"Enabling" Undermines Responsibility in Students

Educators can foster student responsibility and self-esteem by modeling positive classroom expectations and behaviors.

The kids have Ms. Jones figured out. She can't stand silence and will answer virtually all of her own questions if they say nothing. Whenever students are actually asked to respond, a quick "I don't know" gets her off their backs. As a result, students say very little in class, their minds are elsewhere, and Ms. Jones essentially talks to herself most of the time.

Charley Lange, known to his students as "Chuckie," assigns lots of homework, gives a quiz every three days, and talks continually about challenging students.

But Mr. Lange is really a pushover at heart. He'll do almost anything to avoid a confrontation, so crude comments, quiet profanity, and cheating are the norm in his classroom. Students know he rarely reads assignments—the abundance of misspelled words, incomplete sentences, and illogical claims in their written work reflect that.

The truth is that Mr. Lange hates to give anything less than a "B" grade, and parents encourage students to take his classes to pad grade point averages.

Teachers like these are found in every school—and they are, often with the best intentions, teaching the wrong lessons. They are "enablers," people who allow students (or colleagues) to be lazy or irresponsible without feeling appropriate consequences for their behaviors.

The concept of *enabling* is well known to those associated with Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, Alateen, employee assistance (Dixon 1985), and social work programs (see Levinson and Straussner 1978). Referring to behaviors that let people off the hook, *enabling* is synonymous with terms like *rescuing* (York et al. 1985) and *coddling* (Al-Anon 1982). In each case, the words carry clearly negative connotations. In contrast, many educators and psychologists speak of enabling in a positive, facilitative sense; for example, "Your interven-



Teachers walk a daily tightrope—deciding how far to go in helping students and when to let them confront the consequences of their choices.

Photograph by W. Spencer

tion should enable Anna to learn more language skills" or "Our work enabled Billy to succeed."

Naturally, confusion occurs when people unthinkingly use positive and negative definitions of the term in conversation, without explaining contextual shifts in meaning. To reduce ambiguities, those of us in schools should carefully reexamine how we define and use *enabling*. What's more important, educators must reexamine school practice through the lens of "enabling" to assess the degree to which we inadvertently encourage and reinforce irresponsible behaviors that essentially undermine students' self-esteem. Toward that end, this article discusses (1) how and why "enabling" occurs in schools, (2) how it affects students, and (3) how "codependent" adults can minimize "enabling" behaviors that allow students to avoid responsibilities as well as opportunities for growth (see Beattie 1987 for a commonsense explanation of *co-dependence*, another AA-based term).

Enabling in the Schools

My first inkling that the word *enabling* could carry negative connotations occurred five years ago outside educational circles at an Al-Anon meeting. There *enabling* referred to actions by people who loaned money to substance abusers, paid their bills, did their chores, or called in sick for them.

Once the concept sank in, I started noticing examples of "enabling" at school. For instance, by not always collecting homework when it was due and then not keeping good records of when students handed in tardy work, I was clearly enabling them to put off assignments without fear of the consequences. Likewise, my long-standing unwillingness (now corrected) to include items on my tests from audio-visual presentations sent a clear message to students: "You can get away with not studying the notes you took so diligently during filmstrips or television programs."

Academic enabling. Hardly a day passed without my observing situations in which teachers were failing to hold students properly accountable for their academic performance. Take the case of Barbara, for example:

> Barbara is an extremely bright girl with attendance problems. After learning exactly how each teacher calculates grades, she skips those classes where grades are based entirely on test scores—and she soon discovers the absolute minimum required to get an "A."
>
> With a friend taking notes for her, Barbara knows exactly when tests are scheduled and surprises her teacher by showing up on test days armed with the question, "When can I make up this test?" If five tests are given in a class, Barbara is there 10–12 times all semester. Her friend takes good notes, the teacher's easy tests don't change much from year to year, and Barbara gets a "B" in the course. She's having a great time.

We must first realize that good teachers don't *give* a good education to students; they provide experiences that facilitate and motivate youngsters to educate themselves through trial and error, success and failure.

Too often teachers let students get away with academic laziness, slipshod performance, and procrastination by:

- allowing them to "tune out" while the teacher does the talking and the thinking,
- consistently accepting "forgotten" assignments without penalty,
- giving credit for sloppy work,
- ignoring cheating or taking off only 2–3 points when students do cheat,
- giving easy tests and grades that require little or no serious studying,
- allowing students who have not studied all semester to pass courses with only three or four hours of "extra credit" work.

Behavioral enabling. Teachers also reinforce self-indulgence, bad attitudes, and disrespect for/self and others when we accept irresponsible or otherwise unacceptable behaviors from individual students or entire classes. Examples of behavioral enabling include:

- allowing students to sleep, read newspapers, or carry on irrelevant conversations with other students during class activities;
- making lame excuses for students (e.g., "She didn't really mean it" or "He was tired from an after-school job") to avoid criticism for lack of discipline from supervisors;
- accepting flimsy excuses from "good students" for inappropriate behaviors that we wouldn't accept from "troublemakers";
- putting words in the mouths of students struggling to express thoughts or repeating questions for inattentive individuals;
- picking up trash left by students around the classroom or cleaning graffiti off desks or walls.

Making school or life easy for students shows confusion in our understanding of what responsibilities properly go with adult and student roles in school. In our efforts to keep them engaged in school, placate their parents, and compete with MTV, we assume responsibilities that are really theirs and fail to confront them with their rightful responsibilities, as happened with Sue, for example.

> Sue is a quiet 11th grader who smiles a lot and compensates for her lack of class participation by being scrupulous about her written work. When asked to express an opinion or solve a problem, she is virtually paralyzed. Efforts to involve her in class discussion in any way are inevitably met with a lowered head, blushing, and silence.
>
> A progress report expressing concern about her poor class participation prompted an angry response from her verbal and aggressive parents. Sue received an "F" for class participation and got a "D" for the quarter as a result. Afterward, her parents bad-mouthed the teacher behind his back to her counselor,

school principal, other teachers, and anyone else who would listen. Ultimately, Sue was transferred to another teacher and hasn't uttered a word in a class since.

As the manifestations of enabling became more apparent to me, it was clear that *school counselors* enable students as well. Depending on the circumstances, these well-meaning adults may encourage inappropriate values and behaviors when they:

- knowingly accept lies from parents who call to excuse absences or to explain black eyes and bruises;
- consistently accept and explain away discourtesy from students with attention-deficit disorders;
- let students have illegal cigarettes in school whenever the kids say they are "stressed out";
- ask teachers to waive class participation requirements for shy students who suffer from "inhibited social development."

Administrators, too, contribute to educational enabling when they:

- ignore athletic code violations because individual students are "needed" for band concerts, plays, or athletic competitions;
- consistently allow "forgetful" students out of class to call parents to bring lunches, books, or assignments to school;
- ask custodians to clean up student messes in hallways or classrooms rather than insisting that the violators do it;
- give three-day suspensions to rowdy students who are looking for ways to get out of school anyway;
- gloss over profanity, racial and ethnic slurs, or fights to avoid hassles with students and parents.

The Wrong Lessons

It isn't always easy to know the difference between helping students and assuming their responsibilities for them. In the long run, though, those who consistently bail out students are teaching the wrong lessons. The examples of Chad and Sandy illustrate how adults assume or overlook responsibilities that rightfully belong to the students.

We can model first-rate standards of performance and reinforce the idea that significant learning and personal growth come only from hard work and persistence.

Chad refuses to record homework in the required assignment section of his notebook, so he seldom has assignments done on time. Usually socializing when assignments are given, he has the audacity to ask, "What was that?" after the teacher has already explained the homework several times. Except for one teacher Chad considers very unreasonable, all of his teachers repeat things for him. They have taught him that he really doesn't need to pay attention when they are talking.

Sandy has terrible penmanship, and half her work is usually illegible. When challenged or corrected, she becomes defensive immediately (e.g., "What difference does it make? I can read it.") or aggressive ("If my penmanship is so bad, why didn't some teacher make a big deal about it before I got in the 11th grade?"). Her mother has tried to get her to work on her penmanship and is continually amazed that teachers accept Sandy's sloppy work.

The lower expectations encountered by Chad and Sandy can serve as a spawning ground for unproductive work habits, mushy values, irresponsible behaviors, and dependency. In a fundamental sense, "enabled" students become academically and psychologically disabled when they consistently come to:

- expect that deadlines will always be extended, regardless of the excuse,
- expect good grades for little effort,
- expect others to solve problems for them,
- believe that mediocrity is "good enough" and display little appreciation of excellence,
- set low goals for themselves,
- see adversity and challenges as burdens rather than as opportunities for growth,
- resent people who express and enforce clear expectations.

Allowing students to be lazy or irresponsible exacts a major price from our society. The growing inefficiency and declining productivity of our workers and our declining capacity to compete effectively in the international market; the rising cost of remedial programs to train high school dropouts, teenage parents, and skill-deficient adult workers; the perpetuation of the welfare state mentality—could these conditions exist in part because schools, parents, and society are enabling young people to become less than they can be?

Last but not least, the burden of educational enabling ultimately falls on the students themselves, especially those who discover the need to address their deficits later in life when the cost of doing so in time and money must vie with formidable family, financial, and professional obligations.

Why Educators Enable Students

Most people go into education because they genuinely like youngsters and want to help them learn. Teachers, for example, enter their classrooms with an understandable desire to be liked and needed. Unlike entertainers, however, their interactions with young people are seldom met with applause or a pat on the back. Working in this age of widespread second-guessing by parents and the media, school personnel are subject to considerably more scrutiny and less community support than ever before. Feeling vulnerable, many well-meaning adults stack the emotional deck for themselves, often unconsciously, by establishing roles in their school relationships that assure they will get the psychic strokes they need.

One effective way to get "thanks" in the educational system is to do things for people they really should be doing themselves. By making themselves indispensable, teachers or counselors

can virtually guarantee being "needed" by the people being "helped." Furthermore, by taking the roles of "helper" and "nice person," the individual is able to reinforce a positive self-concept and avoid the hassles and verbal abuse that may come from students, parents, or supervisors when unacceptable behavior is confronted head-on.

Regardless of whether students perceive enablers as "easy teachers" or "gutless wonders," the predictability of these interactions brings a sense of security to both the enabler and the enablee. Unfortunately, however, as behaviors associated with the roles become more defined and interwoven, the parties become increasingly dependent on each other. The development of *codependency* leads students to expect the teacher to rescue them—and that, in turn, reinforces the underlying factors that motivated the adult in the first place.

In all fairness, I recognize that professional and institutional factors provide additional reasons for educational enabling. Heavy curriculum demands, the need to prepare students for standardized tests, and the requirements of extracurricular duties press expediency upon teachers and other school staff. Frankly, it is often faster and easier for us to do things ourselves or ignore inappropriate behavior than to confront students or wait for them to complete a task well. Other influences are the educational relativism left over from the late 1960s, which made it fashionable to think that rewards can be achieved without much effort, and the failure of teacher training programs to encourage prospective teachers to look seriously at their motivations for teaching.

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Educational enabling, then, stems from a wide variety of complex factors, including: (1) a failure to see or accept that "taking care of" or "helping" students can be harmful to them in the long run, (2) a deep-rooted need of educators to nurture or feel needed, (3) adult fears of letting go of power or social roles, and (4) institutional expectations and reward systems that reinforce "take-charge" behaviors.

How to Reduce Enabling

So what can be done? The first step is to realize that good teachers don't *give* a good education to students; they provide experiences that facilitate and motivate youngsters to educate themselves through trial and error, success and failure. Once we accept this proper role of the teacher in the learning process, we can come to understand how enabling works, recognize enabling in our interactions with students, and actively attempt to increase student accountability for participating actively and productively in learning.

From a practical standpoint, there are many ways to reduce educational enabling. To begin with, we can develop inservice programming to help staff learn to distinguish "helping" and "enabling" behaviors, to differentiate genuine academic differences and "learned helplessness" (Seligman and Maier 1967), and to learn when "negotiations" (McNeil 1981, 1986) and "treaties" (Powell et al. 1985) work to the detriment of responsibility and self-esteem. Then, we can begin to foster student responsibility and self-esteem by modifying our own behaviors.

Adult behaviors play a central role in modeling behavior for students and in setting parameters for what is acceptable or unacceptable in the classroom. Students cannot shirk academic and social responsibilities in the classroom—or elsewhere in the school—if adults don't enable them to do so. For that reason, it is essential that teachers, counselors, and administrators apply some of the social learning theory (Bandura 1977) taught in education classes. And we can do so by modeling first-rate standards of performance and reinforcing the idea that significant learning and personal growth come only from hard work and persistence.

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In addition, we can take conscious steps to set meaningful standards for young people and to hold them accountable for meeting them. For example, we can learn to live with silence when students don't answer immediately and give them the time and encouragement to formulate their own responses. We can also:

- introduce students to the concept of *enabling* and encourage them not to try to get us to do things for them;
- learn how to ask questions that require students to demonstrate an understanding of concepts and skills;
- refrain from prematurely interjecting personal knowledge or opinions into discussions in ways that encourage "teacher-pleasing" responses from students or otherwise stifle student discussions;
- provide experiences that help students appreciate the value of intrinsic rewards;

• develop the courage to stand up to students and parents who try to pressure or manipulate us to accept less than the personal best from each child.

These efforts will make it possible for young people to feel the consequences of success and failure and ultimately the self-satisfaction from learning that they can overcome adversity, meet challenges, and even accept defeat in cases where one gives one's all.

Learning the Right Lessons

The term *educational enabling* offers a useful perspective for helping us understand why schools usually don't accomplish as much as they might: educational enabling teaches young people the wrong lessons. By letting go of enabling roles, educators can go a long way toward enhancing student respect for themselves—and for us. Because life generally offers more bumps than pillows, it is important for everyone to learn to feel and deal with consequences of choices. When our students are allowed to feel the natural pain of falling on their noses (especially when they chose to do so in the first place), we provide them the opportunity to experience the satisfaction of learning that they *can* bounce back again—and that's one of the *right* lessons.□

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Steven E. Landfried is Social Studies Department Chair at Stoughton High School and the host of radio talk shows for teenagers and adults in Wisconsin. He may be contacted at Route One, Highway 59 East, Evansville, WI 53536; (608) 873-8848.
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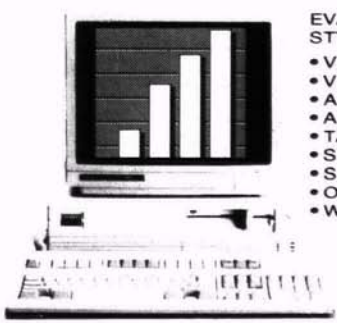

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