

The Dilemmas of Discipline

Teachers' behaviors and beliefs contribute directly to student discipline problems; they can also solve those problems.

Sooner or later, every teacher confronts the dilemma of discipline—what to do about the unruly and indifferent student who doesn't want to learn and doesn't care whether others do either.

Discipline is not a simple concept. It is affected by factors beyond the control of teachers and schools, such as an indifferent community or heavy drug traffic, and also by factors stemming more directly from teachers' own beliefs, misconceptions, and shortcomings. In searching for the most immediate solution for the dilemma of discipline, it's worthwhile for teachers to examine first their own attitudes and behaviors. Following are a few considerations that can guide such a self-examination.

The personal belief systems of some teachers remain tacit and unexamined, only marginally useful for interpreting the teacher role. Personal belief systems are largely intuitive rather than intellectual; as such, they are unlikely to be subjected to scrutiny. Some personal belief systems serve reasonably well; others are seriously flawed and interfere with sound judgment and judicious behavior. "The most tyrannical of all our beliefs are those which are persistently unexamined—precisely because they appear so patently reasonable as to be mandated by common sense and impervious to question."¹

Consider the teacher who believes in reason and humaneness. That teacher's discipline-related behavior should

- Be educationally sound; that is, have its basis in accepted principles and the most recent research on discipline
- Have positive learning outcomes rather than compliance as the first priority
- Preserve the dignity and personal integrity of the student (focus on the act, not the actor) and the teacher

RICHARD KINDSVATTER

- Avoid aggravating the problem of an already troubled student
- Have no undesirable effects.

If this teacher should then threaten nonconforming students, berate them in a menacing tone, confront them and force a showdown, or use sarcasm or ridicule, the teacher is violating principles of humane discipline. It is a paradox that often teachers' sincerely expressed beliefs are not the beliefs that guide their behavior.

Further, a dilemma exists in the fact that the discipline measures described above are effective only in suppressing students' immediate misbehavior, not in changing the reasons for it. They are, in fact, detrimental to the classroom climate in the long run and actually contribute to the likelihood of more and worse student misbehavior.

Teachers may not accommodate sufficiently to the real needs, intents, and perceptions of modern students. Today's students are different from those of prior generations. They live in a society in which absolutes have given way to relativity; the family structure has steadily weakened; the use of drugs is endemic; crime and vandalism abound; the government has suffered severely in credibility; and schools are frequently criticized.

But regardless of the national climate and more sophisticated and alienated students, the schools themselves have not changed in their basic format. The teacher-dominated, information-delivery-oriented classroom still prevails,

Richard Kindsvatter is Associate Professor, Elementary and Secondary Education, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.

based on the assumption that teachers are the major source of worthwhile knowledge and the students' task is to absorb as much of it as possible. This assumption is not enough to engage today's students in the wholehearted pursuit of learning.

Students themselves don't really know what they want; they speak in vague generalities about relevance and practicality. It is the responsibility of educators to help them define their needs, yet educators have had only limited success in this fundamental task. As a result, many students lack faith in the educational system and perceive little that is worthwhile in the classroom. The stage is set for discipline problems. Teachers try to do better what they are already doing, but what is needed are new, creative approaches designed especially for modern students.

Motivation deserves more emphasis as a means of promoting learning and preventing misbehavior. Motivation and discipline are keys to the success of the teacher. Motivation, the broader of the two concepts, refers to student involvement in the learning activities of the classroom. Discipline refers to student conformity to acceptable behavior. They are related in the sense that a high level of motivation largely precludes disruptive behavior. Conversely, a low level of motivation produces a climate conducive to misbehavior. Discipline is the flip side of the motivation coin.

For the student, motivation is the internal drive toward a personal goal; it is the mainspring of learning. For the teacher, motivation requires arousing the student's desire to learn. The most effective teaching employs the most powerful motivation, which, in turn, relates to students' interests and social-psychological needs. Teachers should not assume that it is the students' responsibility to learn, that they should arrive in the classroom eager to learn and to com-

ply, or that it is the teacher's primary task to present the lesson in a clear, straightforward manner. For the sake of motivation, teachers must take as their point of departure students' actual perceptions, priorities, and inclinations.

Teachers naturally focus on the subject matter to be learned. However, subject matter may receive an inordinate proportion of the teacher's attention while motivation and discipline receive too little. A naive faith that motivation and discipline will take care of themselves almost surely will result in problems with student behavior and achievement.

Teachers' responses to student misbehavior are often intuitive or emotional rather than rational and objective. Teachers usually approach student misbehavior in two ways. New teachers especially attempt to win the favor of their students, in order to be liked and to avoid discipline problems. However, the opposite is likely to occur since playing the students' game makes the teacher vulnerable to student manipulation.

When inexperienced teachers realize they have lost the necessary level of control to teach effectively, they resort to intimidating students. Ultimately, an uncertain balance is reached in which the students sense how far they can go while teachers keep their guards up. An uneasy standoff then exists in the classroom. The occasional encroachment of the boundary by bold or troubled students is a continuing source of discomfort and possible confrontation, and a dilemma as teachers find that their intuitive behav-

iors do not answer the problems of student misbehavior.

Teachers do not fully consider the influence of indirect factors related to student behavior and teacher control. When educators consider how they maintain decorum in their classrooms, the practices that most readily come to mind are voice characteristics, teacher demeanor, appropriateness and clarity of the rules, consistency in applying them, and the modes of rewards and punishment. The advice given young teachers by experienced colleagues generally falls within these categories of direct control. However, new teachers often find that such advice does not have the desired effect.

What they may ultimately realize is that the effectiveness of any technique is determined as much by who applies it and the context within which it is applied as by the nature of the technique itself. Decorum in the classroom is abetted by the students' faith in the credibility and competence of the teacher and by the level of motivation in the classroom, as well as by the more obvious direct factors. With discipline, as with a gourmet sauce, all the ingredients must be present and all must be of high quality, even though some may become indistinguishable in the final mix. All the past experiences of a group of students contribute to their perceptions and attitudes and predispose the response they make to the teacher. Thus, for each teacher and each class, the conditions are unique.

Clearly, controlling students' behav-

ior is more than a matter of the moment, more than finding an expedient. The teacher needs to consider the extent to which various factors, direct and indirect, affect student decorum, and then to decide what short- and long-range measures should be taken.

Teachers have not developed a sufficiently comprehensive and useful concept of discipline. Discipline is often construed by teachers in terms of control and punishment. When behavior problems arise, teachers make threats designed to suppress the offensive behavior. Regardless of the specific words or actions, students understand the teacher's position to be, "I'm in charge here, and if you don't do as I say, I'll make life unpleasant for you."

While harsh techniques momentarily suppress misbehavior and may provide the teacher a sense of relief, they nevertheless violate accepted principles of learning; they have negative long-range effects; and they have no intrinsic educational value. Teachers who use these tactics model aggressive behavior for students and convince them that "might has the right." Meanwhile, teachers may confront a dilemma when they apply the nostrums traditionally recommended to cure misbehavior but find that the symptoms continue unabated.

Figurative models may help describe the interrelated elements of discipline and dispel the view that discipline is synonymous with control and punishment. Figure 1 presents one such model.² It incorporates three phases of discipline

Figure 1. A Model of Discipline.

Sources of Student Misbehavior	Phases of Discipline		
	Prevention (Creating optimum classroom conditions)	Control (Reestablishing order following the occurrence of misbehavior)	Behavior Adjustment (Eliminating disposition to misbehavior)
Casual or capricious actions	Establish fair and reasonable expectations	Use reminder, restraint, reproof	Enforce reasonable consequences
Routine Management Approaches			
Chronic emotional or adjustment problems	Communicate clearly the reasonable expectations	Be compassionate but be firm; ascertain the syndrome of misbehavior	Use reinforcement and extinction techniques; may require referral
Behavior Modification Approaches			
Students' negative attitudes toward the teacher or class	Create positive climate; consider students' perceptions, attitudes, expectations	Be firm, fair, and considerate; avoid anger and retaliation	Assess appropriateness of teaching methods; adjust instruction and management approaches
Classroom Climate Approaches			
Volatile intra-group conditions or interpersonal relations	Involve students in developing the expectations	Analyze the group dynamics; conduct a class meeting to address group problems	Guide class toward ownership of its internal problems
Group Dynamics Approaches			

along one axis, and four sources of misbehavior along the other. The 12 intersections pose particular implications regarding the aspect of discipline described at that point.

The chart depicts instances of student misbehavior that may have widely differing causes. Assuming one cause when in fact another is more directly the source will result in an inappropriate teacher response. Moreover, the teacher's approach to discipline should be planned and conducted in terms of three separate successive phases. The prevention phase suggests that the teacher—with the students' help to the extent possible—should establish clearly what level of order is expected in the classroom. The control phase poses teacher measures that are likely to abate the problem symptoms. The behavior adjustment phase involves deciding what means are appropriate to deal with the conditions and provide for long-range improvement.

Models don't solve problems; teachers do. A model is intended to aid understanding by clarifying relationships that may not be apparent, and by revealing promising implications. It serves as a sort of Rosetta stone to help interpret the jumbled and sketchy information available to teachers from observed symptoms. With clear understanding and direction, teachers have the means to deal with sources as well as symptoms and to help students understand their own behavior and its consequences.

A great many persons, including professionals and interested observers, pronounce the school scene too permissive and soft on students who misbehave. What is needed, they prescribe, is tougher "discipline," a real crackdown on the bad actors. If only it were that simple!

For too long educators have used prisons or the military as metaphors for schools. But teachers are not policemen or drill sergeants. As professionals, they must be committed to the science and methodology of their profession and order their behaviors accordingly. ■

¹Mary Ann Raywid, "The Democratic Classroom: Mistake or Misnomer?" *Theory Into Practice* (February 1976): 27.

²A similar although slightly less comprehensive chart is described in greater detail in Richard Kindsvatter, "A New View of the Dynamics of Discipline," *Phi Delta Kappan* (January 1978): 322-25.



What Teachers Can Do About Discipline

The discussion following each of the reasons for the dilemmas of discipline suggests what sort of responses teachers should make in dealing with students. But these responses are of a general nature, more specifically:

- Schools should identify and remove students who are incorrigible or who require an inordinate amount of educators' time and energy at the expense of the attention that better-behaved students deserve. Certainly educators try to encourage and aid students in behavior—and values—adjustment. But there are limits for accomplishing this within the school setting. Teachers have neither the training nor the time for dealing with extreme cases.
- Teachers should attend to preventive measures. Prevention especially promotes a positive classroom climate based on good communication and rapport, and clarifying behavior expectations with the students.
- Under no circumstances should teachers argue with students during class, or engage in confrontation. Under-reaction is by far preferable to hasty over-reaction.
- Teachers should move quickly to quell any disturbance. They need to have in mind a graduated list of responses to many types of misbehavior. The minimum level of intervention that is likely to suppress misbehavior should be used first, with the option of moving down the

list to stronger measures if necessary. Teacher responses can range from simple eye contact to removing the student from the classroom. Responses should be firm but not punitive.

- Teachers should decide whether further follow up to a problem is required. Minor misbehavior needs no further attention. More serious misbehavior, however, or undue persistence in minor misbehavior requires teacher follow up.

- Follow-up measures include: (1) conferring privately with the student; (2) calling parents to exchange pertinent information and arrange a two-pronged approach; (3) arranging a conference involving interested parties—the parents, counselor, psychologist, administrator; (4) referring the case for more specialized attention; and (5) recommending suspension (preferably in-school suspension).

Improving discipline can no longer be narrowly construed by educators as finding more effective ways of directly controlling—manipulating, really—student behavior. Enlightened approaches are based on helping students find reasons and means for responsible behavior. When educators become committed to that principle and work vigorously to apply it, schools will become more responsive to the students they serve.

Copyright © 1982 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.