Public opinion trends over the last five decades show that lack of discipline continues to be one of America’s top public educational concerns. This trend suggests that alternatives to the traditional model are urgently needed. In this traditional model of classroom management, based on behaviorism and still common in some areas, discipline is teacher-directed. Fifty years of research demonstrates that person-centered, pro-social classroom management may provide that alternative. Person-centered classrooms facilitate higher achievement, and have more positive learning environments with stronger teacher-student relationships than teacher-centered or traditional classrooms. There are four pro-social learner dynamics that a person-centered classroom management program emulates: (a) social-emotional emphasis, (b) school connectedness, (c) positive school and classroom climate, and (d) student self-discipline. This article shows how the theory and research of a person-centered learning environment can be practically applied to the classroom.

Do we want to raise compliant, obedient youth who have limited experiences with initiative and creativity, or would we rather raise our nation’s youth to be caring, self-disciplined, independent thinkers? Look inside today’s American classrooms and you will find many students still living in a behaviorist world: struggling to earn that next gold star that equals extra privileges or living in perpetual fear of that dreaded check next to their name, meaning a loss of privileges. In this traditional model of classroom management, based on behaviorism, discipline is teacher-directed. There are fixed rewards and consequences for student behavior.
Fear of predetermined consequences and desire to earn rewards are used to motivate students and keep them compliant and obedient.

Is this the most effective way to focus student attention on learning and reduce discipline problems? The American public doesn’t seem to think so. Nearly 40 years of public opinion polls show that lack of discipline in schools is consistently in the top three of public concerns for education (Gallup, 1969–1984; Rose & Gallup, 1998–2007). Further problematic, new U.S. zero tolerance policies have resulted in increased student discipline actions (Gregory & Weinstein, in press); hundreds of thousands of young people are being adjudicated (placed in court systems) for minor offenses (Freiberg & Reyes, in press; Reyes, 2006).

After decades of use, the behaviorist model has not caused significant changes in student behavior. Rather, it has limited the ability of the learner to become self-directed and self-disciplined, a necessary condition for the use of more complex instruction in teaching and learning (Cohen, 1994; Eiseman, 2005; Freiberg, 1999a; Freiberg, Huzinec, & Lamb, 2008; Freiberg & Lapointe, 2006). Clearly an alternative is needed—one that creates an equilibrium between the learners’ and the teacher’s needs.

A person-centered classroom creates a balance between the wants of the teacher (the W) and the efforts and needs of the students (the E), forming a collective classroom WE, including all persons in a classroom. A person-centered classroom is balanced between the needs of the teacher and the learner. Movement from teacher to person-centered is a gradual progression of building trust and developing shared responsibility for the management of the classroom. Person-centered characteristics are clearly observable in classrooms (see Table 1). Teachers develop four pro-social classroom management dimensions that foster person-centered classrooms: (a) social–emotional emphasis—teachers demonstrate caring for students’ social and emotional needs, and for who they are as people; (b) school connectedness—teachers ensure that students feel a strong sense of belonging to the school, their classroom, and their peers; (c) positive school and classroom climate—students feel safe in school, developing trust for their peers and their teacher; and (d) student self-discipline—students learn through responsible consequences and a shared respect and responsibility. These classroom outcomes reflect a process of change, not the flip of a switch.

Research supports a person-centered model. The most comprehensive research review of 119 person-centered and student-centered learning studies (Cornelius-White, 2007) spanned 56 years and found positive cognitive and affective learner outcomes in person-centered environments, including creativity/critical thinking, achievement (mathematics/verbal), student participation, student satisfaction and self-esteem, reduction in dropouts, increased motivation to learn, less disruptive behavior, and fewer absences.

**What Is Person-Centered Classroom Management?**

The term person-centered is from the field of counseling and psychology. Dr. Carl Rogers is credited with developing the concept, highlighted in his classic work *Client Centered Therapy* (Rogers, 1951). Rogers transitioned to schools with *Freedom to Learn* in 1969, a book that applied his person-centered principles into classroom environments. *Freedom to Learn* (third edition, 1994) was co-authored by Jerome Freiberg, also a contributor to the second edition. Freiberg has incorporated and expanded on Rogers’ work, bringing person-centeredness into the theory and practice of classroom management.

Is there discipline in a person-centered classroom? Ironically, there is much more. By sharing control, learners begin the process of becoming self-disciplined. Self-discipline is knowledge about yourself and the ability to determine the appropriate actions needed to grow and develop as a person, without someone monitoring you. In teacher-centered classrooms, the teacher is in control. Students wait for instructions, rarely taking initiative. A fourth grade inner-city teacher, known for her control reported, “I never realized how much energy and effort it takes to control
Table 1

Classroom Management in Teacher-Centered and Person-Centered Settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher-Centered Classrooms</th>
<th>Person-Centered Classrooms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher is the sole leader.</td>
<td>Leadership is shared.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management is a form of oversight.</td>
<td>Management is a form of guidance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher takes responsibility for all the paperwork and organization.</td>
<td>Students are facilitators for the operations of the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline comes from the teacher.</td>
<td>Discipline comes from the self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A few students are the teacher’s helpers.</td>
<td>All students have the opportunity to become an integral part of the management of the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher makes the rules and posts them for the students.</td>
<td>Rules are developed by the teacher and students in the form of a classroom constitution or compact.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequences are fixed for all students.</td>
<td>Consequences reflect individual differences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewards are mostly extrinsic.</td>
<td>Rewards are mostly intrinsic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are allowed limited responsibilities.</td>
<td>Students share in classroom responsibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few members of the community enter the classroom.</td>
<td>Partnerships are formed with business and community groups to enrich and broaden the learning opportunities for students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


the students. I leave school each day with a headache.”

In a student-centered classroom, the focus shifts to students, often neglecting what teachers require to function. A student-centered seventh-grade algebra teacher stated, “I was burning out from trying to do everything for the students. I realized it was not possible to do it alone. I began to enlist the students to form study groups, peer tutoring, and cooperative lessons. I had a more facilitative role—it had some balance.” Creating this balance of needs facilitates a person-centered classroom (see Table 1).

Why Do Kids Love School?

After extensive interviews, the answer to that question came in the form of four key understandings (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994), which mirror the four pro-social dimensions of person-centered classroom management. Both elementary and secondary students from low-income communities said they that loved school because:

1. they were trusted and respected—people cared about them (social-emotional emphasis);
2. they were a part of a family (school connectedness);
3. they felt their teachers were helpers, encouraging them to succeed and listening to their opinions and ideas (positive climate);
4. they had opportunities to be responsible, with freedom and choices, but not license to do whatever they wished (self-discipline).

The four dimensions are inherent to a person-centered instructional and management framework, where teachers and students share classroom responsibilities and build meaningful relationships. Person-centered classrooms foster student motivation through the four dimensions.

These findings are similar to those presented by Carole Ames’ (1992) TARGET Program, an intervention designed to enhance student motivation, in which students participate in decision-making, take on leadership roles, develop a sense of personal control and autonomy, work cooperatively, and receive supportive feedback. Each of the four person-centered dimensions are
discussed below, featuring classroom vignettes from both authors.

Social–Emotional Emphasis

Teaching is about building relationships—knowing your students, sharing ideas and all life events. In a time of test-driven schools, the need for relationships is greater. To be genuine in the classroom is difficult, but it is necessary. Some students don’t learn from people they don’t like (Cornelius-White, 2007). Building relationships with students can be crucial to their academic, social, and emotional success. The following illustrates this perspective.

Andrew’s former teachers warned me—he was “erratic, unpredictable, and borderline dangerous.” Worse, they warned, “he has little remorse for his actions.” Andrew was labeled “Emotionally Disturbed (ED).” His excitable eyes and smile greeted me the first day. But within weeks, Andrew’s first-day smile transformed into outbursts, glares, and bizarre behavior. Teased by peers, Andrew lashed out physically and landed himself in trouble. Unable to relate, Andrew withdrew into a lonely state, drawing disturbing illustrations during class.

I needed to build a relationship with Andrew, though he frightened me. We began to talk at recess, about cartoon art and cars—his passions. Slowly, we started to connect. I was no longer his disciplinarian; I was his mentor, friend, and teacher. He learned to make changes in his actions and his reactions to peers. Andrew began to trust me and sought me out to talk. He tried harder in academics and we celebrated his successes. By the end of the year, the child feared by many hugged me and said, “I don’t know how I’m going to make it without you next year.” I nearly cried. And I thought, me too, Andrew.

Person-centered teachers extend their roles to become encouragers, facilitators, and connectors of learning. Students are given opportunities to express their ideas privately or publicly (through weekly class meetings). To facilitate a person-centered classroom, teachers should place themselves in the students’ condition. Students often want to know how much you care long before they want to learn how much you know (Freiberg, 1994).

School Connectedness

Throwing back the beached starfish into the sea does make a difference for that one starfish, and the same is true for that one student. Students need to know that they have a personal connection with their teacher, principal, or another adult within the school. It is important that someone notices when they are absent. Inherent to the sense of belonging is the sense of importance—if a teacher notices a student is late and expresses concern, a clear message is sent: “My teacher cares about me enough to worry.” When class begins on time, that also sends a message: Learning is important here.

Unfortunately, paperwork and student disruptions exact a toll on the time needed for building relationships and creating connectedness. Students as tourists, rather than citizens, lose interest in or attachment to learning (McNeely, Nommaker, & Blum, 2002; Rice, Duck-Hee, Weaver, & Howell, 2008). Resnick et al. (1997) identified that, among adolescents, school connectedness was the only school-related variable that was protective for every health risk factor, including violence. Promoting school connectedness through a person-centered environment diminishes risk behaviors (McNeely et al., 2002).

Students want to belong. Shared leadership and increased student classroom responsibility facilitate this process. When teachers release responsibility to student managers for important classroom tasks, the outcomes are mutually beneficial: students feel empowered, while teachers have more time to teach. The following demonstrates this process.

Rosa, an often difficult child, was ecstatic about being hired for the highly coveted position: “Substitute Teacher Manager.” She would be the class liaison in my absence. A few weeks after her appointment, Rosa reported feeling unsatisfied with her new role. While I reiterated the importance of her position, she responded, “I mean . . . are you EVER going to be out!!?”
I had to be out the following week, and Rosa’s face lit up. “I FINALLY get to do my job!” she shrieked. “But, we’ll miss you, too.” Later, at Rosa’s request, we met to discuss job specifics. The next afternoon, Rosa’s report awaited me: the computer lab lesson was a total disaster due to technical difficulties, most kids completed their history assignment in class, and the substitute had sat four kids out for recess. It was evident that Rosa was the best choice for this job. She’d taken ownership—a side of her I had never seen before.

When students are given opportunities to be responsible, they become connected and invested in making teaching and learning work.

**Positive Classroom and School Climate**

We want to feel safe in school. The sense of *WE* is built and modeled as teachers and students determine shared norms and begin to establish trust in the classroom. In a person-centered environment, put-downs or disses are not tolerated; the social skills necessary to nurture a caring environment are taught through daily experiences. When students feel safe, they are more apt to demonstrate creativity, intellectual curiosity, and higher-level thinking (Cornelius-White, 2007). Freedom and choice motivate students to be active participants in the learning process. The following supports the need for a caring environment:

I was stunned by eighth grade students’ responses to an assignment “My Personal History” that I observed in an inner-city middle school. The students could write their history and give it privately to their teacher or choose to read it to their classmates. Noisy and unfocused students suddenly became attentive and silent as their peers read their histories. Many of their tragic stories were filled with male family members being killed or dying of diseases and the breaking up of families. When given a choice, students felt safe enough to share their stories.

Nurturing a positive climate enables students to take risks, build trust, and develop a strong sense of community.

**Creating Student Self-Discipline**

For students to achieve self-discipline, they have to be allowed to make mistakes and learn from them to grow socially and emotionally. Student self-discipline is built on responsible consequences. Fixed consequences (i.e., name on board and multiple checks, with disciplinary actions for each mark) often assign punishment for student behavior, without time for reflection or the taking of responsibility. Unlike fixed consequences, responsible consequences require students to reflect on the behavior, consider alternatives, and make written or verbal apologies (or undo what was done). This multistep process builds self-discipline. When confronted with similar situations in the future, students can make better decisions.

Freedom and choice build self-discipline, a necessary foundation for more complex instruction, including cooperative learning, learning centers, and independent projects. Students learn how to be responsible, cooperate, resolve conflicts, manage their own time, complete relevant social and/or academic contracts, and set goals for learning. Behaviorally, students have specific role responsibilities within the classroom. Collectively, they work together to make decisions that affect the entire group. In the following example, a shared classroom constitution is established.

“We the kids of Mrs. Parker’s homeroom class … in order to establish a more perfect classroom … do hereby establish this Constitution …” My fifth-graders have just decided on the wording for the first line of our class constitution, having abandoned “we the people” (too generic) and “we the students” (too boring). They’re invested in this. A discussion ensues: What do we value in this classroom; what rules do we need to keep us safe? Jesse shares: “No put downs!” Heads nod in agreement; Jesse’s on to something. After some discussion, the class settles on: “We have the right not to be put
down, and the responsibility not to put others down." These are OUR rules. Later, we'd sign our new constitution into effect.

Students who help make classroom decisions have ownership, building the foundation for self-discipline. Teaching is, above all, about relationships.

**Theory Into Practice: A Person-Centered Classroom Management Model**

Theory applied well becomes practice. The Consistency Management and Cooperative Discipline program (CMCD) is a person-centered classroom management model. It was developed by a middle- and high-school teacher, and has been researched by a teacher educator (Freiberg, 1999b). The CMCD program is currently being implemented in pre-kindergarten through high school settings in the U.S. and in England. Research findings report that CMCD schools have: increases in student achievement (Slavin & Lake, 2007), increases in teacher and student attendance, reduced office discipline referrals, and improved classroom and school learning environments (Eiseman, 2005; Freiberg, Connell, & Lorentz, 2001; Freiberg & Lapointe, 2006). CMCD allows teachers more time to teach—2.2 weeks to 5.5 additional weeks—without lengthening the school day or year (Opuni, 2006). Eiseman (2005) reported that the use of CMCD in urban elementary schools in two cities significantly built students’ sense of ownership, helped educators use data to guide instruction, use cooperative learning strategies, and helped students use comprehension strategies for learning (pp. 2, 12, 27). CMCD has two distinct components:

- **Consistency management** (CM) focuses on classroom and instructional organization and teacher planning. Teachers provide a flexible, but predictable learning environment, enabling students to feel comfortable, cared for, and at liberty to take intellectual risks. Assignments, objectives for the lesson, and the homework are listed on the board daily or on the teacher’s blog. Questions are asked to individuals by pulling students’ sticks from a cup, or using a random generator on the computer, projected on a white board. A countdown poster near the door charts projects and long-term assignments. Overall, the teacher’s role within consistency management is to fashion a support system that creates a fair, consistent instructional process where students are active participants, not passive observers.

- **Cooperative discipline** (CD) expands the leadership roles and responsibilities of instructional management from solely the teacher’s to shared responsibility between students and teacher. CMCD provides all students the opportunity to become leaders in the classroom. Students know what to do when the teacher is not present and understand how to effectively solve disputes, prevent problems, and work in groups. New job responsibilities (CMCD student managers) are established for some fifty tasks that teachers usually complete themselves; students apply for classroom jobs through applications and interviews. Through opportunities to take ownership, students learn to trust and be trusted. Linked together, the CMCD program takes the philosophy of person-centered learning and successfully applies it to enhance classroom practice.

**Conclusions**

Education is a complicated, human endeavor. Person-centered classrooms and their management approaches allow teachers and students to see one another as people. Students take on responsibilities and have responsible freedom and choice within the classroom. Teachers establish caring interpersonal relationships with students. The climate is warm and productive in a person-centered classroom, where students feel safe to express their ideas/opinions and make mistakes. Teachers help students to develop socially, emotionally, and academically, using responsible consequences with the goal of self-discipline. Students are connected. Changing a teacher’s perspective from “I am in control” to “We are
in control” is not always easy, but our teaching experiences and the decades of person-centered research shows significant benefits to teachers and students—all persons in the classroom.

References


