

Keeping Discipline in the Classroom

IN THE PAST, KEEPING DISCIPLINE IN THE CLASSROOM WAS AS IMPORTANT AS TEACHING. Teachers were allowed to use corporal punishment, and some used it often. Of course, students didn't like it very much! British and American research done before 1960 shows that children don't like teachers who (among other things) are sarcastic and dominating, show favouritism, and punish students to keep discipline (Janowski 1995). However, that same research shows that teachers should not only be nice, patient, honest, and friendly but should also be able to keep order in class.

One of the main problems for every teacher, especially those just starting their careers, is being able to keep peace and order in class. We all have heard of well-meaning new teachers who wanted to be very friendly with their students but encountered chaos when students paid no attention to them. When this problem occurs, the teacher ends up wasting class time silencing students and calling for order, and sometimes doesn't realize what went wrong. Only afterward will that teacher realise he or she should have started by being strict with clearly defined rules and then later could have given students more independence.

For me and my colleagues, discipline in the classroom is very important. We all know that there is no single ideal way to address the issue, so I decided to collect and summarise information on the subject. In this article, I will try to define

discipline, then give some reasons why it is often difficult to keep discipline, and finally discuss some ideas for improving a bad situation in class.

Defining discipline

The word *discipline* is understood today to mean conforming to rules, to supervisors' orders, and to demands of the community or an institution. Even its derivation is inseparably connected with education; it comes from the Latin word *discipulus*, which means student. Latin *disciplina* refers to the way of treating students.

For the needs of pedagogy, Oko (1975, 296–97) speaks of “conscious discipline,” that is, obedience to rules and values that are unquestionably recognised by an individual or by society: “At school, conscious discipline occurs where there aren't any big discrepancies between the systems of values represented by teachers and students.” He goes on to say that the basis for introducing conscious discipline at school in the educational process is in treating children and youth as partners who are shown respect by others but also are given appropriate responsibilities.

Many of the assumptions accepted by teachers, including those about discipline, have not been confirmed in the actual classroom. We can still hear from some teachers that students learn only when they are quiet, silence being regarded as a sign of intensive learning. This is connected to another belief that the only one who can and should teach is the teacher. Problems with discipline in the classroom usually start from this type of belief by the teacher. Teachers usually begin to have problems with discipline when they can't motivate students or keep their concentration and attention, or when they don't understand students' reasons for misbehaving.

For me, discipline in the classroom is based on mutual respect of rights and duties of the teacher and students so that the aims of the lesson can be attained. Discipline includes creating and keeping rules based on reciprocal understanding and tolerance and requires establishing limits that must not be transgressed. Where is the line between good and bad behaviour? Probably there is no definition satisfactory to all.

According to McManus (1995), sometimes we hope that when we give a thing a name, we will get some power over it. It is impossible to

create a definition of discipline that would be both useful and acceptable to all teachers, not to mention useful and acceptable to parents and others outside the classroom. McManus goes on to say that school behaviour is too complicated to put it into a single definition.

Most contemporary educators and methodologists avoid definitions of the word *discipline* because of its pejorative tone and frequent associations with corporal punishment. In spite of the difficulty of finding a suitable definition, I hope that I have outlined enough of the topic to allow us to take a closer look at students' expectations about keeping order in the classroom.

Students' expectations about discipline

Even young children going to school for the first time have their own expectations of the institution of school and of the people working there. These expectations reflect the specific culture of the country. Also, teachers, even those with little classroom experience, have expectations of students and of themselves. Expectations and perceptions influence classroom interaction from the beginning.

Research done by Nash amongst 12-year-old children led to the conclusion that they see the teacher in six dimensions, based on their expectations and perceptions at school (cited in Janowski 1995). The dimensions are:

1. Keeps order vs. Can't keep order

Children think that keeping discipline is a teacher's basic duty, even more important than teaching. A teacher who is too soft arouses dislike, contempt, and disdain.

2. Teaches vs. Doesn't teach

To teach is to educate and give assignments, not to amuse with stories and jokes. According to young students, teaching consists of giving facts and other concrete data, not simply expressing opinions.

3. Explains difficult concepts vs. Doesn't explain well

For most students, it is the teacher who should make new and difficult material easier to understand. Incentives to do independent work can be perceived as not fulfilling a teacher's duty.

4. Interesting lessons vs. Boring lessons

This is a very important dimension for children, although they can't always articu-

late what interesting teaching is. Generally speaking, an interesting and engaging lesson provides learners with new knowledge and has a consistent plan without any unnecessary interruptions.

5. Fair vs. Unfair

For some students, a fair teacher is one who isn't too strict. For others, however, fairness is more complex. For example, punishment may be considered fair only under certain conditions, such as after the teacher's warnings and threats have been disregarded. Blaming students who are not responsible for the problem is clearly unfair. Teachers can and should be strict and determined in punishing, but the punishment has to be viable; for example, the teacher can't demand complete silence during an entire lesson.

6. Friendly vs. Unfriendly

Inexperienced teachers may consider this dimension more important than students actually do. For some students, friendliness of the teacher is optional, and other dimensions, such as fairness, are more important.

Whether it is due to students' expectations or a generation gap between students and teachers, students usually give themselves a rather passive role. They leave all the work of maintaining discipline to their teacher. For this reason, in the beginning, it is important for the teacher to be able to control the situation in class. Children expect the teacher to define the limits of behaviour and then consistently enforce the rules, while allowing the students to make their own decisions. This can make it difficult to introduce a democratic teaching style.

From my observations, it seems that often students themselves try to prevent a teacher from keeping order. Sometimes, in more or less conscious ways, students try to take over the lesson. It depends on the character, knowledge, and experience of the teacher whether the teacher will control the class or the class will control the teacher.

Students' games and strategies

Students may try to control the teacher and the lesson for different reasons, some of which they themselves might not understand. They use a variety of games and strategies, which they might not be able to explain. The aim of

many students is not really learning but getting the best possible marks at the least cost, or simply surviving, or staying unnoticed for as long as possible. These games and strategies, therefore, are not connected to learning.

Early games

Students misbehave for different purposes, one of which is to find out how much a teacher will allow or to test the teacher's limits. This tends to happen during the first few classes and can be the beginning of a bigger discipline problem later. These games often consist of showing off in front of other students and include joking, making comments against the teacher or to contradict the teacher's orders, asking unnecessarily for the teacher's help, and forming alliances with like-minded classmates. Other examples are asking silly questions, misleading the teacher, asking for information that requires complicated explanations, pretending that the teacher isn't present, talking back, displaying insolence openly, laughing or making loud noises, and making rude or mocking gestures. Most experienced teachers realize that this type of disruptive behaviour is usually temporary.

Long-term strategies

Other kinds of misbehaviour are not temporary, and these I call *strategies*. For the purpose of this article, I will consider these strategies as methods to achieve some reaction in the teacher and/or classmates, especially over a long period of time. A particular strategy may not be chosen intentionally or consciously for a specific aim. Also, these strategies for controlling behaviour or disrupting order may not be used consistently.

Komorowska (2002) presents a combination of strategies with possible causes and responses, three of which are summarized in the chart on the next page. The first one, achieving learning goals, is not usually a discipline problem unless the teacher's response is mistaken.

The strategy that is most important for us is the strategy of rebellion because this one causes the biggest problems. It is used by students who want to disturb the teacher in an ostentatious way. The only solution for rebellion is to first find the cause, which can be a difficult living situation at home, emotional problems, or the desire to be the center of attention. It is usually easier to draw someone's attention (classmates

or the teacher) by behaving badly than by behaving properly, which can take more time and effort.

Rebellious students are often confused with good students who show their academic talents over their weaker classmates in an equally ostentatious way. Rebellious children can easily be confused with overactive children with a disposition for kinaesthetic learning. So, the first step is to find out which students have real discipline problems. To avoid conflicts with rebellious students, teachers should avoid open tests of strength and alliances, praise them often for even small successes, emphasise their best qualities, and use their abilities for the good of the class (Komorowska 2002). This could mean asking for their help in a way that will give them authority and meaning in the eyes of their classmates, but not in competition with the teacher.

Methods of keeping discipline

I have successfully used three methods to maintain discipline: keeping students' attention, establishing clear rules, and, when necessary, explicitly addressing discipline problems.

Keeping students' attention

Keeping students engaged in the lesson is the basis for keeping order in the class. Here are several ways to do it:

1. Provide a clear structure for the lesson.

After greeting the students, begin by briefly stating an outline of the lesson. Separate parts of the lesson with expressions such as We have finished our work on.... and Now we can go on to.... Make clear conclusions. All of these steps can help focus learners' attention on the lesson.

2. Do many short activities instead of a few long ones.

Short exercises that change the task and work required of the students can help their concentration.

3. Use an unpredictable order when calling on students.

When learners know they are not going to have to answer, their minds wander. An element of uncertainty is necessary, so say the student's name after asking the question, not before. Avoid exercises with "chain" answering.

Establishing clear rules

Students must feel their autonomy and take part in creating rules so that they feel responsible for obeying them. To avoid future conflicts, it is necessary to create strict rules together at the beginning of the course, even in the first lesson. These rules should contain basic responsibilities such as:

Strategy	Students Who Use It	Mistaken Teacher Reaction	Suggestions for Improving Situation
Achieving learning goals	Good students who are motivated, interested in the subject, and pre-disposed to learning can become bored if the assignments are too easy, and then they become disruptive or inattentive.	Trying to show that the student doesn't deserve good marks, arrogance, or other responses that kill the student's potential and arouse feelings of injustice.	Establish a special programme with individual tasks. Separate evaluation of language skills and evaluation of effort put into completing assignments.
Seeking approval	Students who lack motivation but want to deserve/receive praise seek the approval of a significant person (the teacher). Two possible causes for this strategy are a desire for a feeling of safety and bad relations with peers.	Showing favouritism and treating these students as allies in disagreements with other students or the rest of the class.	Apply the same evaluation criteria for all students. Do not make unpedagogical alliances with some students against other students.
Withdrawal or hiding	Students with low motivation often aim to simply get through school without any difficulties, which requires resigned patience and obedience. These students seem passive and uninvolved in their learning, but, paradoxically, they make efforts to hide themselves and their opinions.	Asking only for volunteers and leaving weak or quiet students to themselves.	Involve the whole class, and use pair and small group work. Require measurable results of class work and homework so that copying is easy to discover.

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1. Grading scales and criteria.
2. Consequences of absences, tardiness, and missed assignments.
3. Rewards for extra work.
4. Consequences for disruptive behavior.

Teachers must apply the rules to everyone without showing favouritism. Rules should be concise and clear, and everyone should receive a copy (or the teacher can hang them in the classroom in a visible place).

Addressing discipline problems

Keeping order during the lesson usually requires avoiding unnecessary interruptions and changes in the lesson plan. Arguing with students, commenting on their behaviour, and any shouting means the troublemaking students have succeeded and the goals of the lesson have been lost. If the situation gets worse, students' aggression is likely to increase, and they receive the attention they desire.

Three effective ways of addressing discipline problems, in the order in which they should be used, are:

1. **Nonverbal approach**

When a student does something to disturb the class, the teacher should continue with the lesson while reacting calmly and non-verbally. This can be making eye contact with the disruptive student, standing near the student, making calming gestures, or all of these things simultaneously.

2. **Verbal approach**

Without interrupting the lesson, the teacher can try another set of techniques to stop or minimize disruptive behaviour. These include lowering his or her voice, inserting the student's name in a statement, and calling on the student to answer a question or to repeat the answer of another student. The teacher might also change the task and quickly organize a common activity.

It is very important to remember that the teacher should not attempt to prove that the offending student doesn't know something but should terminate the disruption without giving a public scolding. When these first two approaches fail, it is time to react verbally to the offensive behaviour. Unfortunately, too many teachers use this approach first.

3. **Reacting to the disruptive behaviour**

The teacher can make a short statement identifying the incorrect behaviour, a short expression of the wish for good behavior, or an announcement of a reward for good behaviour. It is worth remembering that a teacher who can't calm students in a skillful way can make the situation worse. Any comments the teacher makes should be short because they will also be considered interruptions by the students who are not misbehaving. Finally, in using these techniques, we must remember two things: we can criticise a student's behaviour, but we should not criticise the student; and our criticism should be constructive and polite.

Conclusion

On some occasions, all teachers have problems with keeping discipline. Some teachers have a natural gift for arousing respect from their students, while others must work very hard to get it. With or without this natural talent, a teacher has to learn a lot about sociology, psychology, and pedagogy and also learn a lot from his or her experience with students.

The problem of keeping discipline in the classroom is too widespread and complex to provide an ideal solution for all circumstances in an article of this length. In my opinion, too little is said and written about this critical aspect of teaching. I hope that these ideas and suggestions will help teachers find practical solutions to discipline problems they encounter in their classrooms.

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