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A Middle School Experience: can Self-Control be taught (or learned), not imposed

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I strongly believe that children are instinctive learners (learners by nature). They learn from their environment, family and peers. Their learning is not only limited to the knowledge but also includes the social skills necessary to be accepted by the peer group and be a part of it. Of course, every child goes through the spells of being stubborn, quarrelsome and quirky.

I believed that to accommodate, appreciate, respect and share with others would be learnt in the classroom. Middle school is the time by which I thought this would be sufficiently imbibed by the children and would have made them identify their own groups .

My experience with the middle school students always supported my belief. I also noticed that effective learning happened in the comfort groups.

My experience with the middle school students always showed that the non-threatening atmosphere of the comfort groups always helped children air their views openly, value others opinions and discuss the pros and cons of their actions, although there were inter- and intra- group rivalries. However, these were not to the extent which affected the learning process. The problems of individual members could be resolved through discussions within the group and the problems with other groups by discussing them with the whole class. Perhaps this process was going on for such a long time that it lulled me into believing there could be no exceptions. That's the reason I ignored the symptoms.

It happened with my class VIII students. I knew that there would be teething troubles as the class was new to me. It was my practice to spend the first class discussing the dos and don'ts. The students themselves

came up with what was allowed in the class and what wasn't. When it came to not interrupting others and not passing snide remarks, many were looking at each other and rolling their eyes. I did not pay much attention to it. I should have!

I let a month go by so that the students get acquainted with the new teachers and new syllabus .I thought transformation from junior school to middle school was bound to be a little unsettling and bound to make them fidgety. But when the class did not settle down even after two months, I began to observe the class keen to find out what the problem was. What I found out really disturbed me. A section of students had become really silent, as if they had withdrawn into themselves. They were the ones who were quite active in the initial stages, but slowly they had become invisible. The reason was they seemed to be scared to even open their mouths, let alone participate. There was a section of boys in the class who would pass scathing comments even as others were sharing their views or answering questions. It was not as if they were singling out a few. No one seemed to be spared from their uncalled- for comments. There were many who retaliated, which led to arguments. Many a time, the issue being discussed got completely derailed.



Most of the productive class time was being eaten into these unnecessary arguments. Speaking to them personally had not effect as they seemed to revel in the attention that they were getting, while ignoring them was making them more aggressive.

I began to seriously reflect on what was happening. I felt the situation was getting out of hand. These were not the children who would take pleasure in pulling out a butterfly's wings. But they seemed to enjoy the discomfort others felt when they passed comments. It was as if they had no control over what they were doing.

Providentially, we were given the article 'What if the Secret to Success is Failure' by Paul Tough to discuss in our teacher training session. The article laid emphasis on how character was as important as intellect and identified a set of strengths like zest, grit, self-control, social intelligence; gratitude, optimism and curiosity that would help them to succeed in long term. What was being discussed in the article seemed quite relevant to my eighth standard . My priority was self control.



I knew talking about self control was not going to have any impact on the students. The very mention of self-control would put them off. I needed to involve students in such activities where in they would begin to think of self control. While sharing book reports, one student in the class was talking about a character in a story who got angry often. I took this opportunity and asked her if she was justified in getting angry.

Some felt she had the right to get angry and others thought that she should have more control over her emotions. At the end of the discussion, students were able to give responses to what made them angry and how the situation might have been if they had controlled their anger. Most of them did not see any reason to control their anger because they thought that it was entirely the other person's fault.

The next step was a purely physical activity with the help of music and drama teachers. The students were asked to move their bodies in a particular way to synchronise with the drum beat. When the beat changed they had to change their movements. Most of the time, they did not change their movements when the drum beat changed. When questioned what made them not go with the rhythm, they realised that the fault was theirs and not the drums. As these activities were going on, some posters on self control were displayed. No formal discussion was entertained on the content of the posters. But the children in groups were discussing these posters. After a gap of one week the final and important activity was taken up. The class was divided into groups of three for a role play. The theme was teasing in the class. Each group was asked to play the roles of a victim and an adult. The students responded enthusiastically. A few groups came up with interesting solutions. Most of the role plays showed the victim reacting violently to the teasing and the adults punishing the tease. However the interesting ones were those where the victim showed unusual restraint by ignoring the tease initially and when it did not have any effect. He/she informed the person in no uncertain terms such behaviour would not be tolerated. Interestingly, the grown ups in these role plays were involved only in the end to conciliate and not to punish. That these role-plays made the students thoughtful and reflecting was evident in the reviews of the role-plays.

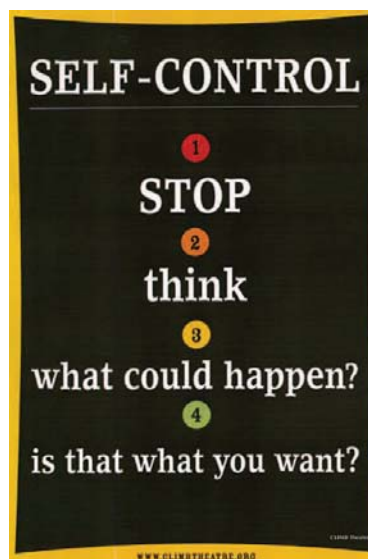
I entered the classroom the next day with my fingers crossed. The first thing I noticed was every group was involved in animated discussions. The

moment I entered the class a chorus went up. “Akka, no lesson today please. Let’s discuss what we did yesterday”. What came up in the discussion showed that the entire process was not in vain. It seemed to have had considerable effect on the class especially on the victims of teasing. Those who used to react violently to teasing said that they would stop doing so and would ignore them as the others were getting the satisfaction by needling them. Those who silently suffered said that they would firmly tell the bullies not to bother them. The best thing that they came up with was to show their displeasure at being disturbed especially when the class is going on, was to pick up

their chairs silently and go and sit at the back away from the distracters. They said that they had excised self-control by not arguing and not getting distracted. As the same time, they had denied an opportunity to the other person to disturb them.

Did the problem get solved? No, children being children, there were lapses. But the whole process helped at least a few to realise that the solution lay in their hands.

I am grateful to TVS School, Tumkur, Karnataka, for all the experiences and freedom it has given me.



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