BOOK REVIEWS

The essential 55: An award winning educator's rules for discovering the successful student in every child

Clark, R. (2003). New York: Hyperion.

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This delightful book is a New York Times Bestseller and it is easy to see why the author was awarded the Disney Teacher of the Year Award in 2001. The author's background provides a hint of the contents of this enjoyable paperback. Born in rural North Carolina, Ron Clark grew up in an extended family that included his grandmother. He writes:

> She, along with my parents, gave me a true southern upbringing, which included respect, manners, and an appreciation of others. In addition to these ideals, I was shown how to enjoy life, take advantage of opportunities, and live every moment to the fullest.

Funds were scarce so following high school Ron accepted a teaching scholarship. However, despite his teaching qualifications, Ron was determined not to be a teacher as he preferred a life of travel and adventure—anything but work! Ron's mother had a different perspective and 'strongly' persuaded him to visit a local school with a particularly difficult 5th grade in need of a teacher. To his surprise it was love at first sight—he hasn't looked back!

Ron writes in an interesting and fast-paced style. This book is a practical guide for teachers everywhere. As Ron says:

> Once I became a teacher, it became evident to me that many children aren't exposed to the type of guidance and opportunities that I had when I was growing up.

The essential 55 are Ron Clark's personal guide to how life should be lived and appreciated. While the focus of these fifty-five rules is school and student related, it is broadly applicable to everyone. Guidance about successful relationships, courtesy, respect, honesty, unselfishness, leadership and kindness contribute to a world view that is positive and responsive. It is a great sourcebook about having high standards, aiming for excellence and making education relevant and exciting. The Essential 55 probably should be compulsory reading for all those entering parliament!

The essential 55 rules begin with:

> When responding to any adult, you must answer by saying "Yes ma'am" or "No sir." Just nodding your head or saying any other form of yes or no is not acceptable. (Rule 1)

"Obvious!" you say? Yes, of course, but how often is this rule actually articulated in classrooms, particularly within the middle school years?

Rule 42:

> When we return from a trip, you will shake my hand as well as the hand of every chaperone. You will thank us for taking the time to take you on the trip, and you will let us know that you appreciate having the opportunity to go. I am not concerned with being thanked: I am concerned with teaching you that it is appropriate to show appreciation when someone has gone out of his or her way to help you.

Yes, the 55 rules are commonsense and basic, but, if consistently applied, they have the capacity to transform school communities. The Essential 55 are timely reminders of the way teachers can raise classroom morale, school tone and levels of enjoyment in learning together. Some teachers who have adopted *The essential 55* introduce and practice a new rule each week.

For each of *The essential 55* rules, Ron explains the rationale, how he introduces it in the classroom, how it is applied and the benefits that follow. Along the way, he adds humorous anecdotes he has experienced during the journey. The book is not overtly Christian, but its underlying philosophy certainly is.

Ron Clark now inspires teachers, parent-teacher associations and school boards across the United States; his final words say it all:

> If this book has done nothing else, I hope it has inspired you to make more of a difference in the lives of children. Guide them as they grow, show them in a every way possible that they are cared for, and make special moments for them that will add magic to their lives, motivate them to make a difference in the lives of others, and, most important, teach them to love life.

Well worth the purchase! TEACH

Soul shapers: A better plan for parents and educators

Roy, J. (2005). Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association.

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After years of supervising detentions, processing suspensions and organising after school work for students, I have come to the realisation that these general methods of behaviour modification rarely have any long term effect. The same offenders turned up on a regular basis to spend 'quality' time with me. This book helps us understand why such methods of behaviour modification have not been very successful.

Soul Shapers, by Jim Roy, is a book for all teachers. It provides insight into and case studies of student learning and management as it examines what three sources, William Glasser, Ellen White[1] and the Bible say about the relational aspects of dealing with school children.

Intriguing aspects of Roy's model

Choice theory—Roy uses Glasser's theory to propose that all behaviour is chosen. We have direct control over our thoughts and actions but only partial control over our feelings and physiology. It is like the four tyres of a front wheel drive vehicle. The front two tyres are the ones we control—thoughts and actions, whilst the back two tyres, feelings and physiology, are kept in line by the fact they are trailing tyres. Hence, people need to learn to control their thoughts and actions as this will enable them to make positive choices that reflect an understanding of the impact of those choices. White is used to support this view: "Right thinking lies at the foundation of right action" (White, 1923, 248). Jesus' ministry, which revolved around choice, is also used to strengthen this position.

We need to carefully examine our methods of behaviour management with the aim of developing students who can internalise the choice-making process.

In view of the fact that we teach a generation that largely lacks internal values, how do we achieve this internalisation of choices? Roy suggests teachers need to make constant efforts to fit the work to the students; facilitate a creative, non-coercive, non-adversarial environment; show students how to self assess; model how work is to be done; and listen to student input.

Leverage (coercion)—As a secondary teacher, I have often used recess or lunchtime as leverage to get work completed in class. Conversely, I also used rewards like stickers or stamps to leverage work output. Roy advises that these techniques do not guarantee the best work from students and that they damage relationships.

After reading this book, coercion feels like a dirty word. Roy suggests that if you have to use leverage to get students to complete work, you probably need to examine what you are teaching and how you are teaching it. "True education is not forcing the instruction on an unready and unreceptive mind. The mental powers must be awakened…[then]...the instruction given impresses mind and heart" (White, 1952, 41).

Assessment—Driving students to complete assignments to obtain grades is, in itself, counter productive to true learning. Roy suggests that our learning should be in response to a God-given, innate sense of wonder and curiosity rather than the need to succeed.

Difficulties with Roy's model

Psychology—Choice theory relies on an understanding of human behaviour and the ability to bring students to the point of realisation and self-awareness. Many teachers do not understand the psychology behind choice theory or have the necessary counselling skills to implement it effectively.

Time—Choice theory relies heavily on building relationships with students. However, numerous issues have eroded the time teachers have available for developing relationships with students.

Although I was challenged and stimulated as I engaged in Roy's discussion, he left me with more questions than answers, but that was the author's intention. This book would be an excellent springboard for provoking debate regarding development of a sound plan for soul shaping in the new millennium. TEACH

Endnote

[1] Ellen White (1827-1915) was a woman of remarkable spiritual gifts. She wrote numerous articles and books on topics such as religion, education, social relationships, evangelism, prophecy, and nutrition. Her writings on education have had a significant impact on the worldwide Adventist Education system.

References

White, E. G. (1923). Fundamentals of Christian education. Nashville: Southern Publishing Association.
White, E. G. (1952). Education. Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association.