

It became a great source of entertainment for me several years ago to visit my wife's classroom and disrupt her teaching. Her classroom was filled with children just like me. Some had learning challenges, some behavioral disorders and some were simply square pegs. My wife taught special education.

One special day I was accompanied by a principal visiting from out of state. Although, it was my style to enter my wife's classroom and be somewhat obnoxious, I was never rude. I was always respectful to the students and enjoyed helping them with their assignments. On this particular day, her intermediate grade students were busily writing letters at their desks when we entered the classroom. One young man appeared deep in thought. I wandered into his line of sight and asked what he was thinking about. He reported to me that he was giving careful thought to his assignment before he wrote. His assignment that period was to write a complimentary letter. I asked him if he was good at giving compliments and he proudly declared that he was very good thanks to his teacher (my wife). I felt it proper to test his abilities. With my wife and the visiting principal observing this interaction I asked him if he would give me a compliment. He said he would. He put down his pencil, moved his paper off to the side and proceeded to look me over head-to-toe. After several minutes of deliberation and obvious serious thought, he proudly offered me his compliment. With a serious face and a complimentary tone, he said, "At least you're not bald." I love honesty.

Many of you have heard me tell the stories of my many exploits as an ADD student. At the time I wasn't considered ADD as we used different acronyms in the old days. To my teachers I was both trouble and troubled, to my classmates I was a great diversion to instruction. I was both entertaining and fearless. My teachers

would look in my direction and inform me that my behavior wasn't funny. I would turn to my classmates and **they** were laughing, I **was** funny. Fifty years later teachers have finally found me funny.

I have a theory as to why it took so long for teachers and administrators to find the humor in my behavior. Many teachers were themselves good students, they did their homework, they behaved well in class. They volunteered for classroom jobs, not to get out of work like I did, but because it was the responsible thing to do. They liked school so it was natural for them to return to school as teachers.

The smells, the sounds, the whole school experience could last a lifetime. How fulfilling it would be to be able to impart their knowledge to classrooms full of excited, attentive students. The first day of class that first year is something special, surrounded by professionals who are like-minded, dedicated, and role models. Figuring out how to put the desks, looking over the class list, learning where the copy machine and staff restrooms are, watching the clock, awaiting the arrival of the first group of students with both nervousness and genuine excitement.

Her students are in for a treat. She loved school and so will they; she greets them outside of the classroom with a welcoming smile. She recognizes faces of past classmates and even sees a few students who remind her of her. Shirts are pressed, hair is combed, and shoes are brand new. Boy is she lucky, boy are they lucky, she loves school and so will they. She is going to assume they are all gifted; that will help, they told her in her classroom management course.

She'll try desks in rows until she learns their names. Hmm, does she start with summer vacation stories or setting the structure? The kids look so well-behaved; why not start with sharing stories about summer. Plenty of time for establishing rules. She'll get to know their names and a bit about who they are through their stories.

Should she break the ice with her stories or let a student begin? The little girl in the front row with the new lunch box and the angelic smile is perfect, and so Cheryl is called on. She heads to the front of the class confidently and begins to share her stories about her family trip to Disneyland and the many books that she read as well as her new brother that her parents adopted from the orphanage. This little girl loves school, and why shouldn't she? Time to pick a boy but who? She scans her classroom and finds a chubby little boy at the back of the class, attempting to avoid eye contact. "Earl", she asks, "What about you?" "No thanks", he replied. With that, the class laughed. She tried again. "How about a few words about your summer?" "It was hot", he replied and the class laughed again. But the teacher wasn't laughing.

At first she appeared puzzled, eventually she became frustrated; frustration led to anger. Who was this "Earl" and how dare he disrupt my class? And so it began.

Lots of Earls exist in classrooms and some grow up to be teachers. Some will teach teachers, others will start Microsoft or develop the theory of relativity, some get even before they drop out by disrupting or destroying classrooms.

Can we as teachers influence the outcome for Earl? You bet. It starts with coming to grips with the understanding that some kids will never like school. That's OK. It continues with the acceptance that the essence of a kid is not how they act and finally figuring out how Earls see the world so we can better structure a successful learning environment for all the Earls and Cheryls in our classroom. This, of course, requires us to “look both ways.”

If our kids represent our future then we have a vested interest in their present. Their perception is their reality. How we react to our students who test us the most creates the overall atmosphere in our classroom. Our interactions with Earl are often mimicked by our Cheryls. If we become intolerant or impatient with our challenging students, they will react in kind. They have no choice.

Who are these kids and why do they do what they do? Shouldn't they all be tested and diagnosed? Isn't that why we have special ed?

Let's take a closer look at Earl. He doesn't come from a dysfunctional family. His parents are involved and supportive. His test scores indicate he's capable. His classrooms are all well structured and he only has master teachers on his schedule. Why then would he continue to act out? Why would he refuse to work? And why does he hate school so much? Perhaps he's just lazy, maybe he's bored. He might qualify for a diagnosis.

Is there anywhere that Earl shows success? Is there any activity or subject that seems to stimulate his interest? Why does he do what he does and perhaps more importantly, what can we do about it? If these characteristics fit any of your students and if you've asked the same questions, Earl will tell you that you just

don't get it. He would tell you that he is funny when his classmates laugh, you just don't get it. He'll tell you that he doesn't have to like school and he'll tell you that if you don't judge him for his actions, you may see what you need to see and hear what you need to hear to offer him the inspiration to achieve. If you're fair, reasonable, logical, and predictable, you're getting close.

Earl sees the box, he understands the box and he's decided to operate outside of the box. His intent is not to "get his teachers", he doesn't look forward to the negative attention, and he doesn't see himself as an outsider

With all of these contradictions and with few educational cookbooks to offer remedial recipes for Earl, what are we supposed to look for? What are we supposed to hear? They say you can best understand a man by walking in his shoes. Often, Earl refuses to wear shoes or the shoes he does wear are often on the wrong feet. Best I can figure, Earl's as confused about school and teachers as the school and teachers are confused about him. Is it possible to dialogue when neither party understands the language of the other?

Earl and his teachers share several common bonds, several similar needs and beliefs. Both Earl and his teachers want to feel physically and emotionally safe. Neither Earl nor his teachers go out of their way to get in each other's faces (although it seems that way to both) and both Earl and his teachers want the other to accept that their way is the way.

Recognizing common ground allows us to build a foundation for possible compromise and accommodation. While it is no doubt important to both Earl and

his teachers that neither lose face in the classroom, it requires more compromise by the teacher than Earl, but neither has to lose face.

In setting expectations for classroom behavior as well as academic performance, we have (in Make Your Day) given Earl and Cheryl ownership. Achievement is measured on individual effort and not on a comparative basis. I can assure you that Earl has a reasonable chance of "doing what's expected and doing the best he can" when his differences are applauded and not chastised. When his eccentricities are celebrated and not corrected.

Is this giving in to a defiant child? Might this technique backfire and open the door to possible anarchy in our classroom? Only if we let it. What it might do instead is teach Cheryl to be more tolerant of differences when she becomes a teacher. A structure is important to Earl but arbitrary constraints and exaggeration of the truth will set him off. He will buy that there is a reason to raise you hand while the teacher is talking. He knows that there are many reasons for not running in the hallway and he can accept them. And he knows that hurting the feelings of others is wrong because he lives it everyday.

His problem, however, may arise when we tell him that he must stay in from recess because his math was not completed. He'll take issue with the statement that he'll use geometry for the rest of his life and he may lose it when the project that he worked on all weekend is described as "juvenile and inferior."

Earl wants you to "get it." He wants to be able to understand you. He can't meet you halfway as he doesn't know fractions. Find out where he is and he'll find halfway with your help. He'll do that if you respect him for who he is because he'll

respect you for who you are; he has to. He'll never like school but he can only find his way to find himself with your help.

Funny thing is, when Earl grows up, his differences that brought him so much grief in school will be considered an asset in many jobs he might choose. And if he's really lucky, he can come back to the educational system as an adult and make it better for other Earls and by that time, teachers may even find him funny.

We instruct our kids to stop, look, and listen before crossing the street. We insist that they always look both ways. This advice is designed to keep them safe. The students in our classrooms often force us to adjust our academic presentations with unexpected or unwanted interruptions. In Make Your Day, we have the tools to reduce these occurrences and remove the interfering students. Most students experience steps at some point in their school careers. Some students appear to seek steps daily. A common complaint from both students and staff is that "steps" are not enough. The implication of that observation is that steps are not a significant deterrent. It's not coercive enough. The etiology of steps began with students developing a stop-gap measure that would eliminate disruptive behaviors in a humane fashion. It was never intended to represent a deterrent for future disruption or a therapeutic model for developing strategies that might change attitudes or behaviors.

The design of MYD accommodates the student who repeats steps. We've referred to this behavior as "Step Olympics" and these students as "frequent flyers". A contract for additional time on steps is offered to those students who

constantly disrupt the classroom. This approach removes a disruptive student for extended periods of time and allows the teacher to focus on instruction.

However, this method is utilized out of convenience to the flow of instruction and ignores what is of equal importance to the matter and that is why our student is choosing to repeat steps and what strategies might benefit the student who hasn't figured it out on their own.

Cheryls will “get it,” Earls may not. Left on their own to figure out how to avoid steps or perhaps the greater good of staying engaged with the class and the teacher in a more appropriate fashion is not likelihood. Our “repeaters” or “frequent flyers” are telling us something. If we evaluate their actions in the context of when they occur and how they occur, we gain great insight into Earl's world. If we stop passing judgment and look at the total picture and listen to Earl's explanation of his own behavior, we will have taken our own advice.

Earl will tell us when he offers recourse how his reality differs from ours. Earl will show us his level of understanding of his own behavior in the points he assigns to himself and Earl will demonstrate his willingness to accept feedback during concerns. Surfacely, it may be convenient to dismiss these students as disturbed or troubled but this does little to remediate the problem.

Student study teams, psychological testing, or intense counseling may be in order for some of our Earls but let me give you some examples of what these Earls might be thinking. I'm going to identify some terms that we as teachers and administrators have defined. However, I will give you the alternative definitions that our Earls would apply. I've added adult vocabulary to interpret their thoughts.



**Special education** – Smaller classes, weird classmates, square peg teachers

**Medication** – The best excuse for our behavior when we miss a dose

**IEPs** – A contract that makes teachers and parents feel proactive

**Pull-out Programs** – Square peg explanations of regular classroom work

**Time out** – Reducing the teacher's frustration with our behavior

**Token Economy** – M&M tax write offs

**Behavioral Contracts** – Taking something away when we're bad

**Advocates** – Knowledgeable, scary people who frighten teachers and administrators

**Behavioral Expectancies** – Significant challenges to our autonomy

**Boxing** – Getting paid to do what got us suspended

**Suspension** – Punishing our parents for our misbehavior

**Anti-social behavior** – None exist in our world

**Norm** – a character on Cheers

**Regular Education students** – students who don't get it

**Assistant Principal** – The only adult on campus that lets us call him by his first name

**Counselor** – The owner of the most comfortable furniture in the school

**Janitor** – Vocational Ed. Teacher

**Lunchroom** – Weapons Arsenal

**School Bus** – Bonus time

**Potential** – Still hoping to get tall enough to reach

**Parent conference** – a twenty minute meeting that costs us a week of grounding at home

**Younger siblings** – Instructed at birth to avoid our footsteps

**Graduating** – The school finally giving up

**Graduation ceremony** – Don't know, they wouldn't let us attend

**Marriage** – The discovery, that despite our eccentricities, someone can love us for who we are

A final story...

Olivia, a kindergarten student in Cave Creek, Arizona, did much to disprove Piaget's theory of development. When asked to assess her performance at the end of a class period, she was insistent on offering a low value of points. Although she was capable of earning 10 points for each period, her values of self-assessments were often less. The frustrated teacher reminded Olivia that she could earn 10 points and that the teacher believed that she indeed had earned all 10 points. When Olivia insisted on a lesser value, her teacher assumed that perhaps, developmentally this higher order functioning was beyond Olivia's maturity level. Before removing Olivia from the activity of self-assessment, the teacher asked Olivia why she insisted on lower values for her points. Olivia's response was, "I know that I can do better. I expect more from myself."

Nuff said.