' function. Since one of Jamal's strengths was technology, many minds, including the teacher's and mine, immediately jumped to assumptions that Jamal had pulled one of his totally disrupting episodes once again.

After weeks of working to remedy the situation, a conversation in the classroom around an entirely different technology issue suddenly made everyone stop short and realize that Jamal couldn't have possibly been the culprit. The teacher, realizing what an injustice we had all done in questioning Jamal repeatedly about the situation, asked the class, "Is there something we need to say to someone?"

Jamal was in his retreat at this point, but the teacher knew that he always heard every conversation, whether he was physically present in the class circle or not.

After a collective quiet moment of thought, James rose without saying anything. Crossing the room to the table with the skirt on it, he solemnly went to the side of the table that had the 'opening' in the skirt. Still without any words, he somberly knocked on the top of the table several times.

"Yes?" a quiet voice answered from under the table.

"Jamal," James said seriously, "we need to apologize. We shouldn't have thought that you – well, we all kind of felt that you – you know, and it wasn't fair."

An equally solemn and quiet voice came from under the table. "I know. It's OK."

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Looking at community building first is not an easy thing to do – for the teachers or for me. Kim puts it best, "I try to step back and understand that the way we try to handle discipline at Central

is not only more difficult, but it's more supportive of students, and it's just the right thing to do. We've read some passages from the book (Watson and Ecken, 2003) to our students (4th and 5th graders), including the piece about not always jumping to a harsh consequence. We talked about the fact that we're not being too soft, but are trying to help students understand why we react the way we do to different situations. The students seemed to respond well to those discussions, as they were beginning to understand that we do things to help them learn and grow socially, not because we want to give them specific punishments."

As our school and classroom climate has changed, learning has had an increased space in which to grow. While standardized test scores have risen (approximately 10%), more important is the authentic evidence we see in student outlook on learning. On informal and formal observations and walk-throughs, observers consistently comment on the level of engagement our students have with their work. Students quickly and confidently volunteer to discuss their work with many of our frequent visitors. When asked questions about their work (often from visitors they do not know), even our youngest students are able to respond with explanations. And students volunteer on a regular basis to share information about their work at all-school assemblies that we call Celebrations of Learning.

It is important to note that no miracle has occurred. As with all schools, we deal with very real, difficult situations, and with children and families who sometimes have enormous challenges. We are not perfect in any of our endeavors. We continue to work to improve student learning, and at times attitudes. We also continually struggle with helping each of our students be the best possible learner and member of our community on any given day.

What has changed is our individual and collective way of looking at and making sense of our work with students. As Alfie Kohn (2003) has suggested above, we now frequently ask, "Is it possible that decisions I've made and things I do might have some relation to what's happening here" (p.xv)? And, as John Goodlad has suggested, we now accept that a huge part of our role in working with students is not just to introduce them to knowledge and the joy of

learning, but to also help them understand how to be part of a greater "social and political democracy" (1979).

A group of our middle school students recently helped me present our structure and beliefs at the National Urban Education Conference at Central State University in Xenia, Ohio. Afterward, when we sat in the student union reflecting together over glasses of soda, one of the students commented, "You know, I used to think you [our collective self] were just too easy on kids with discipline things. But now I understand that it's not about the punishment. You're trying to get kids to change the way they think about stuff."

Coming from a student who has had his share of discipline issues, that was quite a moment, reflective of both adult and student growth in how we view our work together.

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Appendix

While our work in reculturing our school is never simplistic, nor easily boiled down to a formulaic system of "tasks," there are some key practices that we have all committed to. These include, but are never limited to:

- Taking the time to work on social learning and how to be a member of a community
- Regular classroom meetings at all ages to understand more about each other, as well as to collaboratively problem solve social and academic issues

> o Problem solving that can entail:
>   - Large group (classroom or whole-school)
>   - Small groups with peer problem-solvers
>   - Small groups with an older student (usually Intermediate or Middle School student with an Early or Late Primary student)
>   - One-on-one older student mentoring of younger students

- Recognition and honoring of student perspective
- Seeing our school as a village of care-givers, and not taking offense if another teacher corrects one of our students
- Using "I-statements" at all ages when we problem solve
- Calling me (the principal) to the classroom whenever possible before the situation devolves, and while we can be our most creative in how and what we do to intervene and de-escalate

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