



The (De)Merits of Discipline

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Adriana Kelly watched as math teacher Mitch Lester raced into the classroom, sweating and scowling, clutching an iced coffee in one hand and a half-zipped backpack in the other. “Sorry I’m late,” Mitch panted. “I had to cover Jack’s class during my prep period and I only just got the copy machine to stop jamming.”

Adriana, Perseverance Academy’s sixth grade science and history teacher, knew that copy machine all too well. “Don’t worry about it. The kids have been really good about their individual reading books, and I still have to clean up from lunch. They won’t mind waiting a couple more minutes to start Math Intervention.”

“Thanks,” Mitch whispered, still clearly flustered. “The administration is asking that we do an assessment today, and I know the kids aren’t going to be happy. I didn’t give them any notice that we were taking a test.”

Adriana responded with an encouraging smile: “I’m sorry to hear that! I’ll stick around until you’re ready. Take your time.”

The students continued reading silently, but out of the corner of her eye, Adriana saw one student squirming in her seat. She took a closer look and chuckled softly. It was Layla, a bright, sweet student who was known to speak out of turn from time to time. Layla struggled in math, but Adriana knew that she really enjoyed the math games on the computers that the class had been playing over the last few weeks. After a moment, Layla put her book down on the desk.

“Mr. Lester! What are we doing today?” she called out.

“Layla, please remember to raise your hand,” Mitch reminded her as he pulled his laptop out of his backpack. “Everyone else is reading right now. Please just wait until I can give the directions.”

“But why do we need directions?” Layla continued, unfazed. “I thought we were playing math games on the computers?”

By this point, the rest of the class had stopped paying attention to their books and were watching Mitch as he walked around the classroom, passing out exams.

“Layla, that’s a demerit. I need you to silently raise your hand. We’re pausing our games today because we need to take a short assessment,” Mitch explained.

An audible groan emanated throughout the classroom, followed by cries of “*What!*” “*Why do we have to?*” “*We just had an exam last week!*”

“What if we *don’t* do it, Mr. Lester?” Layla asked, her voice rising above the others.

“Look, Layla—if you choose not to do your exam, you can just sit there silently and get the zero,” Mitch snapped, frustrated. “Doesn’t matter to me. Given your grade right now, I think it would be a poor choice for you to sit there and do nothing, but I’m not the one who will have to repeat 6th grade. That’s another demerit.”

Adriana frowned, taken aback by Mitch's harsh tone. Layla's shoulders instantly slumped, and her head fell onto the desk. The rest of the class went silent and started working on the exams that had been passed out. Mitch sighed, shook his head, and walked to the desk at the front of the room, opening up his computer without saying another word.

Adriana wiped up one last spill and turned her attention to the students. All but Layla were bent over their exam papers, but Layla still sat with her head on the desk. Meanwhile, Mitch was staring at his laptop. Concerned about Layla, Adriana approached Mitch at the front of the room.

"Mr. L, can I pull Layla for a second?" she asked. "I want to make sure she's able to have some time to work on her exam."

"That would be great," Mitch sighed, lowering his voice to a whisper. "We've been working together after school on her homework all week, and I thought we were making some progress. I have no idea why she kept pushing me today. Honestly, I'm just trying to get through this day."

"This week has been really hard," Adriana whispered back. "I'll see if she responds to the check-in and then hopefully get her back in here quickly."

Adriana walked over to Layla and quietly tapped on her desk. Layla looked up at her with puffy eyes, tears streaming down her cheeks. Adriana motioned for Layla to follow her outside.

They sat on the steps outside of the classroom, and Adriana wrapped her arms around Layla.

"You seem really upset," Adriana started.

Layla whimpered, "He always does that. He's such a bully and snaps at us. He's just mean to all of us all the time. He gives so many demerits and detentions and sends kids out of class all the time *for no reason*. I mean, no one likes him. I'm not going back in that classroom. I don't want him to be my teacher anymore. Why can't Mr. Lester be more like *you*?!"

Adriana's heart sank. She knew Mitch hadn't intended for his comment to be cruel, but she couldn't help feeling that such a public dressing-down was inappropriate. At the same time, Adriana had lost her own temper before with students when she was tired and overwhelmed, though she had always apologized afterward. And she knew Mitch was under a lot of pressure to have students do well on the upcoming state assessments. Though she would have acted differently, she could see why he didn't follow up with Layla in the moment.

All that said, Adriana was concerned to hear what Layla had to say about Mitch. She knew he was strict, but she had not expected Layla to be quite so angry with him. In her own classes, Adriana had found that Layla was a much better learner and classroom citizen when she was given a little bit of wiggle room. However, Adriana knew her approach to classroom management was out of step with the approach encouraged by school leaders and practiced by her colleagues, including Mitch, a fact that clearly wasn't lost on Layla. Nevertheless, Adriana was convinced her way worked better, especially for students who needed some extra leeway.

In any case, even though Adriana was sympathetic to Layla's critiques— she shared some of them!—she felt she needed to be a team player. She couldn't just throw Mitch under the bus.

"Layla," Adriana said. "I'm sorry that happened. I can imagine it didn't feel good to be called out like that, but I don't think Mr. L meant to hurt you. I don't want your grade to suffer, and I'm worried about you losing time to learn, so why don't you take a little break out here, and then I'll come back to get you so that we can get started on your exam. How do you feel about that?"

“Okay,” Layla huffed. “But can you talk to him? He doesn’t just make comments like that to me. He says things like that to lots of students. *And if he does that again I am not going back into that classroom.*”

Adriana told her she would, flashing Layla a reassuring smile as she headed back into the classroom. After a minute had passed, Adriana came to check on Layla and found her ready to come back in. Adriana watched Layla start her exam, nodded to Mitch, and then went back to the teachers’ office.

At the office, Adriana sat down on the beat-up couch in the far corner, still trying to sort out how she felt. Adriana had been a 6th grade teacher at Perseverance Academy for five years. In that time, she had learned how crucial it was to develop strong relationships with her students, especially given how rigorous the Perseverance curriculum could be. She showed affection to her students daily, and she loved that kids would come and find her to talk to when they were feeling sad. She knew that her strong relationships with her students helped them learn from her. Adriana worried that Layla’s fractured relationship with Mitch threatened her ability to do well in his class, which could have ramifications across her academic career—especially for a subject like math where every year builds on the foundation laid in previous years.

At the same time, Adriana’s supervisor had already warned her that her alternative methods to classroom management were threatening the consistency the school wanted to provide to students. If Adriana continued her way of coaching student behavior, with plenty of reminders and neutral directions rather than demerits and detentions, her students would respond angrily to other teachers’ more formal and rigid style—other teachers like Mitch. *Might I have contributed to the bad relationship between Mitch and Layla?* She hated feeling like she was the cause of inconsistency within her team. If all the teachers used the same language and issued consequences for the same behaviors, students wouldn’t feel like one teacher was fairer than another.

Nevertheless, Adriana was concerned that Mitch’s style of discipline—the style at least implicitly supported by Perseverance Academy’s official policies—caused emotional harm to students like Layla. While structure was important, and students interrupting class needed to be redirected so that other students could learn, Adriana sometimes felt that other teachers ended up emphasizing structure too much, micromanaging behavior at the expense of greater student needs.

Although Adriana had promised Layla she would talk to Mitch, she worried about how to approach him, especially as he had been teaching for longer than she had. Although Mitch was new to Perseverance Academy, he’d previously taught for 7 years in a chaotic public school. She knew he had only been able to maintain some level of control in his former classroom through his strict demeanor, which happened to align with the standards for teachers at Perseverance Academy. In fact, the school’s own success surely rested in part on its “no excuses” approach to discipline. Perseverance had some of the highest standardized test scores in the district, and the administration continually assured teachers that their students performed well in large part due to the high academic and behavioral standards teachers set in the classroom.

Adriana slumped into the couch cushions, unsure of what to do next.

Just after the next bell rang, Mitch pushed open the teachers’ office door and collapsed at his desk with a sigh. “I’ve got five minutes before my next class, and I know I’ve got a granola bar in here somewhere,” he said, rifling through the top drawer. Emerging with the bar, he continued, “Hey, thanks for pulling Layla. She got right to work when she came back into the room. I just don’t understand why she always has to challenge me publicly. It drives me crazy.”

Adriana tried to smile. “I’m happy to help. I know how hard it is to lose a prep period.”

A couple of seconds passed, and Adriana followed up, “Have you had a chance to talk with Layla? It might be a good idea to check in—we’re all so busy, but I know she appreciates the attention.” Adriana laughed faintly, trying to ease some of the tension.

Mitch looked at the stack of papers on his desk. “If I had had the time, I would have, but I only have a few minutes before my next class.” He paused for a moment. “I know the grades comment was a bit much. I’ll try to check in with her before our next class, let her know that I was a bit too harsh. But she has to know that she can’t just derail my class like that.”

Adriana frowned. *Close, but not quite what I had in mind.*

Mitch continued, “There are so many students that need help, and she’s always interrupting instruction. I don’t like when she’s unhappy, but it’s not a bad thing when she’s in one of her moods and actually quiet for once. Then I can focus on the other kids who are falling behind.”

Just as Adriana was about to say something, the bell rang again, and Mitch ran off to his next class. Adriana felt frustrated and conflicted. She was certain the rest of the year would be rough if Mitch continued his current approach to handling Layla—both for him and for her! It was only February after all, and they still had four months together.

At the same time, she felt ambivalent about her own role in all of this—how many times had she received feedback that she needed to be more consistent in issuing consequences? More than she could count, and yet she still struggled to discipline young people for minor infractions she felt were not disruptive to other students’ learning. Given that Mitch’s approach was closer to what Perseverance Academy expected of its teachers, maybe it was enough that he acknowledged that he had been too harsh and promised to talk to Layla the next time she was in his class?

Or should she bring the issue up with Mitch again? She believed it was important for teachers to present a united front, and she worried about damaging their relationship by belaboring her point, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that she needed to do more to protect Layla.

Adriana also felt she had a bigger choice to make. Although her approach was out of line with the rest of the school, she wasn’t powerless. She could speak to Mitch again. She could even speak out more broadly and try to shift the school’s culture. While that would take time, it wasn’t impossible. Discipline was a hot topic nationally, and Perseverance had just hired a new Director of Equity and Inclusion who’d be starting soon. Maybe they would be an ally? Alternatively, she could change her own practices. After all, wasn’t it plausible that Layla acted out with Mitch because she had grown used to Adriana’s style? And, of course, she could jump ship. A number of other schools in the area had just posted jobs for the fall, and Adriana was confident she could land one of them if she wanted to.

What should she do? Speak up? Fall in line? Find a school with disciplinary practices she believed in? Adriana was torn, but she knew those postings wouldn’t be up forever...