



"Choice Theory" and Student Success

By William Glasser
From *Phi Delta Kappan*

JOHN is capable of good work in school. Yet, essentially, he chooses to do nothing in school that anyone would call educational. He knows giving up on school is a serious mistake, but he doesn't believe his school will give him a chance to correct it. And he is far from alone. There may be five million students aged 6 to 16 who come regularly to school but won't make the effort to become competent readers, writers, and problem solvers. Their chances of leading even minimally satisfying lives are over before age 17.

The cause of school failure is that almost no one knows how he or she functions psychologically. Almost all believe in stimulus/response (SR) psychology.

I am one of the leaders of a small group of people who believe SR is completely wrongheaded and totally destructive to the warm, supportive human relationships students need to succeed in school. The solution is to give up SR theory for *choice theory*. I have written two books on what my

staff and I try to do to implement choice theory in schools: *The Quality School* (1990) and *The Quality School Teacher* (1994).

Human relationship problems are the most difficult to solve but surprisingly easy to understand. They are all some variation of "I don't like the way you treat me, and, even though it may destroy my life, your life, or both, this is what I am going to do about it."

I used to call choice theory "control theory" because it teaches that the only person whose behavior we can control is our own. I find "choice theory" a better, more positive-sounding name.

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NOVEMBER 1997

Accepting that you can control only your own behavior is the most difficult lesson choice theory has to teach—so difficult that almost all people refuse to learn it. This is because the whole thrust of SR theory is that we do not control our own behavior; rather, it is a response to a stimulus outside ourselves. Thus, we answer a phone in response to a ring.

Choice theory says we answer a phone—and do anything else—because it is the most satisfying choice for us at the time. If we have something better to do, we let it ring. The ring is not a stimulus to do anything; it is merely *information*. In fact, all we can ever get from the outside world, which means all we can give one another, is information. But information, by itself, does not make us do anything. All that teachers can give students like John is information, but SR believers don't know this.

What they do "know" is that, if dissatisfied with someone, they should try to "stimulate" that person to change. They waste much time and energy trying to do this. When they discover, as they almost always do, how hard it is to change another person, they begin to blame the person, themselves, or someone else for the failure.

And from blaming, it is a very short step to punishing. No one takes this short step more frequently and more thoroughly than husbands, wives, and teachers. When teachers attempt to deal with students such as John, punishment—masquerading as "logical consequences"—rules the day in school.

Coercion in either of its two forms, reward or punishment, is the core of SR theory. Punishments are by far the more common, but both are destructive to relationships. The difference is that rewards are more subtly destructive and generally less offensive. Coercion ranges from passive behaviors of sulking and withdrawing to active behaviors of abuse and violence. The most common and, because it is so common, the most destructive of coercive behaviors is criticizing—and nagging and complaining are not far behind.

Four Needs

Choice theory teaches that we are all driven by four psychological needs embedded in our genes: the need to belong, the need for power, the need for freedom, and the need for fun. We can no more ignore these needs than we can ignore the food and shelter we must have for survival.

Satisfying one or more of these needs feels very good. In fact, the biological purpose of pleasure is to tell us a need is being satisfied. Pain tells us that what we are doing is not satisfying a need we very much want to satisfy. We suffer because we are unable to figure out how to satisfy these needs. If the pain of this failure continues, it is almost certain that in two years John will leave school.

Teachers need to learn and use the most important of all choice-theory concepts, the *quality world*. This small, very specific, personal world is the core of our lives because in it are the people, things, and beliefs we have discovered most satisfy our needs. ►

NOVEMBER 1997

Beginning at birth, as we find out what best satisfies our needs, we build this knowledge into the part of our memory that is our quality world and continue to build and adjust it throughout our lives. This world is best thought of as a group of pictures, stored in our brain, depicting with extreme precision the way we would like things to be—especially the way we want to be treated. The most important pictures are of people, including ourselves, because it is almost impossible to satisfy our needs without getting involved with other people.

Because We Care

We put people into our quality worlds because we care for them, and they care for us. We see them as people with whom we can satisfy our needs. John has long since taken pictures of most teachers—as well as a picture of himself doing competent schoolwork—out of his quality world. As soon as he did, no SR teacher could reach him. As much as they coerce, they cannot make him learn. This way of teaching is called “bossing.” Bosses use coercion freely to try to make people they boss do what they want.

This bossing must turn to “leading.” Leaders never coerce. We follow them because we believe they have our best interests at heart. In school, if John senses that particular teachers are now caring, listening, encouraging, and laughing, he will begin to consider putting them into his quality world.

Of course, John knows nothing about choice theory or a quality world. But he can be taught and, in a Quality

School, this is what we do. We have evidence to show that the more students know about why they are behaving as they do, the more effectively they will behave.

When SR teachers teach successfully, they succeed because their students have put them or the subject they teach (or both) into their quality worlds. If both, the students will be a joy to teach. They may also succeed with a student who does not particularly want to learn their subject, but who, like many students, is open to learning it if given a little attention.

John, however, is hard core. He is more than uninterested; he is disdainful, even disruptive at times. To get him interested will require a real show of interest from teachers. But they resent any suggestion they should give John what he needs. Why should they? He's 14. It's his job to show interest. They have a whole classroom full of students, and they haven't the time to give him special attention. Because of this resentment, all they can think of is punishment.

Punishing John gives him more reasons to keep the teacher and subject out of his quality world. Now he can blame the teacher; from his standpoint, his failure is no longer his fault. Thus, the low grades and threats of failure have exactly the opposite effect from the intended one. That is why teachers are so puzzled by students like John: They did the “right thing,” and, even though they can see John getting more and more turned off, they don't know what else to do.

My wife Carleen and I spent the 1994-95 school year introducing Qual-

NOVEMBER 1997

ity School concepts at Schwab Middle School, a seventh- and eighth-grade school that is part of the Cincinnati Public School System. (Carleen began training many staff members in choice theory during the second semester of 1993-94.) This school of 600 regularly attending students (750 enrolled) has at least 300 students like John, who come to school almost every day. With the help of the principal (named best principal in Ohio in 1996) and a very good staff, we turned this school around.

By the end of the year, most of the regularly attending students capable of passable schoolwork were doing it, some of it much better than passable. None of the students like John were doing it when we arrived. Discipline problems that had led to 1,500 suspensions in the previous year slowly came under control and ceased to be a significant concern by the end of the school year.

Special Program

By mid-February, after four months' preparation, we started a special program enrolling all 170 students who had failed at least one grade and regularly attended school. Most had failed more than one grade, and some, now close to 17, had failed four times. Teachers from the regular school staff volunteered for this program.

Our special program continued through summer school, by the end of which 147 of the 170 were promoted to high school. The predicted number of students who would go to high school from this group had been

near zero. Getting these students out of the "on-age" classes where they had been disruptive freed regular teachers to teach more effectively, and almost all the "on-age" students began to learn. "On-age" seventh-graders at Schwab had a 20 percent increase in math test scores.

We achieved this because we taught almost all teachers in the school enough choice theory to understand how students need to be treated to put us into their quality worlds. Using these concepts, teachers stopped almost all coercion—an approach radically different from the way most of these students had been treated since kindergarten. Asked why they were no longer disruptive and were beginning to work in school, they said, "You care about us." Sometimes they added, "And now you give us choices and work we like to do."

What did we do that they liked so much? With the district's permission, we threw out the regular curriculum and allowed students to work at their own pace. We assigned lessons that, when successfully completed, proved the students were ready for high school. The seven teachers in the special "Cambridge program"—spurred on by the challenge that this was their school and they could do anything they believed necessary—worked day and night for almost two months to devise these lessons, in which students had to demonstrate they could read, write, solve problems, and learn the basics of social studies and science.

We told the students that they could not fail but that it was up to them to

NOVEMBER 1997

do the work. We said that we would help them learn as much as we could, and teachers from the "on-age" classes volunteered their free periods to help. Some students began to help one another. The fear began to dissipate as staff saw the students begin to work.

Similar Capability

What we did was not so difficult that any school staff, with the principal's leadership, could not do it as well. Because we had so little time, Carleen and I were co-leaders with the principal. A little extra money (about \$20,000) from a state grant was spent to equip the room for the Cambridge Program with furniture, carpeting, and computers, but it was not more than any school could raise if it could promise the results we achieved.

These Quality-School ideas have also been put to work for several years in Huntington Woods Elementary School, in Wyoming, Michigan. This nearly 300-student K-5 school in a small middle-class town is the first to be designated a Quality School. There were very few Johns in this school to begin with, so the task was much easier than at Schwab. Nonetheless, the outcomes at Huntington Woods have been impressive. No extra money was spent by the district to achieve these results. The school did raise funds to pay for staff training.

I cite the Schwab and Huntington Woods schools because I worked in one and had much contact with the other. Both are using the ideas in my books. Huntington Woods has changed from an SR-driven system, Schwab has made a strong start to-

ward it, and over 200 other schools are now working with me to become Quality Schools.

So far, only Huntington Woods has evaluated itself and declared itself a Quality School. Even Schwab, as improved as it is, is far from being a Quality School. But, in terms of actual progress made from where we found it, what Schwab has achieved is proportionally greater than what Huntington Woods has achieved.

While Huntington Woods had the kind of support that would have made it a good school without changing the system, the staff wanted it to become a Quality School and set about changing the system from the outset. With the backing of the superintendent, staff were given an empty building and the opportunity to recruit new staff, all of whom were anxious to learn the choice theory needed to change the system.

The fact that Huntington Woods has a charismatic leader is certainly a plus, but it is her dedication to the ideas of choice theory that has led to the school's great success. With very high test scores, no discipline problems, and no need for special programs, Huntington Woods has gone far beyond what I believe the typical SR school could achieve. Many educators visiting the school have said it is "a very different kind of school."

Schwab today is also very different from the school it was—and all with almost no active parental support. The most parents at any meeting—even when we served food and told them to bring the whole family—was 20, and some were parents of the few students

who live in the middle-class neighborhood where the school is located. Almost all the Schwab students who are like John are bused in from low-income communities far from the school, making parents' participation more difficult.

At Schwab, an effort was made to teach all the teachers choice theory. Then Carleen and I reminded them continually to use the theory as they worked to improve the school. At Huntington Woods, not only were the teachers and principal taught choice theory in much more depth than at Schwab and over much more time than we had at Schwab, but all the students and many parents were also involved in learning this theory and beginning to use it in their lives.

Get Tough?

Unfortunately, most teachers have never taught in a school that uses choice theory. When they bring up their problems with students like John in the teachers' lounge, they get a lot of SR advice: "Get tough!" "Show him right away who's boss." "Don't let him get away with anything." "Call his mother, and demand she do something about his behavior." "Send him to the principal."

The SR system settles for educating only students who want to learn. Its credo says, "It's a tough world out there. If they don't make an effort, they have to suffer the consequences." Since many teachers are successful products of such a system, they support it. In doing so, they believe it right to give students low grades for failing to do what they ask and to

refuse to let them make up a low grade if they don't have a very good attitude—and sometimes even if they do.

Life is hard enough without the continuing harangues of the doomsayers. In a world that uses choice theory, people would be more optimistic.

There has been no punishment in the Huntington Woods School for years. There is no such thing as a low grade that cannot be improved. Every student has access to a teacher or another student if in need of personal attention. Some students will always do better than others, but all can do well. This is a Quality system, with emphasis on continual improvement, and there is no settling for good enough.

Unfortunately for them, many Schwab students who experience success in school for the first time will fail in high school. The SR system in use there will kill them off educationally. They didn't have enough time with us and were too fragile when we sent them on. However, if by some miracle, the high school pays attention to what we did at Schwab, many will succeed. There was some central-office support for our efforts, and there is some indication it will continue.

The Huntington Woods students are less fragile. They will have had a good enough start with choice theory so that, given the much stronger psychological and financial support of their parents, they will probably do well in middle school. Indeed, data from the first semester of 1995-96 confirm that they are doing very well. **ED**

NOVEMBER 1997