At my school they're called the Bs. After their ninth grade year, they are tracked into the non-college, terminal classes. And so they take English IIIB, English IIIIB, and English IVB. Along the way, many of them take night school courses to make up for the classes they've flunked in regular school; lots of them take drug classes instead of going to juvenile hall or paying huge fines.

Here is what William Glasser says in his Control Theory in the Classroom to people like me who teach the Bs:

Unless you have had your head in the sand, you cannot fail to agree that about half of the secondary students in your regular classes make no consistent effort to learn...It is also obvious that as much as you know that this serious situation exists, you seem powerless to change this frustrating situation...

Over the years I have become very fond of my Bs. They are truthful, painfully so; they are often funny (and yes, sullen); they are free from artifice; their greediness extends beyond grades to important things like pick-ups and Heavy Metal. And, for reasons unclear to me, I trust them. I trust them not to trash my car; I trust them to know which eye shadow looks best at night; I trust them because, evidence sometimes to the contrary, I believe they are good people. But Glasser is right: my Bs "make no consistent effort to learn" and so far I have been "powerless to change this frustrating situation."

Further, and this is no doubt one of the roots of my frustration, the responsibility for learning falls upon me. I have known for a long time that I work harder in my classes than any of my kids. And I learn more. It doesn't matter how much fun I
try to make “Fall of the House of Usher”; I am the one getting
deeper and deeper into the story; the kids are the ones having
the fun. Sometimes, they have fun watching me get off on
some weird psychoanalytic tack, something about how
Madeleine Usher is really Guilt. “Oh yeah?” they say. And
turn to more important business.

What to do? Dr. Glasser, talk to me.

...humans not only need 1) to survive and reproduce,
but also 2) to belong and love, 3) to gain power, 4) to
be free and 5) to have fun.

So what does this say about my Bs? My Bs do not drop out
of school. They do not want to take the GED or go to
continuation high. They get enough from regular school to
continue their attendance here. What that is, I’m not sure:
friends surely; more likely, a structure for lives that often are
frayed around the edges if not bombed out in the center.
School is for these kids a relatively safe place. But they hate
school and cut school and fail school, and if Dr. Glasser is
right, I believe that’s because, while school offers them
survival and belonging, at the same time it refuses them
power and freedom. I am part of that school; for 55 minutes
every day, I am school. What would happen if I turned over
my power to them? After 25 years of teaching, I decide to find out.

September rolls around (it always does), and I get scared.
There they are, all Bs and not yet friendly. How can I say
something completely off the wall like “Well, guys, I’m
turning the classroom over to you”?” I can’t, so I play it safe.
I get out E.A. Poe and we, excuse me, I learn a little more
about Madeleine and Roderick. The kids know where I am
coming from (center stage) and I know where they are (in the
lobby). All is going as expected. But not all is going well.

E.A. Poe under our, whoop, my belt once again, I decide to
go for it. This is what I have thought about for a year. This
is the beginning of my experiment. I am manipulating them,
I’ll admit it, into thinking about learning. I say, cooly,
casually, pretending like I don’t really care, “Let’s talk about
reading.” “What for?” “Well,” I say, “why should we read?”
“Oh, yeah?” This time the ‘yeah’ is different. This time, it
translates into “Hey, here’s something kind of interesting.” I
take a deep breath. We are on our way.

So we talk, just a little bit, and then we write what we think
are some answers to that question. Here’s what Shaari wrote:
“If you don’t know how to read it’s like you are blind. Except
it’s not your eyes-sight. It’s in your mind.” And Matt: “The
reason I read is because I don’t want to be embarrassed about
how I can’t.”

Most of the papers, somewhere in the midst of complaints
about being forced to read, hating to read, come to something
similar. I am awash in enthusiasm. “O.K., then let’s read.
Here is the list of books in our bookroom. Do you want to read
different books? All the same book? What?”

They look at me; at least, they look at me. Some are open-
mouthed; most eye me with suspicion. What is going on
here? Undeterred, I say, “Well, get into your writing groups
and decide.” (They had chosen their own writing groups in
September, their first sign, had they recognized it, that things
in this class might be different.) “So what are those books
about?” they want to know. A great question. I answer it.
They move into their groups, decide they want to read one
book together as a whole class (the Standard Operating
Procedure of English classes) and that it should be Ordinary
People.

Day two I put on the board: “Objective: to read Ordinary
People with student involvement and understanding. Chal-
lenge: to devise a plan by which this can be done. Task: to
come up with, in your group, a plan of attack. How much
should we read? Homework? What would you do in class?
What should the teacher do?”

Everybody gets into their groups and every group comes up
with a different plan of attack. (Do not despair, I say to
myself; they bought the Objective and Challenge.) So we put
all the plans on the board, and select the most common
elements of each. The Ideal Plan of Attack comes out this
way:

Getting people involved:

no discussions unless students want to
class meets in groups every couple of days to discuss chapters
read if they want to

Assignments:

10 chapter per week (10 pages a night) so we can finish by
Christmas
homework only if reading not done in class
one-half hour per day for reading, or every other day in class
Fridays, free read
vocabulary should come from the book

The Teacher will:

make out quizzes, tests
read whatever book she wants
not talk unless she is asked
show the movie at the end

In my mind's eye, a vast desert opens, peopled by students
wandering aimlessly about, some carrying books, most not,
one explaining to an adult shade, "Well, our teacher said to do
anything we want." And, even more depressing, "anything we
want" excludes the teacher: I am not wanted. Except yes, I am
still the keeper of the gate; I should be the examiner, maybe slip
the quizzes and tests (multiple choice, Scantron) under the
door, pick them up after class, and slide the results back under.
My feelings are hurt. But I won't let them know. You know
what happens to wounded animals in the jungle.

Instead, I say something like, "What about those class discus-
sions? And those quizzes and those vocabulary words?
Should I do them or should you?" By now, minds are churning,
eyes are glistening, I can almost hear the, Oh, man, I could
come out of this class with a fuckin A! "Yeah, I think we
could." Oh, and are they ever earnest. "Like we should handle
those things." "How?" "In our groups!" Yippee! they're doing it;
they're going to be the teacher!

Then I tell them, "This is my class, too, and I need some writing
from you so I can be a part of this whole thing." They are
surprised I am interested in being part of what they think is a
pretty shabby little operation, but obviously I am, especially
when I tell them, well finally confess, that my feelings were
hurt when they left me out of their Ideal Plan. So they let me
show them about reading logs and agree to do a couple. "For
now."

I am also genuinely puzzled as to how I am to know how well
small group discussions are going, seeing as how, according to
their plan, I'm hardly in the room. "Trust us," Shannon tells me.
"Oh, bull," says Russ. "You know she can't trust us." So,
they agree that I can watch their discussions. "For now."
"What about grades?" I ask. "Do you want any kind of evalua-
tion?" "Well, sure, we want grades! So give us points
when you watch us! And you should grade us on our vocabu-
larly quizzes and discussions too!" The A looms ever larger in
their heads. As for me, I'm just glad to be back in the room.

A week swims by; it is dreamy, that is to say, sometimes wild
and definitely weird: the kids read and write and talk about
Ordinary People in small groups. On Wednesday, Group One, having spent Tuesday in the library preparing, leads a whole class discussion; they throw M&Ms to those who answer their questions; they throw M&Ms at those who refuse to answer and call them assholes. Then, they grade the class on participation. I record those grades in my book.

Far away in a corner of the room, I write my critique of Group One’s efforts. They’ve done a good job: class participation is at an all-time high and their questions about the book show they have read well. I give them a B. (“You just can’t use that language in here.”)

On Friday, Group Two gives a vocabulary quiz, having listed the Important Words on the board earlier in the week. The quiz is a crossword puzzle. Almost everybody gets an A. I get a C because I didn’t study. Group Two gets a B because the quiz doesn’t include any writing. An argument ensues. I win. (“And the only reason you got a B is that yours is the first quiz.”)

For me, the major difference is that I’m not in the spotlight. I have spent an enormous amount of time, behind the scenes, constructing the schedule and displaying it for all to see; classtime I spend with my trusty clipboard, monitoring their efficiency during their small group discussions and evaluating their teaching. I write in my journal: “I feel funny. I feel like a manager, a bookkeeper, a foreman. I must not forget the book.” But I end my journal entry with “Oh, what a pleasure not to be pushed (by self) to cover material.”

Here’s the real difference: the kids are reading, they are writing, they are talking about the book. Maybe none of this is getting done as quickly or as intensively or as efficiently as it would if I were center stage. But no. I remember what Dave told me way back in October: “Face it, Mrs. Juska, nobody read ‘Fall of the House of Whatever’!” Now they’re proceeding, and in fact, not just in my wishful imagination. Whatever is happening in this classroom is really happening; it’s not pretend.

Friday, I get a petition: “Get rid of the logs. Get rid of the clipboard.” Signed, everybody.
What the hell. I do it. Week Two is chaos. They talk in their groups about who got kicked out of whose house, about the fight in the locker room, about getting drunk at Santa Cruz, about everything but the book. By Wednesday, I am ready to throw in the towel. This is ridiculous. Anything is better than this, even pretending. Then I remind myself: your instincts told you to trust these kids; don’t quit now. On Thursday, I once again mask myself in nonchalance and leaning casually against my desk, ask them how they think things are going. Things, they say, have not been going very well. They suggest that instead of the clipboard, they write to me at the end of each group discussion; they think it would be a good idea to tell what they talked about and how they’re getting along with the book, and maybe I could write back. Yes, I could. They ask me if I would once in a while read aloud from the book and would I lead a whole class discussion maybe a couple of times. Yes, I would. They say, they believe they should be held responsible for learning something and do I think their suggestions would help? I do.

In December, as they had planned, they finish the book, write about it once they have chosen the topics, and watch the film. “This is the first book I ever read,” says Darrin. “I think the movie was too hard on the mother,” says Kathy. “What’re we going to do next?” asks Bobby. God knows.

I look at my fifth period class. I look at them for real and all weekend wherever I go, whatever I do, I am seeing my Bs. I see Walkmans peeping out of athletic bags, ready for use should my vigilance weaken. I see makeup spilling out of purses. I see Mike, full of allergies or something, his head down on his desk with Jennifer behind him, twisting her feet onto his chair, leaning forward to breathe on his neck. I see Chuck, his boogie board balanced against the wall next to him, Matt drawing half-men, half-beasts for the record cover he wants to make. I see Lisa, her eyes vacant, unresponsive except when Bart makes obscene noises with his tongue. I see Darrin embrace (not even surreptitiously) Melissa.

What are we going to do next? What chance have I got? What chance has a book got? But wait, they read Ordinary People; they wrote about it; they talked about it. And, by golly, they liked it, not the book necessarily, but what had happened to the class. “This is my favorite class,” a few of them said. Not all of them, not most of them, but a few.

“We want to go on a field trip,” they tell me after Christmas break. What hath I wrought? But we do, and they agree to do an I-Search paper. They even agree to follow my instruction on how to write better sentences; they let me be center stage. “For now.” We end the year reading and talking about books and writing stories and poems. By June, we’re just about all in the orchestra.

What has not changed since the beginning of the year is their growing sense of power. I keep Glasser in mind whenever I feel like chickening out and going back to S.O.P. They like having some control. One afternoon I wheel out the overhead to show them some writing. Dave blurts out, “Put that thing away; whenever a teacher gets it out, I feel like I don’t have any control.” I put it away. I write on the board instead. Dave approves. I like their having control. I feel an enormous relief with the responsibility out there instead of down here, that is, right on top of my shoulders. What is being learned is being learned by them, not by me.

But I worry. I worry that the learning is not enough in quantity and in kind. I worry that they need sometimes to be coaxed, pushed into accepting the responsibility for what goes on in this room. I worry that once in a while they don’t seem to like each other now any better than they did in September. And I especially worry when they say, “Let’s go back to the old way. You do it. It’s easier.”

So I do. I try it for a couple of weeks in May, and we are all, every single one of us, miserable, bored, and disappointed in ourselves. We had given up and we knew it. The other way, the “New Way,” we had learned a lot. The Bs learned that, while power is at first a heady thing, it soon becomes hard work. But I think they learned, too, that once you’ve experienced power, second best is no longer good enough. And that maybe, just maybe, having power is worth the trouble.

And I? I of course learned more than anyone; some things never change. I learned that, with some guidance, kids will choose what’s good for them; I learned that believing in them will not result in mayhem. I learned that center stage belongs to everybody, that moving scenery in the wings can be rewarding, that selling tickets can be fun, and that sitting in the critic’s seat is a heavy responsibility. And I learned that if you have the patience and the trust and determination to put it all together, you get great theater.

So what do we do next season? Well, in September, I give Power to the Bs; and then I charm, urge, and finally insist that they accept the responsibility that goes along with power. If they do, we’re all home free.

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