

# Thriving

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## Learning Tough Lessons: Leaving Punishment Behind

*R. Scott Lee*

**A**s an exceptional education teacher of eighth graders, I remember the exact moment I knew I would never be happy at that school. Our former assistant principal, Kyle, an outstanding administrator, had moved to a new state at Thanksgiving. Over spring break at his new school, he came back to visit. When the principal greeted him, the first thing she said was, “We finally got rid of Quay.” I was dumbstruck; in almost four months the most noteworthy accomplishment was the removal of a student. Quay certainly was difficult and seemingly incorrigible, but this was success? In my mind, the real accomplishment was that office conduct referrals for Quay had dropped from two or more a week at the beginning of the school year to zero in a four-week period between the middle of January through the middle of February.

Most of the students in my self-contained classroom had been in the same group together for several years. They sometimes enjoyed proclaiming that no teachers liked to work with them. Their previous teacher had quit during the first couple of weeks of school and it was rumored that another had quit during in-service before classes had even started. When I was hired, school was starting its fifth week and for most of that time the class was led by a substitute teacher, a turbulent way to start a school year. Only the principal, Kyle, and the exceptional education department chair had been involved in my interview process. After school on my first day I showed up in Kyle’s office with a file of classroom procedures, a class management plan, and data collection systems. We hit it off. I was happy with his willingness to offer support and he was happy to have an experienced teacher who was also willing to work with this group. After having to rely on substitute teachers for several weeks, he seemed relieved to have me on board.

As I became acquainted with other faculty members, they shared pieces of information and advice. Most wanted to help the new teacher; sometimes their advice was useful and other times not. The lack of continuity in this position was well known, and most everyone knew something about various students. Several in the class had less than stellar reputations among faculty, but Quay was infamous. It was rumored that he held the all-time record among the eighth-grade class for the most office conduct referrals. While those who offered advice were well-meaning and wanted to help me,

their comments often seemed demeaning, conveying the assumption that this kid was somehow bad and incapable of change. At this point in my career, I had taught for two years in a Re-ED program which sought to create a classroom ecology that builds trust and opportunities to experience joy which lead to positive change (Hobbs, 1994). Despite the disparaging comments from some staff, I had higher expectations.

Early in the semester, it would have appeared to an outsider that chaos reigned with most of the students, including Quay. For the first couple of months, I searched for solutions, trying various interventions resulting in a steady stream of office referrals, detentions, and suspensions. My students went to non-core content classes with other teachers and many struggled with a curriculum that lacked movement and

***We wanted to move beyond ineffective punishment-focused systems...***

engaging activity. But I started to find some allies among the staff. Besides Kyle, the eighth-grade school counselor was willing to help as much as he could, but he spent half his time away at the high school campus. The school resource (police) officer knew Quay from the community and was the first staff member who spoke about this boy in positive terms. Near the end of the semester we were seeing a student who was beginning to make better choices, avoiding gang-style behavior at school, and even engaging with school work. His behavior choices were still not consistent, but instead of being the kid who enjoyed getting in trouble he seemed willing to respect school expectations. It was after Thanksgiving that I realized that Quay had not had an office referral in some time. Instead of being sent to in-school or out-of-school suspension, he wanted to be in my class.

The last day of classes before Christmas break, I was collecting everything I would take home for the holiday on my hourly commute. Over the intercom came the announcement, “Mr. Lee, if you are still on campus, please buzz the office”. Not a welcome surprise for one who wanted to be on my way. I pressed the call button and the assistant principal asked me to come to the office for a phone call—he did not say with whom. When I got to the main office, he pointed to the phone and said I had a call. He left to lock up the building but didn’t tell me who was on the phone. I would have hoped that if it was an angry parent, he would have offered a heads up.

Picking up the phone, it was Quay who had called the school wanting to talk to me. He had been suspended after an office referral from another teacher over something in the hallway during class change—the time he was most distractable. He wanted to know what we had done in the class he had missed. I was pleased that he reached out to me and we had moments of supportive, light-hearted communication. In recent weeks we had started engaging in a friendly but sarcastic banter when we had private conversations that were not about behavior problems. While I usually spent my hour-long commute absorbed by NPR [National Public Radio], that afternoon I continued to think about Quay. I realized we had made a positive connection, a bond that I had often doubted we would ever achieve. I was excited because I had finally developed a meaningful relationship with the kid who many others saw as disposable.

After the holidays, Quay continued trying to follow expectations and I was pleased with how things were going between us. Yet, the two periods a day he spent with other teachers or unstructured time in the hallways still posed potential problems. The school behavior management system still focused on punishment. I knew intuitively that punishment did not lead to learning, but I lacked the level of influence needed for changing the school culture. Suggesting practices from my Re-ED experience would be a non-starter because of the association with alternative schools. And, although I was familiar with the goals of Re-ED, my own experience in that setting occurred during an administrative upheaval when there was an over-reliance on external controls, point systems, and consequences. Such practices have little educational value and are easily misused (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001; Harper, 2007; Hobbs, 1994).

My close colleagues and I faced a problem shared by many educators: we wanted to move beyond ineffective punishment-focused systems, but many schools are reluctant to implement relational interventions that are not explicitly academic (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern 2019; Duke 2002). Our quandary was that we knew what we were doing was not working, or at least not working well enough. At the time, we were clueless about what else to do. Most of the faculty were trying a more positive, preventative approach to classroom management by developing explicit procedures and teaching clear expectations (Wong & Wong, 1998). For some colleagues this was enough to give them the feeling that their classes were well managed as long as a majority of students complied.

A small group of colleagues and I were still looking for a comprehensive approach that promoted restorative experiences, but we lacked the vocabulary to express what we needed. So, we tried every intervention we heard about, with varied results. We were missing a systematic perspective of how an adult should frame interactions with students. Our professional practice at the time was somewhat like participating in the *Iowa Gambling Task* in that we would make random choices until we stumbled on something that worked, without understanding why some choices only worked with some students.

*The Iowa Gambling Task (IGT)* is used in a variety of psychological and neuroscience research contexts. Participants are given four decks of cards with varying amounts of monetary value. Participants draw cards that add or subtract money from the participant's "account." Eventually most participants realize by trial and error that one or two of the decks have cards that cause the participant to lose large amounts of money and the participant learns to choose cards from other decks that often have lower values but also fewer losing cards, thus increasing the likelihood of ending the task with a positive account. (For a more in-depth discussion of IGT see <https://www.psytoolkit.org/experiment-library/igt.html#refs>)

***There is little realistic expectation that punishment and external consequences will lead to any results beyond passive, minimal compliance for limited time periods.***

Our small group of colleagues was learning that administering external controls, while a common practice, was counter-productive in the long term (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu and Easton, 2010; Harper, 2007). In truth, there is little realistic expectation that punishment and external consequences will lead to any results beyond passive, minimal compliance for limited time periods (Brendtro et al., 2019; Deci et al., 2001; Lee, 2013). To the contrary, educators whose practice includes an intentional, relational approach that utilizes both social emotional and academic interventions leads to student well-being and high academic achievement (Brendtro

et al., 2019; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnikki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). My colleagues and I knew the truth but had not yet found how to put these ideas into practice.

I would like to close the loop with a story about Quay returning before the end of the school year, how he finished the eighth grade, went to high school, graduated, and found success as a young adult, but I cannot. After I left my class, I taught for a short time at the high school where Quay would have attended, but he never enrolled. I left that school district to become the director of a residential alternative school in another state, having never found out anything else about the life path of this young man. The late Yogi Berra said, “Life is a learning experience, only if you learn”.

Over the years I’ve thought about what I learned from Quay. I wish I had been more trusting of my professional judgement and able to be assertive that students are motivated from within rather than by artificial consequences. I was still at a point in my career where I was not using evidence-based principles, but rather trying random choices as in the Iowa Gambling Task. All I did know was that much of what I was doing was not working. I knew the problem was not Quay or any of the other students, the problem was at the systemic level. So, I kept quiet, timidly discussing practices with a very small group of trusted colleagues, and I left that school at my first opportunity. Luckily, as Yogi Berra reminds us, learning is a lifetime process. Although unable to change the situation at the time, I have a great deal of respect for those colleagues who stayed seeking to encourage change from the bottom up. However, I took what I learned to new professional opportunities as they arose.

There are many narratives involving how schools develop cultures where students are successful. Two are particularly relevant for the case described here and both have growing evidence of support. First, if given tools and a school culture that develops social emotional learning and restorative approaches, teachers can motivate students to change and grow in positive ways (Brendtro et al., 2019; Durlak, et al., 2011; Harper, 2007). Second, educators are integral in

implementing organizational culture change within schools; their actions are essential to implement relational interventions as opposed to interventions imposed by authoritarian directive (Bryk et al., 2010; Eyal & Roth, 2011; Fernet, Guay, Senecal, & Austin, 2012).

In my new administrative role, I worked with a team to put these ideas into practice. We asked questions, we researched what was working for others, we debated, and we always thought about how we could build relationships with our students—all our students. As a result, we collectively implemented academic and

social emotional learning systems using the values of the *Circle of Courage* (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2019 and earlier editions). We sought to understand students from their perspectives and develop relationships motivating autonomy and agency. Because we promoted quality relationships with students, we were able to redefine what punishment meant and review and assess the effect. Exclusionary interventions were only used as needed to maintain safety and were carefully monitored. On those occasions when interventions that might exclude or punish were necessary, we coupled punishing interventions with interactive learning opportunities. Meaningful learning happened as we developed positive, prosocial relationships with students. In turn, students developed self-discipline and controls from within in these relationships based on trust and respect.

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## **Meaningful learning happened as we developed positive, prosocial relationships with students.**

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