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On Students' Needs and Team Learning: A Conversation with William Glasser

The author of numerous books on counseling and discipline, William Glasser says our failure to use control theory in the classroom and teach it to students is "like asking people to play a game without teaching them the rules." In this interview, he also suggests that if we structure schools to satisfy basic human needs for belonging and for power—for instance, by providing for team learning—students will be less susceptible to destructive influences in their lives and will come to see school as a need-satisfying place. The result will be fewer discipline problems and more learning.

Do you think today's young people have more difficulty coping with life than children of earlier generations?

In many ways life is easier for kids today, because there are so many more resources available to them, even if they're poor. What makes it harder, however, is that there are also so many more opportunities to harm themselves with drugs, cars, and sexual activity, well before they're old enough to realize the risks of these pursuits.

Knowing that's the case, what can schools do to help?

Schools must help children understand that, good and bad, most of what they do with their lives is their choice. For example, they've been told that school is good for them, and most believe it when they're small; but when they get a little older a large number, more than half, begin to believe that what goes on in the classroom is not good for them. Rather than to understand that this is a choice, they blame school for the fact that they have stopped working. What they also don't realize is that they are driven by genetic needs that they are not able to satisfy in their classes, and further they don't even know what these needs are.

What are they?

We all have needs built into our genetic structures, and everything we do is our best attempt to satisfy them. For example, we all need to struggle to survive (most children do understand this), but we also have a need for love and belonging. For example, if we ask young children what's the best part of school, invariably—I must have asked 150 of them by now—they'll say, "My friends." We should explain to them that the reason they feel this way is that we all have a built-in need for friendship and caring concern.

Teachers should know this too. Schools, especially primary schools, do a good job of encouraging students to socialize while they work; but most schools, especially secondary schools, would function much better if they made an effort to increase the opportunities for students to feel that in class they can talk to and work with each other.

While most educators try to make their schools friendly places, they don't pay enough attention to the fact that needs do not turn off in the classroom. In most secondary classrooms, students are taught as if they were supposed to suspend this need, to put it in abeyance: sit still and pay attention to what's being taught and not to each other. But they can't suspend this basic need; they can't even put it in abeyance. Teachers therefore need to find ways in class to give students chances to associate with others in friendly ways and do this as a planned part of this learning.

What are students' other needs?

Another need, perhaps harder to satisfy than friendship, is to gain the continuing sense that "I have some power; I'm somebody; people pay attention to me." When I ask, as I very frequently do, students aged 11 to 15, "Where in school do you feel important?", they look at me as if to say, "That's ridiculous! Who listens to us?" (I'm using the terms "important," "power," and "self-esteem" synonymously.) You can't have self-esteem, you don't feel important, unless you have some sort of power which means at a minimum somebody listens to you.

"When you ask . . . students aged 11 to 15, 'Where in school do you feel important?', they look at you as if to say, 'That's ridiculous! Of course you don't feel important in school.' "

As I pursue this question, I keep pushing and pushing for some sort of anwer and, eventually, about half of them say they do feel important in school to some extent—but almost *never in classrooms*. It's always in extracurricular activities: athletics, drama, music. In the classroom, only a few of even the top students feel important.

If educators wanted to check this out, could they ask their own students that question?

Educators who've worked with students for years have never heard students answer questions related to their basic needs, and they should ask these questions. And we should keep in mind that teachers also often feel relatively powerless and lonely in school. Teaching traditionally as most do, their needs are hardly more satisfied than their students'.

Indeed.

Certainly. For example, there are three levels of satisfying the need for power. At the first level, the minimum level, we have to feel as if someone whom we respect listens to us. If we, teacher or pupil, don't honestly believe that when we talk someone listens, this need cannot be satisfied. And, in our frustration, we begin to do all kinds of things, many of them antisocial, to get someone to listen. That "effort" is the source of perhaps 95 percent of what we call discipline problems in school.

The next higher level is: somebody listens and says, "You're right." That's even harder to get. Students may get the first, but except for "right" answers, they almost never get the second; and we all need to be told once in a while that what we say counts.

The third level is very hard to get. We can do without it, but it's nice to have. Here, not only does somebody listen to us, but once in a while he or she says, "You know, your way is better than mine. I think we ought to do it your way." That's the pinnacle for satisfying this need and students, especially, rarely have this experience in class.

I believe that frustration of the need for power, even more than the need for belonging, is at the core of today's difficulties, not only in school, but everyplace else in our society where there are serious problems (e.g., in the workplace, in management, in marriages). People who aren't able to say, "I'm at least a little bit important" in some situation will not work hard to preserve or improve that situation.

Many students, however, maintain a good sense of being important that they've gained from home, so they are able to survive the lack of importance in the classroom. But we can't count on a majority of students coming from homes this supportive. In our varied culture, homes provide much less of this than in more homogeneous cultures like Japan, where home support is so strongly a part of the culture that it can support them to work hard in schools that pay even less attention to this need than we do.

You say students' needs for power and belonging are the main problem. What are their other needs?

The others are freedom and fun. They are important needs, too, but I don't think they are at the core of our problems. Students really don't expect to have much freedom in class or in school. They know that you can't have a thousand kids going in different directions; they accept the need for rules and regulations.

The final need is for fun, and it's very important, but if students have a sense of belonging and a sense of personal importance in class, the fun will take care of itself. Even without this, however, few schools are grim; lack of fun is not a major flaw.

How does what you're saying apply to, for example, the teenage pregnancy problem?

The decision to be less than careful about sex and pregnancy is the result of both a lack of belonging and a lack of power. Many teenagers, especially females, feel powerless at home and at school. When a girl discovers that she can use her sexuality, which is one of her most powerful possessions, to get her boyfriend to do what she wants, she feels the satisfying power of increased control. That's the major reason that very young "women" become sexual. Young women who have a good sense of personal importance at home and in school tend not to get involved in premature sexuality.

Another factor is that we revere motherhood so much that most unwed school-age girls who get pregnant are often treated more with respect and love than disdain. Suddenly they're somebody, and this leads others to think, "To be somebody and to get love, maybe I ought to get pregnant too." Unfortunately, pregnancy (not caring for a child) satisfies the need for belonging and the need for power but does so in a way that is almost always self-destructive for immature mothers.

"Schools have used the team concept in classrooms less than any other part of society. . . . you sit and work by yourself, keep quiet, don't share, don't relate to one another."

There may be no easy answers for educators in this, but at least if they understand—

No, there *are* answers. Not easy, perhaps, but clear: regardless of their homes, girls who find school satisfying and do well will have little inclination to get pregnant. What's more, they'll also pay attention to what the school teaches about avoiding venereal diseases and AIDS. Unfortunately, disinterested students don't listen to what's going on in the classroom, so it does little good to teach them the facts about AIDS, drugs, or pregnancy.

In your book, *Control Theory in the Classroom*,[1] you advise using learning-teams.

Absolutely. If I suggest to educators that they should be running schools that meet students' needs, I have to suggest a practical way to do it. When I learned control theory—and certainly the basis of control theory is these needs we've been talking about—it became apparent to me that the way most of us satisfy these needs is by working in teams with people we respect and care for. A well-functioning family is a team. The extracurricular activities, all of which function superbly in almost all schools and lead students to feel important—the band, the orchestra, athletics, the school newspaper, the drama club—are all need-satisfying team activities.

I'm sure that working teams evolved because we have these needs. For example, in a good team, we satisfy our need for belonging because we care for each other. We satisfy our need for power because we can do so much more than by ourselves. In a team we have lots of chances to contribute our ideas, and people listen to us. And when we work well together, we learn more and it's fun.

Except for tradition, I don't know why schools use so little cooperative learning. It hasn't changed that much since I was in school: students still sit

and work alone, and are continually told to keep quiet and keep their eyes on their work.

But it can and should be done differently. Good researchers like David and Roger Johnson, Robert Slavin, and Spencer Kagan have proven the effectiveness of cooperative learning or, as I call it, learning-teams. Here, the teacher, instead of trying to force all the students down a single learning pathway, becomes a facilitator who goes from team to team encouraging, helping, inquiring, and prodding. In this method of instruction, the teacher gets nose to nose with learning, and students are encouraged to branch out creatively and stray from the "common" pathway.

The increased interaction apparently helps students understand and remember.

Especially for those who have difficulty learning. To think things through to an intelligent conclusion, most of us have to bat ideas back and forth. Otherwise it's like going to a movie by yourself and then trying to have a lively discussion with yourself about what you saw. But if you go with a friend, you can probably come up with some really creative ideas. We are by nature interactive creatures who learn by inquiry and disagreement.

Another point is that much of what we do in schools is far too superficial. Teachers have a tendency to teach to the level of the average students, trying to keep them from falling behind, but average is too often superficial. Learning gets interesting only if it gets beneath the surface. When students work together in teams, the teacher can encourage them to go deeply into the assignment, and they almost always can and do.

It sounds easy.

I wish it were. It isn't, because a team lesson is not the same as an individual lesson; it has to be tailored to the team situation. It's like tennis, where doubles is only superficially like singles. In conventional classrooms, students can, and too often do, fill in the blanks or write out questions at the end of the chapter; and few except the highly motivated students learn from these traditional activities. If, however, you give assignments like this to teams, they don't work at all. And when they don't work, because usually one student answers the question and the others copy, both teachers and the working students get disgusted and say learning-teams are no good.

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So that's the tricky part.

Absolutely. It takes a lot of time and effort to work out an effective team assignment, and anything less doesn't work. But if you figure out some good assignments, they can be used year after year. For example, I've written about 18 team-learning assignments to teach students the control theory they need to know if they are to make the choice not to use addicting drugs, and it has taken me well over a year to do this. It's not easy, but good team assignments are the keys to this educational approach.[2]

You're also saying, then, that control theory offers a practical approach to preventing drug abuse?

Control theory teaches students about their needs and that they have to make choices to satisfy these needs. It also teaches them that they have the ability to evaluate their choices and to make good choices. Anyone can say, "Don't use drugs"; but the point is, if you are unsatisfied as many students are and you don't use drugs, what else can you do to satisfy your needs? Control theory addresses this vital issue directly.

Would you say a little more about making choices?

Well, besides the needs themselves, control theory includes several other important concepts. Although your needs are very general, you can only satisfy them in very specific ways. You can't just go out in the world and eat; you have to find a restaurant or a grocery store. So each of us builds inside our head a kind of hypothetical world—I call it an *"all-you-want world."* Starting at birth and throughout our whole lives we store pictures in it, pictures of what we have found to be need-satisfying for us. In this world we put our mothers, our fathers, our loved ones, our prized possessions, these kinds of pictures.

Once this is understood, then control theory points out specifically where things go wrong in school. In any school you'll see some students working hard and some not working at all. Those who are working hard are getting their needs satisfied, and those who aren't are not. But we also know that those who are working hard have a picture of school inside their heads as a need-satisfying place. Hard-working students will keep it there, even if they run into a couple of bad classes, or a bad year or so, because it's firmly fixed in their minds that "my school is a satisfying place." Most students start with that idea, but in the early years it's not firmly fixed. If they don't actually

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experience school as satisfying, around 7th or 8th grade, they take this vital picture out of their heads. And when they take this picture out or when they take a subject like math or reading out of their heads, they won't work at it any more. We will only actively pursue what's in our "all-you-want world."

We have many teachers struggling with kids with "learning disabilities," "dyslexia," and so on. Too many are convinced that there's something wrong with these kids' brains; that the wiring is so defective they cannot learn. Many reading programs, however, are successful, but none change the wiring of the students' brains. Successful programs work mostly because they persuade kids to put pictures of themselves liking to read or liking history or math into their "all-we-want worlds," as need-satisfying activities. When they do, the kids expend effort to learn, and the teacher's hard work begins to pay off.

In other words, if students have some sort of difficulty reading, which many kids have, the difficulty is usually severely compounded by the fact that they *stop wanting to read*. All the remedial programs that work make use of involved, caring people who use interesting, relevant materials, materials designed to get kids to say, "Gee, maybe this program is good for me; maybe I'd better try again."

Most of the money spent on testing these children, for specific perceptual or neurological difficulties, is wasted. We are looking for things that don't exist, and, even if they did, we could do nothing to correct them.

I've understood that in fact these kids are different in certain ways.

Not neurologically. The difference is in how they choose to try to satisfy their needs. Psychotic people seem much different from most of us. But if you can figure out how to help them satisfy their needs, they become much like us. Emphasizing behavioral or even possible neurological differences is not the way to help kids learn. That's a bankrupt carryover from the field of medicine, where it's always assumed that there's something wrong with the structure, perhaps a virus or genetic defect. It's analogous to a computer. If you have a friend who really knows computers, ask him or her, "When a computer fails, how often is it software, and how often is it hardware?" The answer you'll get is, "999 times out of a thousand it's the software."

Well, it's the same with learning disabilities. It's software when the kid says, "I don't think I want to learn." Hardware is the rare instance when a student actually has a wiring defect in the brain. I'm not saying there aren't some kids with brain defects; of course there are. But with most of them the defect is, "I don't really see this work as need-satisfying, and I won't try. But if they force me, I'll say and do all kinds of odd things so they'll give me attention for being 'different' instead of for not trying."

That explanation is consistent with your view of mental illness, which you describe as a choice, right?

Right. There are some mentally ill people, I'll grant that: people with syphilis, tumors, or strokes destroying their brains are mentally ill. But most

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of the people we call mentally ill are choosing behaviors that they believe are most satisfying for them at the time, even though to us they're self-destructive. Alcoholics, for example, choose to destroy themselves with drink. If there were something inherently defective in alcoholics' brains or genetic structures, none of them would recover. But *millions* go to AA and learn to make better choices, and most AAs recover. So, although they may be genetically different, it's obviously not a genetic defect; it's a defective way of satisfying their needs.

And you also say that sometimes people choose to be ill.

Oh, yes. Almost all of our major diseases have a large element of choice in them. Not all—certainly not most cancers. But most heart disease and rheumatoid illnesses are very much related to how people choose to live their lives. Smoking, drinking poor diets are choices that lead to illness.

Is control theory being used outside of schools?

I teach it in every application of what we would call the helping professions. It's basic to drug and alcohol counseling, and used widely in working with those who have all kinds of psychological problems. I believe it's the best explanation of how all living organisms function both biologically and psychologically.

And you're saying not only that educators should apply control theory, but that we should *teach* it so that it's common knowledge?

Yes. To me, not teaching how we function is like asking people to play a game without teaching them the rules.

Because if kids understand control theory, they'll understand their own motivations better?

Yes. They'll say, rather than, "I feel lousy today," which a lot of us do, "Okay, what need is involved, and how can I satisfy that need? I can sit around and 'depress' or I can do something about it." Little kids, 7- and 8-year-olds, can learn this.

Among some of those having considerable influence on education these days, what you're saying is probably anathema. They say schools must teach fundamental knowledge like geography and history and mathematics, and not get sidetracked into "pop psychology."

I don't want to imply that I'm against basic educational skills. I'm just saying that unless we pay attention to what students need, we will continue to have trouble teaching the basics successfully. Trying to force students to learn has never worked; control theory teaches that we can't force people to do what they don't want to do.

How can educators learn how to use control theory?

The best way is to begin applying it in your own life.

You ask yourself, "All these con-

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cerns and problems I have. What choices am I making about them?"

That's right. When you sit in the corner "depressing," as I say, that's a choice. And you have the option to make a better choice. If you don't believe me, all you have to do is think back to a time in your life when you really had a hard time, and you'll find that when you "recovered" it wasn't because the world had suddenly become a better place; it was because you made a better choice. You started dealing with it more effectively, instead of saying, "I'm sick; I can't make it."

So control theory is useful both in preventing some problems and in resolving others?

Yes, it can be both. There's no way to live our lives without problems. People don't always do what we want. But as much as we try to control other people, the only person we can control is ourselves.

And yet, as you've said, we all have a need for power. Is there a relationship? If schools make teachers feel more powerful, does it carry over to students?

Let's be clear about what I mean by power. Most people think having power is being the boss, telling others what to do. But few people in our society can be intimidated for very long by someone telling them what to do, especially if the person doesn't pay them. I say we have to understand that management practices built on the old idea of power—that the top person tells the next one and so on down the

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line—are totally inadequate, especially in school, where students aren't being paid for their work.

The way I understand power should be used is that if you're the head of an organization—the principal of a school, or the teacher of a class—there are at least two ways you can use your power that are need-satisfying both for you and for those you're trying to direct. One way is to provide them with material support: the best possible tools, the best possible workplace. The second is to use your power to facilitate what they do. The more powerful you're perceived to be, the more you should listen to what other people say; and in this way your power helps them get some power too. It's really the opposite of the conventional notion of power as exemplified by "Sit down and shut up." The ultimate use of power should be to empower others. That's what our Constitution is all about.□

1. William Glasser, *Control Theory in the Classroom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

2. *Choice*, the Control Theory Approach to Preventing Drug Abuse. A program distributed through the Educator Training Center, Long Beach, CA 90813.

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