

Interpreting Glasser's Control Theory: Problems that Emerge from Innate Needs and Predetermined Ends

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Read pages 157-163 of this resource which focuses on William Glasser's control theory, a method that encourages student decision-making through teacher encouragement.

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A really efficient totalitarian state would be one in which the all-powerful executive of political bosses and their army of managers control a population of slaves who do not have to be coerced, because they love their servitude. To make them love it is the task assigned, in present-day totalitarian states, to ministries of propaganda, newspaper editors and schoolteachers.¹

Introduction

William Glasser has been advancing control theory in the educational literature since 1969, when his *Schools without Failure* was published.² However, the 1970s was not to be Glasser's decade, as Lee Canter's *Assertive Discipline*, promising "A Take-Charge Approach for Today's Educator," enticed legions of teachers who were desperate to find ways of coping with an era conflict produced by shifting social mores and power relations between teachers and students.³ In a field already vulnerable to the novelty and appeal of "the latest thing," the topic of classroom management remains an especially fertile terrain for any technique or plan which promises effective ways to make the classroom a peaceful, productive place. As *Assertive Discipline* waned in popularity, Glasser's publication of *Control Theory* in 1986 would position him to ride the waves of constructivism,⁴ community, and quality in education during the 1990s.⁵

Glasser's control theory fits contemporary schools in several ways. In the spirit of constructivism, he writes of school as a place where students make meaning in the process of meeting their basic human needs. Well-suited to the trend of schools as learning communities are Glasser's ideas on cooperative learning, team approaches, and school as a friendly, comfortable environment. In an era in which Edwards Deming⁶ revolutionized industrial management, Glasser's application of the Quality principles to school and student management holds a common-sense appeal for many American educators.

Glasser's Quality Schools are beginning to appear on the educational landscape. Indigo Elementary School,⁷ the school profiled in this chapter, resembles schools in Glasser's growing Quality School Consortium which use control theory and the ideas in *Quality Schools and Control Theory in the Classroom* as guides to restructuring. While not a member of the consortium, Indigo's recent reorganization is the result of school leaders' exposure to and enthusiasm for the ideas that Glasser presents in his work. Through an examination of Indigo Elementary School, we paint a picture

of Glasser's ideas in action. Not unlike other accounts of Glasser applications,⁸ we seemed to witness an important, yet not completely successful, step toward democratic transformation of students and teachers at Indigo.

In contrast to external stimulus-response theory so prevalent in the classroom discipline literature, and especially in Canter's work, control theory is based on the assumption that all motivation starts from within the individual: "Basic to control theory is the belief that all of our behavior is our constant attempt to satisfy one or Page 159 more of the five basic 'needs' that are written into our genetic structure. None of what we do is caused by any situation or person outside of ourselves."⁹ The five "needs" that motivate individuals are the need to survive and reproduce, to belong and to love, " to gain power , " to be free, and to have fun.¹⁰ Power is the central need in this theory; Glasser holds that "the way we continually struggle for power" is evident in every aspect of our lives.¹¹ Students fulfill their need for power when they are able to make choices in the classroom. So central is this need for power that "if students do not feel that they have power in their academic classes, they will not work in school.... There is no greater work incentive than to be able to see that your effort has a power payoff."¹² As we will see, making choices— an element of power— is an important part of the Indigo day. Consequently for Glasser, the good school is defined as " a place where almost all students believe that if they do some work, they will be able to satisfy their needs enough so that it makes sense to keep working ." ¹³ Doing work that meets one's internal "needs" while satisfying course and teacher requirements is quality work.

Quality work is successful work in Glasser's theory. Quality work is done by students who are workers, guided by teachers who are non-coercive lead-managers rather than boss-managers. Students work on subjects until mastery is achieved, rather than being failed for not learning in a designated period of time. The curriculum reflects relevance, and students are tested on essential information: "The purpose of a history test in a Quality School would not be the parroting of briefly remembered nonessential knowledge; it would be to think 'sensibly' about the past and put some of this sense down on paper."¹⁴ Success in a Quality School, put simply, means students are working at doing their best and meeting their individual "needs" in a warm, friendly environment.

Yet defining success in American education is, of course, tricky business. In an educational system which Page 160 has only haltingly moved away from its origins as a factory-like system of behavioral control, it is not surprising that success might mean satisfied and productive students and teachers. For teachers who struggle each day to educate large numbers of diverse students, happy productivity is no mean feat; the pressing question of how a successful Glasser classroom contributes to society as a whole is left uninspected, however. As a democratic nation with no shortage of conflict, injustices, and national as well as international crises, it is pertinent that we analyze Glasser's ideal of "success" in light of our pressing social context. The larger question for control theory and Quality Schools, therefore, is not simply "successful or unsuccessful?", but must focus upon the ability of control theory and the Quality School to foster the maintenance and improvement of democratic life.

In fact, Glasser's theory and practice hides a manipulative individualistic pedagogy behind a concern for school spirit, cooperative learning, and a humane workplace. Framed in a post-industrial model of management, Glasser's Quality School aims to prepare students for their place in the contemporary work world. Like many school reforms in this century, Glasser's Quality School equates the good worker with the good citizen.¹⁵ Our critique of Glasser, using the works of John Dewey, will focus on this false equation. Dewey saw democracy as a form of social life, and placed his ideas regarding democratic life and citizenship at the heart of his philosophy of education. Central to our

argument, following Dewey, is that schools should not just prepare students for some faraway end called "citizenship," or "work," but should help students experience school as a democratic society. By both practicing the skills required for associated living, and living in an associated way with others at school, the means of democratic living are made indistinguishable from their evolving end: the constantly fluctuating life in a democratic society. When means and ends are separated, the likelihood for a counterfeit form of education occurs; a student may be given "control" over certain aspects of school but if this control is inauthentic, the democratic project is weakened.

Our critique on the work of Glasser spotlights the weaknesses of control theory as an educational guide, showing how the means of Glasser's theory— an individually-based "needs" curriculum— generates fixed ends which are insufficiently communal for a democratic society.

Control Theory and Quality Schools

Glasser draws a parallel between American education and the once-failing American automobile industry, presumably rescued by the quality principles of Deming. He asserts that, "Probably fewer than 15 percent of those who attend [school] do quality academic work in school, and even many of these do far less than they are capable of doing."¹⁶ His goal is to use control theory in order to help all students do quality work, just as Deming used Total Quality Management to revolutionize the assembly lines in Detroit to increase the quality of production of factory workers.

Unable to meet students' individual "needs," schools become dismal places that hold little positive energy or good feelings, either for teachers or students. Glasser metaphorically describes feelings about school as "pictures in the student's head."¹⁷ He states that these images of ourselves at school can be positive or negative, based upon our experiences at school. Students who do not succeed at school have a higher likelihood of having negative pictures of themselves at school, thereby making school a place of pain. Using a "needs"-based model, Glasser explains why some students are not motivated to come to school or work once they arrive.

Because "needs" form the basis for control theory, failing to meet these "needs" marks the genesis of problems for both students and teachers. Given that all these "needs" are constantly present and signaling us to Page 162 meet them at various times, Glasser asserts that students who choose not to do work in school do so because doing the work assigned does not meet their "needs." Therefore, the role of the teacher is to create an environment that offers students opportunities to meet their "needs," so that successful learning experiences— pictures— are amassed in their memories. The result is a desire to attend and perform quality work at school.

These "learning pictures" are crucial for Glasser. He states that we can diagnose a child who does not work at school as a child who pictures learning as an unsatisfying activity. Further, before a child rids himself of a positive learning picture of school, "he usually has some idea that [working] can be replaced by another satisfying picture even though this new picture may be self-destructive."¹⁸ Turning to drugs, sexual activities, or rock music are the ways that children usually get their "needs" met, Glasser concludes. This deficit of positive pictures is a vicious cycle: students who have negative pictures of school in their heads don't do work, fail, and reinforce their negative pictures of school. Glasser firmly informs the teacher in this situation: "No teacher will successfully teach anyone who does not have a picture of learning and those who try are doomed to failure."¹⁹ If teachers experience too much failure, they too become discouraged and alter their own pictures of school and of students.

Consistent with his business framework, Glasser recasts the teacher as a manager, and draws a contrast between bossmanagers and lead-managers. Boss-managers use coercion to motivate workers to do quality work. Conversely, leadmanagers have management responsibilities in the

classroom. "Teachers are people managers," he asserts, and are responsible for maintaining consistent experiences across lessons, structuring the class so that "needs" can be met, and developing means by which students can obtain a voice in the classroom environment.²⁰ The teacher as lead-manager is a crucial element in the successful implementation of control theory in the classroom, because taking the suggestions of students seriously and helping them develop a voice increases their sense of power without undermining the teachers' influence in the classroom. Glasser maintains that this role-switching is difficult for most teachers because historically they have not defined themselves as managers, but in fact perceived themselves as workers. Glasser's view of the teacher as manager means that the teacher works on a system, and the students are workers in that system.

What about grading and evaluation in this model? Glasser contends that in a quality school, the record should show what a student knows, not what he does not know, and that grades should never be on a "curve." In striving for competency and quality, students should be involved in self-evaluation. Through this process they become familiar with what quality work looks and feels like, creating a self-generative cycle that is mutually rewarding. The emphasis on self-evaluation is suggestive of a method to increase responsibility and personal accountability for work in the classroom, rather than an externally-driven system of motivations and rewards.²¹

Glasser is essentially an individualist whose theory of education expects an aggregate of individuals in a classroom to form a community within which individual "needs" are met through the activities of the day. Glasser supports cooperative learning methods that get students working together, because in this process they are mutually meeting their instinctual need to belong while accomplishing their work. He states that educators ought to harness all that is educational and communal about co-curricular activities (athletics, band, clubs, etc.) and create this same atmosphere in the classroom. "Not only do the team members fulfill their own 'needs,' but good teams add both power and belonging to the whole school. We call this school spirit." Individual "needs", when fulfilled, drive the system.²²

We now turn to see one such system in motion, a school where Glasser was interpreted methodically by teachers who found his control theory appealing and applicable to their work. Led by a teacher who had studied Glasser and experimented with his theory in her classroom, the third and fourth grades of Indigo Elementary enthusiastically constructed classrooms based on the "needs"-based theory. Incorporating teaching strategies that encourage feelings of belonging, power, freedom, and fun, these teachers integrated Glasser into their pedagogy in unique ways, illustrating the potential implications of control theory.