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Send out your light and your truth! Let them guide me. Psalm 43:3

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PRAISE: Christians Educators and the Difficult Student

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"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." - Isaiah 53:6 (NIV)

Anyone in education knows that the teacher's greatest challenge in the classroom is behavior management. Although there is a wealth of articles on the subject, few such articles are written from a Christian perspective for Christian educators. In addition, many of these articles give advice for managing the general population of students, while most of a teacher's stress comes from those few particular students that challenge authority, break rules, and interrupt instruction. Even the most knowledgeable and experienced teachers often find themselves stumped about what to do with these difficult students. This article attempts to address the concerns of a Christian educator in dealing with the difficult student in an editorial and practical fashion.

Our Christian Role

Christian educators often struggle with the balance of how to offer the best programs while also ministering to struggling students. This sometimes becomes a battle of the elites versus "the least of these." Before Christians are able to minister to these students, it is necessary to evaluate the core values and biblical concepts regarding the educator's role in reaching these students.

The challenging student is like the lost sheep. "'*Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.'" Luke 15:4-7.*

It is common to hear objections from teachers and administrators to working with challenging students: "We have 350 other students in the building that need our attention," or "I have twenty-four other students in this class. It isn't fair for this one student to take too much of my time." The parable of the lost sheep answers this concern all too clearly: "Does he not leave the ninety-nine in open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?" And, of course, there are initial fears that go with this idea: "How far should we go? How do we seek to reach the difficult student while nurturing and educating those who have not strayed?" But, it is important to see Christ's mission in going after the most challenging and lost people as shown throughout the Bible, from Jonah to Zacchaeus to Paul.

The Great Commission calls Christian teachers to reach difficult students: "*He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.'"* –Mark 16:15*; "I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."* –Matthew 25:36.

Christian school teachers are able to meet the needs of individual students with behavior challenges only if they are open to receiving ALL of God's children. Although the gospels call for all Christians to reach all people and to set prisoners free, there is concern that these difficult students might disrupt the learning and growth of other students. This article will thus discuss tools for equipping schools and teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to help these difficult students and to keep them from disrupting the program. But how far should a school or classroom teacher go? Is there ever a point in which nothing can be done to help a student? In Luke 15 following the story of the lost sheep is the story of the prodigal son. In this story, the father does release his child into the pains of the world with an attitude of being ready for his return when he is ready for his shelter and love. This is the manner in which Christian educators can release these students from their care, recognizing that after making all attempts, nothing can

be done in their care to help the student. But when the child or adolescent is ready for this care, they accept them back into their fold with forgiveness and celebration.

The first tool to assist teachers in making the decision could not be more obvious or overstated. It is prayer. Christian teachers should pray for themselves and their students. Even teachers are human and broken, and it is common for teachers to make mistakes in how they handle these challenging students. Prayer and guidance from God can help keep them on track. There are times when teachers feel verbally and physically abused by students and prayer becomes a necessity. There is no exact science for dealing with human behavior, but the power of faith and prayer cannot be contended with for seeking success for students. On rough days dealing with challenging behaviors, it is easy for a teacher to feel bitter, vengeful, and doubtful of any success for these students. In prayers, however, the teacher can welcome the fruits of the spirit to fill his or her heart with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in dealing with these students (Galatians 5:22-23). There are also other verses that teachers can pray through such as I Thessalonians 5:14, "We urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone."

In the business of life and teaching, it is easy to go through the motions of a spiritual life, to say a quick prayer, and to move on to the next thing on the checklist. To help these students, a teacher must take some time to go deeper into prayer. Richard Foster in *Celebration of Discipline* gives a guide for a deeper prayer life. He states, “[L]earning to pray for others is to listen for guidance” (p. 39). He further goes on to state that “imagination often opens the door to faith” (p. 41). So, when teachers pray for their students, they need to imagine the student behaving and being whole. Any teacher dealing with a challenging student should spend some time in a prayer study. Books such as Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline* give advice for praying

against evil and for healing prayer that would help both the students and a teacher through their spiritual journeys.

The teacher can experience spiritual growth by having challenging students and praying for these students. Such students teach patience and give the opportunity to show God's love and grace. In addition to praying for Christ to begin working in the hearts of students, the teacher is asking God to work in his or her heart as well, and these challenging students are just such an opportunity for teachers. James 1:12 states, "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him." The job of a Christian is not supposed to be easy. When a Christian teacher is being tested and refined, it should be seen as a blessing from the Spirit who teaches how to better cultivate the fruits of the Spirit.

PRAISE: A Tool for Dealing with the Difficult Student

Many Christian teachers do want to help all students be successful. Unfortunately, many teachers are overwhelmed with the stresses of teaching and the over abundance of advice and techniques on the topic of behavior management. Thus, the remainder of this article will review a simple and easy to learn acronym that shows how teachers can respond to their students' behavior challenges by building on what they already know about teaching. To help teachers apply their instructional skills to improving their students' behavior, this article reviews the keys to successful classroom management using the acronym PRAISE: Being **P**roactive, using **R**einforcements, **A**ssessing and analyzing the **I**ntent of misbehavior, being **S**incere, and **E**mpowering the Holy Spirit in students (Ackerman, 2006 & Ackerman, 2007). This mnemonic tool serves as a primer for evaluating and guiding student behavior and for creating a positive and structured classroom environment (Ackerman, 2007).

P	roactive
R	einforcements
A	ssess
I	ntent
S	incerity
E	mpower

Ackerman, 2006

Proactive

Proactive (the "P" in PRAISE) behavior management is the primary key for preventing negative behaviors. An effective teacher is proactive much more often than reactive (Wong & Wong, 1998; Carpenter, & McKee-Higgins, 1996). Strong and/or experienced teachers know they can head off behavior problems by preparing in advance to avoid situations that might encourage them. Such proactive preparation involves arranging classrooms appropriately, posting classroom rewards and consequences, and fostering a positive, structured environment (Wong & Wong, 1998; Carpenter & McKee-Higgins, 1996).

For some reason, when it comes to their students' behavior, teachers throw out everything they ever knew about teaching. But the bottom line is, appropriate behavior should be taught. To do so, teachers must model proper behavior, assess students' current behavior, and create plans for improved behavior. When a teacher asks a student, "What is 4 + 4?" and the student's answer is "9," the teacher would never respond, "Excuse me! Do you think I am playing? You should go to the principal's office right now for what you just said. I'm going to write your name on the board." No. Instead, the teacher teaches that student the correct answer and shows him or her why the original answer was wrong. The teacher helps the student to

complete the problem correctly, and he helps the parents practice completing the problem with the student at home. This is the first step to being proactive.

The guidebook *PRAISE: Effectively Guiding Student Behavior* further discusses how the proactive teacher understands the balance between being well-liked and well-respected. A proactive teacher needs to be well-liked by being fun and positive and well-respected by being structured, consistent and organized (Emmer et al, 2003). A positive teacher is creative and engaging and also allows all children a chance to experience success.

Reinforcements

Reinforcements (the "R" in PRAISE) must be used by the teacher to maintain discipline. As teachers use reinforcements such as grades in teaching academic concepts, so too can they use reinforcements in teaching students to manage their behavior (Maag, 2001). These reinforcements can be positive as well as negative. The saying, "Spare the rod, spoil the child," applies here. The "R" in PRAISE could be seen as the "rod" of the Good Shepherd, as discussed in the previous section. The shepherd did not use his rod only to steer the sheep in the right direction by striking the sheep; the hook was also used to gently guide the sheep. The shepherd also employs many other techniques for guiding his sheep in addition to the rod, such as knowing and providing for all of the sheep's needs as shown in Psalms 23.

The Difficult Student

The classroom management techniques discussed up to this point (being **P**roactive and using **R**einforcements) most teachers already know and use, but the importance of these steps cannot be minimized because they are the foundation of any effective behavior management plan. Most students respond well to them, but all too often, these wonderful attempts do not

address the student with behavior problems. The following steps for handling chronic classroom disruptions build on the first two techniques and principles.

Assess

The first two techniques, being proactive and using reinforcements are techniques that can be used for the general classroom. However, to determine how to handle a behavioral challenge in a particular student a teach needs to **A**ssess (the "A" in PRAISE) the situation in which misbehavior occurs to determine the intent and a specific behavior plan. The first step in assessing the situation is to collect information about the behavior. Answering the following questions provides a place to start: What is the misbehavior? When is it happening? Who is present when the misbehavior takes place? What happened before it occurred? What happens after the misbehavior? To be helpful, the answers to these questions must be specific, not abstract. As previously mentioned, instead of labeling the attitude (a student is disrespectful), the teacher should name the specific behavior—for instance, the student is rolling his or her eyes. It is much easier to identify, assess, and address a specific behavior than to respond to the abstract emotional quality. There are many tools for assessing these behaviors, from simply counting the number of times a student exhibits a specific behavior in a certain time frame to creating an "A, B, C" chart for analyzing behavior: the **a**ntecedent of the behavior, the **b**ehavior, the **c**onsequence following the behavior (Walker & Shea, 2004). Biological and physiological factors should be considered as causes of behavior as well as issues in the home environment. However, these issues are outside what teachers can do in their classroom and should only be considered for referral purposes. A functional assessment can assist in determining these causes. This specific information helps to identify problem behavior/s and develop a plan of action.

Intent

Identifying the **I**ntent (the "I" in PRAISE) of the student's misbehavior is another important key in developing an intervention plan. Like crying toddlers or babies, students communicate through their behavior, and a student with chronic behavior problems is communicating a need. All too often the student does not know or understand what he or she is attempting to communicate. Students misbehave for many reasons, and it is vital that the teacher understand the reason for the action before reacting. The guidebook by Ackerman (2007) describes the following five reasons students misbehave in further detail: attention, power, revenge, display of inadequacy and testing of limits (Dreikurs, Grunwald, and Pepper, 1997). Each of these reasons for "acting out" requires a different response and behavior intervention plan from the educator.

Sincerity

It is also critical in dealing with any behavioral challenges that the teacher approaches the student with all **S**incerity (the "S" in PRAISE) by seeking what is best for that individual child. The teacher and administrator must demonstrate Christ's love and forgiveness. The student must always feel that the teacher wants what is best for him or her. All too often, teachers get too personally involved in a difficult situation and forget always to act in the student's best interest, or they become more concerned with their own immediate need of gaining control. In difficult situations, a teacher can find him or herself in "Win-Lose" battles in which the student is punished or in which the teacher feels wronged rather than "Win-Win" where both the student and teacher achieve their desired results. When both achieve their desired results, this also helps the teacher to become well-liked by the student. Any successful behavior management plan requires compassion to the needs and esteem of the student. As discussed at the beginning of this

article, in order to deal with these students in a sincere manner it must be believed that this is the mission of a Christian educator.

Empower

It is most important to **E**mpower (the "E" in PRAISE) the student to manage his or her own behavior. Galatians 5:22-23 states, "But the fruit of the spirit is…self-control…against such things there is no law." Ideally students should be able to manage their own behavior rather than be controlled by outside influences. This can be one of the teacher's greatest challenges. If a teacher asks a student with a behavior issue to act in way that seems normal to the teacher, he or she should remember that the student is learning to behave in a manner that to him or her is actually abnormal. This is the sinful nature and the constant human struggle. Working through these issues is a spiritual matter for these students. However, the school can assist students through this battle by teaching them through a behavior management plan that students are involved in creating. The goal of such a behavior management plan is for the student to learn how to demonstrate the appropriate behavior without assistance. This can be done by allowing the student to give his or her own reinforcements and by encouraging independent control of behavioral issues. The following is an example of the framework for a behavior plan (contract):

Behavioral Contract

If I _____ then I will be able to

_____. If I _____ then I will

need to _____.

_____ Teacher's Signature

_____ Student's Signature

_____ Administrator's Signature

_____ Parent's Signature

This contract should always be available and in view of the child, such as on his or her desk or in his or her assignment book. The teacher should remember that the contract must have a specific identified target and must be measurable and observable in order to receive the proper praise and consequences; for example, "If Johnny does not interrupt class for 20 minutes, he will be given a check mark. After 15 checks, Johnny may choose an assignment that he does not have to complete. If Johnny does not receive any checks during the class period, then Johnny will lose the privilege of playing video games at home for that evening."

Being **P**roactive, using **R**einforcements, **A**ssessing and analyzing the **I**ntent of misbehavior, being **S**incere, and **E**mpowering the students are keys to any successful behavior plan. The acronym **PRAISE** is a simple way to plan, organize, and evaluate successful behavior management.

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