

Book Review: Who are the Troublemakers?

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Abstract: Reading Carla Shalaby's *Troublemakers* made me question how I viewed that "one student" who causes trouble in my classroom. Shalaby's "loving way" encouraged me to look beyond behavior, reconsider my classroom rules, and learn more about my students' lives. After working to build a relationship with that "one student," I adjusted my grading, assignments, and assessments to better meet their needs. These changes helped them move from failing to passing and transformed how I manage my classroom. This reflection argues that building relationships and allowing flexibility can give every student, including our "troublemakers," tools and freedom they need to succeed.

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Shalaby, C. (2017). *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom from Young Children at School*. The New Press.

Every classroom I've ever visited and every teacher I've worked with has told me about that "one student" in their classroom. That "one student" who causes problems or makes trouble. I cannot tell you how many times *I* have even talked about that "one student" who makes me feel like ripping out my hair someday. This past year, I read Calra Shalaby's 2017 book, *Troublemakers*, written about that "one student".

In *Troublemakers*, Shalaby used a research method that focused on four students who were challenging, even for seasoned, expert teachers. To identify students for her research, she visited different schools and asked teachers, principals, and parents to identify the school's best teachers. Shalaby then asked those teachers to identify the students who they found most challenging. She then visited three different classrooms and observed four children at school and at home. Across these contexts, Shalaby asked,

"What is good here?" to identify the challenging students' strengths and potential.

While written about elementary-aged children, the lessons learned speak to teachers in any subject area, working with children of any age. Unlike many classroom management books, Shalaby does not give directions on how to manage these students or tips and tricks to help; she provides a way of looking at our students called "the loving way." Instead of consistently correcting behavior, this approach asks us to take a look at classroom rules to ensure they are reasonable, justified, and allow student freedom. Rather than solely relying on consequences, we would instead seek to understand the underlying cause of the behavior and meet students' needs. That "one student" is often labeled as a "troublemaker," but what if there is more to the story that we do not understand? Shalaby provides us with a new view on that "one student" in our classroom.

It was interesting to me to see students through the eyes of someone in the classroom

WHO ARE THE TROUBLEMAKERS

as an observer, rather than a teacher. She visited these students in the classroom and at home, which allowed her to get to know them as more than a student. She noticed that some of the students' behaviors at school were a reflection of how they were taught at home. At home we can be who we want. As adults we teach our kids to be unique, confident, creative, and enjoy life by taking risks, making mistakes, and having their own opinion. At home we do not stop our children from talking to each other, nor do we ask them to sit properly in a seat at all times of the day. Instead, we encourage them to talk and learn how to communicate with others, and we tell them to get off their devices and go outside. "Go get some fresh air," as my mom would say. At school they are told not to speak unless in response to a question, to pay attention, and to be in their seat before the bell rings with materials ready. The uniqueness of each student is hidden behind strict behavior rules. We want our students to be creative, but only with a project or on a paper. We want them to discuss content with others, but then split up groups when they aren't always on task.

Troublemakers made me realize that in a classroom I have 20 different personalities, 20 different brains with different ideas. As teachers, we are taught to teach in multiple ways, as students learn using different methods. We have IEPs and 504 plans that accommodate our students. However, our rules are firm and unforgiving. I realized that in my classroom I often discourage students from being off task, talking to a friend, and moving around the classroom—restricting their freedom to be themselves. *Troublemakers* made me question why I do this. I want them to understand the material and stay on task, but at what point am I discouraging collaboration? In my classroom I use group activities, as we know that collaboration is beneficial for the students;

but I also give them prompts, which restrict what they are allowed to talk about. Reading *Troublemakers* made me reflect on how much room I actually give students to express themselves during an average class period.

Troublemakers also made me reflect on hidden rules in classrooms. In my classroom I have five rules: (1) Come to class prepared to learn with materials ready; (2) Follow directions the first time they are given; (3) No cursing or teasing; (4) No distractions such as grooming or electronics; and (5) Respect others, their voices, and their property. Yet I get onto students for not facing the front of the classroom, sharpening their pencil when I am talking, talking to others, and so on. How strict do we need to be with our students? Is that "one student" really a troublemaker? Or are our rules simply too strict? Reading *Troublemakers* helped me to notice that students are learning and learning is messy. When I give my students an assignment I want the assignment to be full of work, not just an answer. I want to see their process, and help them learn from mistakes. However, if I tell students to remain seated, is that discouraging learning that might happen off the paper? Even when they do not look or sound like the idealized student, my students are still learning. I encourage students to make mistakes, yet I discourage any mistakes regarding my five class rules.

As I read *Troublemakers*, I did not expect how much I would come to love the students in Shalaby's study. In particular, I was surprised by how sad I felt when the students' personalities and uniqueness were hidden by medicine prescribed to help them become more manageable at school. Although her book was written about elementary aged students, I could not help but think of my students in high school and the high expectations we have for them to behave as if

they are adults, with little understanding for the messiness of the learning process.

After reading *Troublemakers*, I pushed myself to learn more about that “one student” in my classroom. How well did I really know them? After looking through my classes, I chose a student that I always felt exhausted by when the class is over. The student who I was always correcting, and who never seemed to follow the rules. This is the student who seemed to never sit down, never turn in completed work, never stay on topic. I was able to get to know that student after a few weeks of working to gain their trust. Starting with little conversations and greetings, over time I learned much more than I had expected. This 14-year-old girl was learning that life is hard. In the morning, she walked to school where she was lectured about being tardy if she was not on time. Then she got to class where she was told she was not paying enough attention and needed to try harder to increase her grade. If she lashed out, she was lectured about being respectful. After the last period, she walked home where she made her own dinner and then babysat her 3-year-old cousin. Where is her free time to be a 14-year-old? When does she have time to do homework? When does she have time to be herself?

In my teacher preparation program, I was told each day is a new day, a new opportunity to engage with our students. However, I have the privilege to go home, where I have my own food, and if I do not feel like cooking, I can eat out. Then I get to relax or spend time with my husband before bed. I get to decompress and come back the next day with a new outlook. However, for my “one student” what does she get? Another lecture? Another tardy? Another night of babysitting? Where is her decompression time?

We are taught that building relationships with our students is key to helping them learn. I argue that the most important student to get to build a relationship with is your “troublemaker.” Doing this will help us to notice when students might just be having a bad day or recognize when we might be lecturing too much. This can prompt us to reevaluate what rules we need. Is my rule of having students sitting in their chairs before the bell rings necessary? I gain instruction time, but I lose the freedom students feel in the classroom. Then the question came to me, is that “one student” really “making trouble”?

After learning more about my “one student”, I have adjusted my teaching. Knowing the responsibility she has at home, I no longer get frustrated with her for having a bad day multiple days in a row. Instead, I greet her each day, happy to see her. I give her copies of my notes when she’s absent or too tired to take notes, knowing that there is a possibility she had no sleep the night before from babysitting. I grade her homework based on if she is able to show understanding on the standard, not based on completion, because after all, if she’s demonstrating understanding, why force her to do busy work? On test day, I allow her to verbally walk me through the answers. She went from failing to passing my class, which is a huge achievement for both of us. Finding that “Goldilocks” style of rules in the classroom was difficult. However, allowing her to be creative and not being so strict on certain rules allowed her to feel more comfortable in my classroom. This in turn helped me build a good relationship with her, which then built the tools necessary for her to succeed in my class. This not only helped me with my “troublemakers”, but it helped me to transform my classroom management to make my classroom more accommodating for all students.

WHO ARE THE TROUBLEMAKERS

I encourage you to get a copy of *Troublemakers* and read it. *Troublemakers* not only made me question my teaching habits but made me reevaluate my interactions with students. Shalaby's perspective allowed me to see my students through a different light and adjust my teaching strategies to accommodate the needs of all. This included how I grade, my daily routine, classroom rules, and my classroom management. I now include more flexibility. I allow students to turn in assignments late without penalty, I give students time in class for their assignments rather than homework,

and I include more student-led lessons and discussions. I admit that at first it was scary to let students lead but allowing them to explore the content and discuss amongst themselves with optional prompts allowed my students more freedom. Being a teacher is more than just teaching content; it is building relationships. *Troublemakers* gave me the insight to build better relationships with all my students. This helped me to make my classroom an environment where all students—including that “one student”—are given the tools they need to succeed.