

Discipline in a Multicultural Classroom: A case study

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Classroom discipline is the problem that student teachers express the greatest concern about in their practicum work in high schools. Poor classroom discipline can easily ruin the practicum experience of a student teacher regardless of teaching ability. Glasser (1992) and LeRiche (1992) have developed non-punitive systems of school discipline that teachers can use to develop positive behaviours in disruptive students.

This is a study of how a student teacher in an Australian high school developed a system to improve classroom discipline. Although the groups he dealt with are atypical of high school classes in Australia or elsewhere, the principles used are consistent with Glasser's and LeRiche's principles and should be applicable generally. The student teacher, in this case, interpreted these principles in order to adapt them to the needs of his classes. He foresaw serious control problems in the classes he had to teach and asked for advice about how best to deal with them. The following is an account of how the student teacher approached his pupils and developed an effective disciplinary system with them during a five week practicum. The data was collected essentially from two basic sources. Videotapes were used as one source and the student teacher also kept a detailed diary of his daily activities. From these two sources significant patterns of disruptive behaviour emerged that provided ample material for an analysis and evaluation of his interactive approach to managing disruptive behaviour. The student teacher is thus one of the authors.

Literature Review

Bernstein (1971) has provided a theoretical model for research into the problem of order in the classroom. He reasoned that the system for maintaining order in classrooms is closely linked to the approach to curriculum in a school. He suggested that the disciplinary system in a school with a traditionalist curriculum is capable of inflicting deep wounds on the majority of students. Traditional discipline takes the 'crime and punishment' view of maintaining order. The 'lay down the law and let the

punishment fit the crime' theme represents the traditionalist view well. This form of discipline complements the traditionalist curriculum and is consistent with it. Bernstein's views conflict with the Canter model of assertive discipline (Canter, 1976) which advocates removing the disruptive student from the classroom. Canter's model is insistent on meeting teachers' and students' rights in the classroom, curtailing self-defeating behaviour and insists on support from administrators and parents. The Canter model has been widely accepted by schools internationally.

Central to the Canter model are established consequences for misbehaviour, namely, periods of detention (time-out), telephoning the parent, meeting with the principal and suspension. Canter does not accept that punitive discipline causes psychological trauma to students (Charles, 1989). Critics of Canter complain of the system's harshness and militancy and believe that it excludes the opportunity for building values associated with responsible behaviour. Good discipline has little to do with punishment (Dreikurs, 1968). Punishment is physical pain, humiliation, isolation and revenge. It is a force imposed on students from an outside source.

it teaches what not to do, but fails to teach what to do. Teachers have long used a variety of undesirable discipline techniques to deal with disruptive behaviour. They threaten, humiliate and punish. The results are resentment, rebellion and hostility (Charles, 1989, 71).

LeRiche suggests that the discipline really needed in schools is self-discipline on the part of the learners with a humanistic form of discipline employed by the teacher. Teachers must also try to make their classes more interesting and enjoyable. Behaviour problems tend to diminish when students are busily engaged in constructive student-centred activities that they have negotiated with the teacher (LeRiche, 1998). He also suggests that teachers use rehabilitative tasks instead of punishing students. On the other hand, the routine tasks associated with the traditionalist curriculum tend to lead to low student commitment to the learning activity at hand which in turn leads to the four recognised forms of classroom disruption: delay, denial, interruption and distraction (Cohen, Intili and Robbins, 1979).

Glasser (1992) extended Dreikurs's ideas and his own in suggesting that schools need to meet basic student needs in order to produce good behaviour and high quality work. Glasser maintains that when the school curriculum is irrelevant to the outside world, student motivation is very low. He also contends that traditional schooling is designed to fail most students and that students who fail fall back on emotion to direct their behaviour. He says that everyone needs love, power, freedom, fun and survival. Everyone has a mental picture of life in which these five basic

needs are met. When students fail at school or suffer severe punishment, they think that their teachers do not care about them and try to make them do things they did not want to do. Glasser's views on student behaviour are broken down into a practical step-by-step model of therapy to help students choose acceptable behaviour. His reality therapy paradigm differs substantially from other models of discipline in several ways.

1. Disruptive students have to evaluate their behaviour—make rational choices.
2. Reality therapy excludes punishment.
3. Teacher and student develop a strategy for responsible behaviour and quality work.
4. The students' needs are met whenever possible.
5. The teacher follows up a plan or contract with the student.

There are a number of less current models for establishing classroom discipline. The Redl and Wattenberg (1959) model is based on an understanding of group dynamics. They maintained that group expectations strongly influence individual behaviour and individual behaviour also affects the group. Kounin's (1977) model of discipline depends on effective lesson management with a special focus on individual accountability, alerting, pacing and transitions. The neo-Skinnerian model uses reinforcement of positive behaviour as a means of behaviour modification (Skinner, 1971). Ginott (1971) advocates teacher usage of sane messages to address the circumstance rather than sending negative personal messages to students.

The School

St Martha's is a coeducational church related secondary school with an Intensive Language Centre that caters to the needs of refugees and immigrants to learn English. The school had a modular six day week, each day consisting of six 55 minute periods, some of which were doubled in length to 110 minutes. The ILC has two full time teachers, one substitute teacher and one English as a Second Language teacher outside the Centre who continues language instruction with pupils after they have moved from the ILC to regular classes with ongoing lessons in English. Intensive language learning is very demanding for both the teachers and pupils but less stressful activities such as videos and excursions made the afternoons less stressful.

The Pupils

The class consisted of 30 pupils, 19 in level 1 and 11 in level 2 with an age range of 12–28. The level 1 pupils were more proficient in English than the level 2 pupils but also exhibited more disruptive behaviour. This class had a

wide range of pupils from a great variety of cultures and nationalities. The range of abilities and motivation to learn English was also wide, from obsessive interest to indifference.

The Vietnamese were set apart from the others in some respects. Some were from small villages, others were only partially literate in Vietnamese and many were very disruptive. This was derived from the disruption of their lives as some were separated from their parents and the parents of others had been killed. They were obviously alienated, having come from a very different culture. They told stories about how they had been beaten in Vietnamese schools. Some of the pupils had come from refugee camps and their futures were very uncertain. Some of them were going into regular classes but if they arrived in Australia after age 15 or 16, their academic options were more limited. Some of these pupils would be going on into regular classes and even on to post secondary studies after grade 12. The ones who arrived in Australia at a younger age would be more likely to learn English well and go on to have the same chances as a native born Australian. There were five girls in the 21–22 year age category, two of whom were going on to study at a technical college but the others had limited academic ability and after leaving school would have limited educational options. Unfortunately for them, there was little chance of their undertaking further study after high school.

In level 1 there were 10 Vietnamese pupils, a Chinese speaking Malay girl, a boy from Chile, a boy from Indonesia and two Polish pupils, a boy and a girl. There were also three Black African pupils, a Croatian boy and a boy from El Salvador. In level 2 there were eleven pupils with an age range of 12–28 years of age. This was a very difficult group to teach but presented fewer disciplinary problems than the larger group. The oldest was a young Chinese man who was very easy to work with but the rest of the group was dominated by 6 Vietnamese teenagers, 2 girls and 4 boys, with a variety of behavioural problems. In addition, there was a boy from Honduras, a girl and boy from El Salvador, and another boy from Chile. Some had short attention spans and were very excitable and others were surly and disruptive. The teachers agonised about how to deal with them. In summary, both groups were very mixed culturally.

Levels 1 and 2 came together at times for certain lessons and it was a teacher's nightmare trying to keep order among these maladjusted, alienated pupils. The administrative organisation of the classes also created problems as some pupils left class during a lesson to join mainstream classes such as French, sport or drama. In double period classes some pupils joined the class midway through a lesson.

Staff

Margaret was the head of the ESL department, did all of the programming and had a heavy teaching load. She had a great sense of humour, was dynamic, well organised and very caring with the pupils who all seemed to love her dearly. She also had to organise all excursions and refugee week. She examined Royal Society of Arts (teaching English as a second language) pupils from Edith Cowan University, Asian teachers who came in to teach lessons and had to organise a student teacher as well. She was always busy doing extra things like learning Japanese. Whenever she was contacted at home in the evenings or on weekends, she was always busy doing something for the school. There is no doubt that she is a very good teacher who obviously loves her job.

The other teacher, Sheila, was also a very pleasant person who was caring with the pupils and gave the student teacher a lot of support. She was concerned about both the Christian ethos of the school and the pupils' academic development. The substitute teacher, Jane, was also pleasant and supportive of the student teacher. She appeared to be very stressed during classroom lessons with the pupils. These pupils provided plenty of stress for whomsoever was teaching them. The teachers in the ILC tried to give pupils a good deal of latitude in regard to their behaviour because of their disadvantaged backgrounds. These teachers were sensitive to the needs of the pupils and gave them every possible type of support.

Margaret was the supervising teacher for the student teacher but the other two teachers, Sheila and Jane also provided informal support for him.

Discipline Problems

During the first week of classes the student teacher observed that there were repetitive disruptions due in part to the short attention span of some of the pupils. He thought that it was going to be very difficult for him to maintain order because he was a male and the pupils were used to the nurturing women teachers. Students were talking out of turn, walking around, throwing projectiles and poking and prodding each other. The Ugandan girl in group one was, perhaps the most difficult problem in the class. It was very difficult to get her involved in the work as she was very resistant to the ESL curriculum, showing little interest in learning English. Her mother was called to the school for a conference because some pupils were threatening her with violence because of her constantly irritating behaviour (poking others with her ruler was the main objection). When told about this her mother slapped the girl several times which upset the teachers very much. The girl's father had been murdered in Africa a few months before and she was obviously still disturbed about that.

The student teacher decided that if he was going to have any chance of being successful in his teaching practicum, he needed to develop some sort of disciplinary framework or structure with the pupils that would enable him to deal with these disruptions. He did not want to spend time in class shouting for quiet and eventually getting it as the teachers did. The teachers also used the silent treatment sometimes until the class quietened down. The student teacher did not want to do these things and be worn down by the situation and end up hating the experience. He decided that some form of discipline or control was going to be essential.

He noticed that the seating arrangement in the classroom caused problems because the pupils' line of vision was directed toward each other and away from the teacher's presentation at the front. There were six groups of pupils' desks arranged together in sets of four with the two groups on each side of the classroom positioned at oblique angles to the front of the class. This arrangement gave the pupils very limited personal space in and around their desks as they were seated very close to one another.

Solutions

The student teacher was advised by an experienced teacher acquaintance to ask permission from his supervising teacher to change the seating to a more traditional arrangement, which he did. The teacher agreed and the pupils desks and chairs were arranged individually in straight rows with a wide aisle in the middle to allow room for the overhead projector. This arrangement gave the pupils more individual space and also allowed all of them to face the front of the classroom without turning around. They could still move their chairs into small groups when required. The student teacher was also advised to develop some classroom 'rules' (that were really norms) with the pupils and some rehabilitative tasks for those who broke the rules.

The student teacher then met with the pupils and suggested that they needed some class rules although they already had class rules written on the board and they agreed. He then asked them what these class rules should be. They suggested that the person speaking, whether teacher or pupil, should not be interrupted. They went on to agree to a set of general rules on acceptable and unacceptable classroom behaviour. He then asked them what they should do with the pupils who broke the rules. They worked out a system of two warnings about misbehaviour within a class period. A third violation would result in being sent to the 'penalty box'. The penalty box was to be a seat at the rear of the classroom where the misbehaving pupil had to sit and write answers to Glasser's four questions previously printed on a sheet of paper. If the pupil had insufficient writing skills in English, they were to tape their answers verbally in the best English possible. The questions were as follows:

1. Is my behaviour helping me? How and why or why not?
2. Is my behaviour disrupting other pupils? How and Why?
3. Do I need to change my behaviour? Why or why not?
4. What can I do to change my behaviour?

After the pupil finished writing answers to these questions, both pupil and teacher signed at the bottom of the sheet. In practice, the student teacher found it preferable to send pupils to the next room to complete the writing task. He has since decided that it would have been better to have kept offending pupils in a penalty box in the classroom because being sent out of the room could have been construed as a punishment.

He did not give warnings lightly for minor infringements, finding it preferable to use such things as body language until a pupil's behaviour became a significant problem. Then he wrote the pupil's name on the white board as a first warning. After that, he asked the class why the pupil had received the warning and then the class briefly discussed it and decided why. This system worked especially well with some of the troublesome Vietnamese pupils in that they asked to have their names removed from the board at the end of class. They were obviously concerned about it and probably felt ashamed at being singled out. Whenever any trouble started to break out the student teacher brought his disciplinary system into play with the two warnings and then the penalty box.

The student teacher reported that he felt more secure and the pupils knew exactly where they stood with him. This appeared to make them feel more secure as well. They continued to test him fully with other problems such as not completing homework assignments. He used other forms of control with these problems such as staying in with him during lunch hour to work on the homework assignments. He made sure that if he told them he was going to do something, he followed through with it. He found it painful to be hard on them because he had also been battered by teachers in British schools and was well aware of how teachers can damage pupils' self-image and self-esteem.

After the first 2 1/2 weeks of his practicum, the student teacher decided that he did not need this system any more and discontinued it. Within a very short time he began having problems with classroom management. He also found it frustrating that the pupils did not appreciate the work he had done to develop interesting learning activities for them. After he eliminated the penalty box and its warnings and tried to be less strict, he soon found himself shouting at the top of his voice, banging chalk on top of the desks, shushing and trying to control the class through all sorts of things that were time wasting and made him feel angry and frustrated.

During the last week of the practicum he returned to the penalty box system and was able to operate it successfully once again. Two boys were

disruptive enough to be sent into the penalty box and write answers to Glasser's questions. After class they had to bring their answers to him for discussion and they then worked out a strategy that would help them. He stressed to them that this was not a punishment but rather assistance in choosing more positive behaviour. The student teacher found this method very effective and thought it would be useful in future classes that he might teach.

He also avoided the use of routine tasks as a basis for pupil learning activities so that he would not have to act as an overseer. Instead he tried to develop stimulating, innovative learning activities that the pupils would find interesting. In addition, he adapted the activities to the ability levels of the pupils and allowed them to work together in small groups which helped to promote some positive social interaction. This approach provided a more complex form of classroom management than routine tasks and allowed a more intensive interaction between student teacher and pupils than the traditional model.

Conclusion

Although the student teacher in this case developed a disciplinary system based on his interpretation of Glasser's (1992) reality therapy, this behaviour is in agreement with a number of other writers on classroom discipline. Principal among these is LeRiche's (1992) rehabilitative tasks idea and Bernstein's (1971) assertion that traditionalist discipline in schools inflicts deep wounds on the majority of students. This student teacher interacted intensively with the entire group of students to establish norms and the penalties for breaking them. He also established standard rehabilitation contracts with the pupils in the form of writing answers to Glasser's four questions. His sensitivity to the needs of pupils in not wanting to injure them emotionally kept him on side with Bernstein.

His attempts to develop stimulating learning activities and then adapting them to the learning needs of individuals fit in well with Cohen, Intili and Robbins (1979) concept of a more complex form of instruction as a means of control. He also empowered the pupils by sharing power with them in allowing them to develop their own 'rules' for classroom behaviour and the penalties for violators. This behaviour is in keeping with Treslan's (1983) suggestion that pupils should share in the governance of their schools. The role of these pupils was not that of vulnerable, manipulated individuals with little control over their lives at school. Instead of attempting to use power to control the pupils, an approach that he saw as futile anyway, he developed himself as a legitimate authority through a leadership role in a democratic process. This student teacher used a combination of Mitchell and Spady's (1983) concepts of charismatic authority and expert authority

to establish himself in this classroom. In so doing, he also bridged the gap in social theory between symbolic interactionism and conflict theory (LeRiche, 1992) to forge a well balanced approach to classroom discipline.

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