

## [The Circle Of Courage In the Classroom](#) (excerpt)

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### **Implementing the Circle of Courage in a Classroom**

**Positive Behavior Supports** (PBS) is a modern educational (interdisciplinary) framework for addressing many issues in institutional settings. PBS is committed to addressing deeper issues than behavior as an alternative to traditional approaches, in order to bring about sustained positive change in students based on research, as well as meet bureaucratic needs (which we cannot escape from in any event). The Circle of Courage and Reclaiming approaches mesh with PBS in many aspects because they share many founding principles.

The Circle is not a set of rules or a strategy; like PBS (Positive Behavior Supports) it is a paradigm shift in teaching social obligation and self-awareness. Implementation then, has more to do with shifting perceptions and expectations than it does with creating rules and strategies, which are a product of perceptions and expectations. The perceptions and expectations revolve around the circle's four principles. Belonging, the first principle is described uncompromisingly by Brokenleg. "The ultimate test of Kinship was behavior, not blood: You belonged if you acted like you belonged" (Brendtro et al. Reclaiming...46). This means that policies like suspension and expulsion are not on the table. Combine this with the principle of mastery, which obligates the community to help all students reach their full potential, and we are held to a very high standard of accountability as a result. New ways of teaching become necessary in this case. Peer teaching has great potential to allow students to take on the role of teaching tasks they have mastered to those who have not; this is reciprocated when students, rather than competing, pass these new skills on to younger classes coming up. While this strategy is not new, it has not been privileged up till now, because traditional forms of teaching based on hierarchy do not allow space for it. By accepting the principles of equal power and obligation to the community, negative traditional practices must be left behind.

As far as ground level strategies for change in the classroom, the Circle of Courage aligns neatly with the tenets of Reclaiming strategies, originally designed for at-risk youth and pioneered by Dr. Janusz Korczak. Reclaiming is composed of four essential elements:

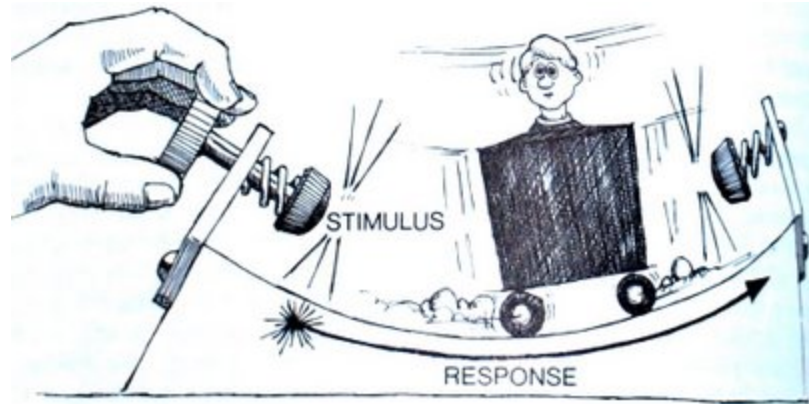
- 1 Relating to the reluctant- examines strategies for establishing positive relationships with youth whose lives have been marked by alienation.
- 2 Brain friendly learning- presents alternative methods for organizing learning experiences to reverse patterns of failure and futility.
- 3 Discipline for responsibility- discusses management approaches that counter irresponsibility and rebellion by mobilizing positive youth involvement.
- 4 The courage to care- presents programs for fostering prosocial values and behavior in youth whose lives are self-centered and lacking purpose.

Relating to the reluctant is put into practice by moving away from stimulus-response scientific approaches to students as "black boxes" which rely heavily on reward and punishment to attain behavioural outcomes, toward relationship building, influence,

obligation, and viewing behavior positively rather than negatively. "Teachers with widely divergent instructional styles can be successful if they develop a positive classroom climate. Counsellors trained in different methodologies succeed or fail to a large extent based on the quality of rapport they build with clients" (Brendtro et al.

Reclaiming...71). This rapport allows teacher/mentors two

tools to influence the behavior of their students. "Social reinforcement" is the legitimacy to give advice, encouragement, or correction directly. Students will not act on these admonitions unless a relationship has been established. "Modeling" desired behavior, like social reinforcement, only has an impact if a relationship based on trust and respect precedes it.



Brain friendly learning assumes a natural drive for students to learn. That drive is undermined when "what passes for education is noise that interrupts the natural flow of learning", and by fragmentation of knowledge into subject area and assembly line process that serves adults before it does children. One aspect of the solution to this problem is teaching to mastery rather than moving forward prematurely, by making meaningful patterns and contextual connections across the curriculum. Another is to allow students the opportunity to teach one another as equals rather than teaching down to them as an authority. This social approach to teaching allows students to ask, to share and to explore together, in a safe environment.

When the brain perceives a threat, whether covert or overt, the brain downshifts. At such times, the older, more primitive parts of the brain that deal with emotions and reflexive 'fight, flight, or freeze' behaviors, are in control. When this happens the opportunity for pattern making in the higher thinking brain and cerebrum – is severely limited. The fact that the brain downshifts under threat has tremendous implications for those teaching or communicating with youth."

What is crucial about the Reclaiming definition of 'threat' is that while it can include fear of punishment or failure it can also be contained in test anxiety, irrelevant curriculum, unnecessary memorization, and "the structure of school itself" (96). Experiential learning, coupling real world skills and activities to theoretical knowledge not only reaches higher cognitive levels, it allows students to understand the relevance of, and contextualize knowledge as an alternative to traditionally threatening methods.

Discipline for responsibility might be a deceiving term, but by this point in the analysis, it should be clear that discipline cannot mean punishment. Self discipline for responsibility might be a more apt description. The term is rooted in the word disciple, which has many connotations as well; but it is based on legitimate authority from experience, and in guidance and modelling leading to culturally appropriate expression of behaviors. Self discipline must be encouraged and modelled, based on established relationships, and within rapidly expanding boundaries. If children are allowed complete freedom of choice, they will be lost and without direction, but treating them as equals, and as deserving of autonomy while providing a model and guidance without coercion will help them develop their own sense of discipline. A good strategy to implement discipline for responsibility is "Demanding Greatness instead of Obedience."

Finally, the courage to care is precisely what it says. Presenting students with the opportunity to pay forward what is being done on their behalf in the Circle of Courage requires that they have first experienced the benefits of all other elements. If this is the case, obligation will become enthusiasm to take on challenges within their circle of influence. "Empathy is the linchpin in this concept of altruism." "At the highest levels of moral development, one gains a sense of being related to all humanity." (122). The manifestation discussed in the Reclaiming model is volunteerism. Based on an established need and a call for assistance as opposed to being ordered or preached at, students choose in what way they can best serve their community.

Because the Circle of Courage has been found to be a valid approach to dealing with behaviors, and because its values are seemingly in direct conflict with traditional school board policies, I suggest that we need to re-think the need for a blanket set of regulations to govern schools that serve vastly different populations with vastly different goals. We must allow for the possibility that those realities exist (are in fact the rule) and must be allowed for.

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