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Five Practices That Provoke Misbehavior

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Teachers can unknowingly cause misbehavior by triggering students' negative emotions. Here are five potential provocations—and what you can do instead.

Misbehavior is a form of communication. It's how we send messages to others that something is not OK. All of us—adults and youth alike—tend to misbehave whenever we find ourselves in circumstances that threaten our well-being. When we feel vulnerable, misunderstood, humiliated, or betrayed, we're inclined to act out. Families do it at the dinner table, educators do it in faculty meetings, and students do it in classrooms. We needn't feel bad about this, however, because it's normal and often healthy to react against the circumstances that produce negative emotions. Sure, we sometimes fail to make our best decisions in such situations, but our misbehavior is rarely without cause.

Why, then, in the classroom, do we often view our students' misbehavior only as a problem? Is it fair or accurate to say that misbehaving students possess "bad attitudes" when they're responding to bad experiences? What happens to us, to our students, and to our communities when we characterize student reactions to negative experiences as "inappropriate," "disruptive," "defiant," "insubordinate," "disobedient," or "destructive"? What if the real problem is the context around the misbehaving student—a context that includes us?

These are hard questions to ask because they suggest that we may not always be right in our interpretation of misbehavior. And if we're not always right, some of what we do in response to that misbehavior might be wrong.

That's why I think that to be the best teachers we can be, we need to admit the possibility that we sometimes create circumstances in our classrooms that provoke student misbehavior. Admitting this doesn't absolve students of responsibility for their actions, nor does it make us bad educators if we make a mistake here or there. Rather, acknowledging that we sometimes inadvertently provoke student misbehavior helps us recognize that we're all part of complex relationships in complicated institutions, both of which don't always function optimally for everyone.

Admitting we sometimes create situations that our students experience as negative can move us away from blame-the-victim questions like, "What's wrong with this kid?" to far more powerful inquiries like, "What might I be doing that contributes to this student's decision to misbehave?" That shift is not only brave; it's also more hopeful and productive.

Five Provocations to Avoid

To help educators move from admitting to quitting those practices that incite student misbehavior, let's look at five provocations frequently committed by even the best teachers. Many of us adopted these practices because they seemed like common sense. I'll concede the "common" part, given how pervasive they are, but I'll dispute their "sense" because I've seen time and again that they don't yield the best outcomes.

Over the years that I've served as a middle and high school teacher, mentor, union president, supervisor, teacher educator, and researcher, I've seen hundreds of teachers who've struggled to understand why their students misbehave. In each instance, it's become clear to me that one source of student misbehavior is, frankly, *teacher* misbehavior. I highlight our provocations here not to blame teachers—indeed, we're enduring way too much of that toxicity already—but

to equip professional educators with knowledge of specific practices that often rouse students to misbehave so that we can choose better approaches that, instead, convince students to engage.

Provocation 1. Highlighting Ability Differences

One of the surest ways to get students to disengage or misbehave is to make them feel stupid. Students (and adults) do some pretty dysfunctional things to avoid that experience. They cut class or skip school. They stay up too late the night before a test to manufacture an excuse for their substandard score. They avoid asking for help because they don't want to illuminate their incompetence. They cut peers down with insults to make themselves feel bigger. They withhold their best effort when faced with challenging academic work because if failure is likely, *choosing* to fail offers an experience of autonomy. And they may even let their dog eat their homework.

Of course, none of us intentionally sets out to make students feel dumb, but we likely do it all the time. We label and track kids on the basis of their perceived ability. We use competition to inspire students to do their best even when academic contests inevitably produce losers. We distribute our questions and attention inequitably, often supplying less higher-order thinking activity to those low-expectancy students we don't believe can handle it. We establish performance-based learning environments that force students to fixate on their scores and rank rather than on their learning and growth. We post grades and display exemplary work even though some students never see their efforts acknowledged. We praise students for their intelligence rather than for their effort. And we cold call on misbehaving students as a way of leveraging embarrassment to produce compliance.

All these approaches broadcast to students that some are smart, whereas others are, well, not. They compel students to look for ways to avoid situations where they might be labeled "the dumb one." Distracting peers, delaying getting to work, cracking jokes, forgetting one's materials, repeatedly sharpening a pencil, feigning illness, starting a quarrel to get sent out of class—these (mis)behaviors regularly function as covers for insecurity, inadequacy, and incompetence.

But perceived deficiencies in ability aren't the problem—it's the stigma attached to students' academic struggles that provokes student misbehavior. Research has shown that when educators reduce or eliminate experiences that highlight ability differences, student misbehavior tends to decrease (for example, see Ansalone, 2010; King & McInerney, 2014; Oakes, 2005).

So if there's one sure thing you can do to reduce student misbehavior, it's this: Remove all features of the learning environment that attach significance to differences in ability. No significance, no rankings. No rankings, no threats of inadequacy. No threats of inadequacy, no need to react against a toxic learning environment and those within it.

And yes, this means that if we're truly concerned about educating all students to maximize their opportunities in life, we should be very suspicious of any claims about the intent or efficacy of tracking. Put all students in rigorous learning environments in which challenges are balanced with differentiated supports, and you'll find far fewer discipline problems compared to those schools that provoke resistance through the ranking regimes on which tracking depends. Detracking schools shows kids that we believe in them, and that makes them want to reach for their potential. It also makes them want to behave better.

Provocation 2. Grading Practice Work

In an effort to assess progress and motivate students to work hard, schools sometimes overstate the need for students to demonstrate their ability. We mark tests, assign quarterly and semester grades, and compute grade-point averages. We then distribute accolades on the basis of how high those scores go.

In so doing, we send the message that our students' performance is our main concern. But for peer-preoccupied youth, such a fixation can be a major source of anxiety, particularly in competitive, high-stakes, test-driven learning environments. When students start asking, "What do I have to do to get an A?" or "How do I compare with my friends?" with greater frequency than they wonder, "What have I learned, and how can I improve?" it's an indicator that they're more invested in playing the school game than in maximizing their learning.

Students faced with such learning environments regularly adopt what's called a *performance goal orientation*. Because it's the answer that matters, not the learning, they will often ask to be spoon-fed the answer rather than try to figure something out on their own. They may be reticent to collaborate with others because helping a peer reduces one's own chance to be the best. They may ridicule classmates' mistakes because instigating insecurity in others is one way of staying on top. These are some of the more insidious and climate-destroying misbehaviors we confront as teachers. Unfortunately, we're often the ones who elicit them.

A prevalent way of provoking such reactions is the practice of grading homework as a summative assessment. We typically assign homework so students can independently practice new knowledge, skills, and concepts. *Practice* is the key word here. But if good practice means making and working through mistakes, why do we assign penalties to those mistakes by making them count toward a final grade? Shouldn't we expect students to temporarily fail when practicing something new?

Grading practice work provokes students to resist academic effort and misbehave as a way of distracting us and others from their insecurities. Further, it overemphasizes performance at the expense of mastery, and it compels students to obsess about social comparisons rather than focus on their own development. Essentially, grading practice tells students, "Don't mess up. Mistakes will be punished." And we wonder why students don't do their homework!

To remove this provocation, we need to assess practice work *formatively*, restricting the use of summative assessments to those instances when students have already demonstrated they've understood the content. We can accomplish this through proficiency-based grading and the articulation and frequent reinforcement of mastery-goal orientations. After all, for students to believe us when we say that the main reason to engage in academic activities is to learn, we must remove those practices that demonstrate that they'll be punished if they try.

Provocation 3. Establishing Vague Norms

Possibly the most ubiquitous behavioral expectation codified in discipline handbooks—and likely posted on many walls throughout your school—is the command, "Be respectful." Unfortunately, that's as ambiguous as it is succinct. Just whose definition of respect are we privileging? Could one person's respect be another person's disrespect? If so, how can (dis) respectful behavior be *normed*?

Although it makes little sense to establish a behavioral norm based on a contested category, we do it routinely. Many of our students know that their teacher's definition of good behavior doesn't match their experience or what they've been taught in their community or family. But students also know that being successful in teacher-defined spaces—and being allowed to stay within them as opposed to being sent out—depends on their regular deference to sometimes-alienating cultural norms. And forced deference is a recipe for resentment and resistance.

The ambiguity of an expectation like "be respectful," coupled with its inevitable arbitrary enforcement, will often provoke misbehavior in students, particularly those who are marginalized as a result of racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, xenophobia, linguistic discrimination, or any other form of oppression. Many students feel chronically disrespected by the lack of responsiveness in our curricula, by mainstream behavioral expectations, and by the lack of diversity in our teaching force.

Further, those who have limited access to the modes of behavior and communication preferred by the mainstream will sometimes struggle to adhere to vaguely defined expectations established by that mainstream. Their lack of adherence may seem counterproductive—maybe even destructive—but it's much more likely that the added stress of trying to comply with undefined rules or culturally unresponsive expectations is compelling students to "keep it real" even when their attempts to remain authentic get them in trouble. Consequently, students' struggle to behave "appropriately" in contexts they had no voice in designing is not an indicator of their moral failing; rather, it may be a signal that our classrooms and schools are not as inclusive as we think they are.

Think about what it's like to travel to a country where everyone drives on the opposite side of the road. The simple act of crossing a street—not to mention driving on one—becomes an exercise in concentration, reframing, and renorming. Until you get the hang of it, your stress rises, your confidence suffers, and your performance on any test associated with street navigation will likely drop even if you were an exemplary driver in your home country. And this happens even where there are signs posted to help you. Imagine adjusting to this alien set of norms with no signs, or maybe just one—"drive respectfully"!

Likewise, in our classrooms, we tend to establish norms as though they were self-explanatory, and we expect a diverse range of students to adhere to them. But actually, our expectations for students are often arbitrary for many classroom behaviors, including how to talk with peers, when to talk with peers, how to collaborate, whether to collaborate, how to ask for help, when to ask for help, how to look at superiors, whether to look at superiors, and so on. For students to guess wrong is to risk ridicule, labeling, punishment, and ostracism. At the very least, they'll feel ashamed when the behaviors they understand to be normal are labeled by their peers and superiors as inappropriate, rude, or disrespectful. Misbehavior in this context makes a lot of sense.

Our students sometimes act out to expose the arbitrariness of the norms we expect them to obey. They may also misbehave in an attempt to negotiate new standards that don't require assimilation as the price of acceptance. Such behaviors suggest a desire to contribute to, if not expand, the pool of who belongs in that learning environment. In that sense, the behavior is sort of heroic. But we can provoke further resentment when we view their actions only as disobedience. That's why seemingly benign pronouncements like "be respectful," rather than building a base for cooperation and congeniality, may actually inspire misbehavior.

So what's the alternative? Avoid articulating behavioral norms using vague, disputed, culturally unresponsive, or assimilative categories. Engage your students and their families in determining what is meant by words like *respectful*, *caring*, *kind*, *polite*, *appropriate*, and *mindful*. Negotiate the meaning of such terms, collaborate with students and community members to generate examples and counterexamples, and frequently revisit and revise whatever behavioral norms you decide on as the year progresses. This invites students into a democratic process that will inspire more expansive ways of taking care of one another. It will also make students want to adhere to norms rather than subvert them.

Provocation 4. Letting Students Choose Their Seats

Over the years, I've seen countless teachers (myself included) permit their students to sit anywhere they choose. Many of us rationalize this open-seating approach by claiming it makes our students feel less dominated. Choice is supposed to elicit feelings of agency, and self-directed opportunities are supposed to encourage engagement, we argue.

But most students experience open seating not as freedom but as a form of abandonment. To youth dealing with rigid social hierarchies and peer rivalries, a classroom with no set seating arrangement offers only the illusion of choice. We

can add insult to injury when students in self-chosen seats become embroiled in interpersonal conflicts or get too chatty while they're supposed to be "on task," and we respond by blaming them for not demonstrating the maturity or the commitment to learning they're supposed to possess. We may even react to their (mis) behavior by assigning seats as a form of collective punishment—or worse, by moving only a few troublemakers to those front and center seats, as though being closer to the teacher is a penalty. Again, this is a set up, and it is guaranteed to provoke student resentment and resistance.

The truth is, open seating isn't democratic, doesn't support student autonomy, and seldom teaches students to self-regulate. The tiny uptick in self-rule a student might experience when choosing a desk is quickly eclipsed when that student must search for the least dangerous seat amid adversaries, bullies, cliques, and even crushes that are always operating in our classrooms. Open seating allows the worst parts of those phenomena to fester. That stresses kids out.

"But my students plead for open seating," you say? Of course they do—or at least *some* of them do. Keep in mind that those who broadcast their desire to sit next to their friends may be doing so to flaunt the fact that they have the richest social network, may feel entitled to have a classroom dedicated to their desires, and may believe that others can fend for themselves in determining where to sit. Instead of yielding to the more dominant voices in the room, look at your classroom from the perspective of the marginalized. Think of the new kid who mistakenly sits in a popular student's seat and is mocked for doing so. Or imagine the student who was meeting with a counselor to discuss a difficult life issue only to come to class late and be forced to find a desk while surrounded by snickering peers.

Given how difficult it is to navigate racial, gender, socioeconomic, linguistic, and sexual dynamics just to find a place to sit, it's amazing that students transition from hallway drama to classroom focus as well as they do. We can support them in that transition and provide a little predictability and safety when we give them a dependable spot that's always there for them and *always theirs*. Switching seats around every quarter will further maximize heterogeneity, promote intercultural collaboration, prevent distraction, and guarantee exposure to multiple ways of thinking and acting. This fosters equity and cultural responsiveness and helps break down hierarchies of status and intergroup misunderstanding.

Provocation 5. Using Tired, Old Scripts

The following statements don't need much explanation. They're frequently uttered by educators (again, myself included) when confronted with misbehaving students even though saying them almost certainly produces forms of resignation and rage that provoke misbehavior. I'll present each in the form of a question:

- Why do we say, "Do as I say, not as I do"? Do we really think that being brazenly hypocritical adds to our credibility or trustworthiness?
- Why do we glibly claim, "Rules are rules" when responding to a student's rejection of a rule's legitimacy? Have we forgotten that rules are invented, rationalized, and enforced by people who possess the power to do something different?
- When a student asks why a certain rule must be obeyed, why do we just say, "Because I said so"? Do we really believe that raw power moves, which command those of lower rank to obey for obedience's sake, will ever yield anything other than bitterness and opposition?
- And why, when a student complains that a rule or its enforcement is unfair, do we respond with, "Well, life is unfair"? Aren't we really saying, "Welcome to adulthood, where constant confrontation with injustice demands a survival tactic of either cynicism or resignation"? Is that a message we want to send?

Using these old, tired scripts essentially communicates to our students that their experience of school (or of us) is invalid, that their insights or critiques are unwelcome, and that their resistance is pointless. And responses like that don't produce better relationships and prosocial learning environments; instead, they provoke misbehavior.

Learning from Pushback

At the end of the day, students will want to learn with us when they're confident they won't feel cruddy in the process. Engaging their resistance and analyzing how we may have provoked their misbehaviors will help us take advantage of opportunities to learn about their perspectives, appreciate their experiences, and improve our practices. This approach will produce far more learning for students and teachers alike than punishments and exclusion ever will. Admitting our provocations does not mean lowering standards or giving up control; it means giving up the belief that our current standards and level of control should remain undisputed.

Likewise, recognizing that we sometimes provoke students' actions doesn't mean we have to accept their misbehaviors. But it does mean we have to ask challenging questions about our role in producing the behaviors. Tricky as it may sound, we need to find the middle ground between demanding students comply and complying with student demands. This requires us to recognize that student misbehavior is occasionally legitimate, particularly when we are the ones who provoked it.

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