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International Perspectives on Student Behavior: What We Can Learn

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Introduction

The objective of this second volume of companion books on comparative student discipline is to identify the best practices in dealing with student misconduct on six continents in a legally sound manner. It is essential for educators to examine national as well as international practices addressing student misconduct in schools because learner misbehavior often has a detrimental effect on the quality of teaching and learning in elementary and secondary schools.

The essence of order in school environments can hardly be overemphasized. In the context of teaching-learning, order is to be regarded as a *sine qua non* (an indispensable condition) for effective learning. One of the cornerstones for effective teaching and learning is vested in the extent to which students can focus on the content of lessons. Interruptions as a result of student noise such as talking during lessons, or when learners constantly interrupt teachers, can upset the focus of an entire class.

This book is designed to show how learner misconduct calls for global awareness and collaboration. It is important to study this issue because not only are everyday trivial disturbances in class problems, but from media reports incidents of serious misconduct are increasing. In fact, there have been multiple assaults and killing of learners and teachers on school premises. Moreover, the latter constitute more than mere misconduct, they are acts of criminal misbehavior.

When student misbehavior turns into serious misconduct and ultimately criminal activity, alarms sound in the global community insofar as schools have sadly become danger instead of secure, tranquil environments enhancing teaching and learning. It is thus time to rethink strategies and approaches to learner discipline.

Educators can effectively learn from the experiences of peers in other countries, especially from their successes dealing with student misconduct. As such, this book endeavors to promote a global reciprocity as it examines causes, tendencies, and forms of misconduct in ten nations. Further, this book focuses on effective methods of dealing with student misconduct.

Following this brief introduction, which highlights key themes to be identified, the remainder of the book analyzes the detrimental effects of student misconduct on teaching and learning environments in schools.

MISCONDUCT HAMPERS TEACHING AND LEARNING

A constant encumbrance for order in teaching and learning environments is student misconduct. The Teaching and Learning International Survey, *Creating Effective Teaching and Learning Environments: First Results*, by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD Report),¹ highlighted international concern for studying the detrimental effects student misconduct is having on teaching and learning. The OECD report contained a comprehensive survey of ninety thousand teachers in twenty-three countries.

One of the findings of the OECD Report was that although positive school climates were associated with higher levels of student achievement, disruption of class instruction due to learner misconduct hinders the provision of proper instruction. As such, these disruptions have a detrimental effect on teaching and learning.

In addition to disturbances in the classrooms, which ranked first among the incidences of misconduct, the OECD Report ranked the other high frequented incidences of student misconduct as student absenteeism (46 percent); students arriving late at school (39 percent); profanity and swearing (37 percent); intimidation or verbal abuse of other students (35 percent); intimidation and verbal abuse of teachers and staff (17 percent); physical injury of other students (16 percent); theft (15 percent); possession of alcohol or drugs (11 percent).²

CONCERN FOR STUDENT SAFETY

Another important aspect which necessitates the proper handling of student misconduct refers to the safety of fellow learners and school staff. It is important that teachers respond immediately to minor incidents of misconduct before they can escalate into more serious difficulties that can pose a threat to the safety of school communities.

THE PROBLEM OF CRIMINAL TENDENCIES

It is critical that some forms of serious misconduct, such as the possession of drugs or weapons or assaults of teachers or peers, are criminal offenses. In perhaps the two worst examples of such behavior, at Columbine High School in Colorado and in Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut,³ students went so far as attacking and killing other learners and peers. It goes without saying that tendencies such as these cannot be ignored nor go unpunished since remaining passive in the face of such behavior would actually be the same as condoning it. Further, tolerating these tendencies would constitute professional negligence.

DEALING WITH MISCONDUCT

In many schools worldwide, there appears to be a need for additional, legally sound methods to deal with student misconduct more effectively. Traditional methods applicable to typical student misconduct such as detention, the setting of school and classroom rules, demerit points, and corporal punishment (in some countries) are effectively applied in some situations but in others they prove to be less effective.

Many educational practitioners claim that the majority of these traditional methods are less effective while others argue that the application of corporal punishment proves to be one of the most effective methods in dealing with learner misconduct. Yet, in many countries corporal punishment in schools is regarded as unconstitutional or deemed to be inhuman and degrading.

DEALING WITH SERIOUS MISCONDUCT

A major problem actually lies with the serious forms of student misconduct. This leads to the following questions:

- How should teachers deal with serious forms of misconduct?
- What methods are available to deal effectively with student violence, theft, assault, and possession of drugs or dangerous weapons?
- What methods are utilized in ten countries on the six inhabited continents?
- Which of these methods are applied effectively?
- What other possible methods can be suggested or should be developed?

THE GLOBAL JOURNEY

In the quest to find answers to these questions, this book embarks on a tour through the global village. The remainder of this chapter provides a brief

overview of dealing with learner misconduct in Brazil, China, Malaysia, South Africa, and Turkey.

In the state of São Paulo, Brazil, the emphasis falls on restorative justice where schools and the juvenile courts work in partnership. The National Education Act is protective rather than punitive. There is also a strong current of preventative actions whereby conflicts in schools and communities are resolved by mediators such that each school has its own professionally trained School and Community Mediator Teacher, acting to resolve conflict. Other successful programs include Prevention Can Be Taught, which endeavors to reduce student vulnerability to drugs, alcohol, and teenage pregnancy while Community Present promotes nonviolent conflict resolution.

Misconduct occurs in schools in China at a much more reduced rate than in the West. A survey in Beijing indicated that a vast majority of learners have never been subjected to disciplinary measures in part because Chinese culture is grounded in the Confucian philosophy of requiring students to obey their teachers, following their commands.

At the same time, learners in China seem to adhere to Max Weber's authority theories emanating charismatic authority versus a legally regulated dispensation. In terms of Weber's theories the relationship between student and teacher is one of a "father-son relationship," rather than one regulated by legal directives. Moreover, the notion of due process is relatively new in Chinese schools.

The Malaysian education system is relatively free from physical and emotional threats because their approach is much like that in Australia in the sense that educators focus on the *in loco parentis* role of the teacher. This common law role of the teacher affords them the right to maintain discipline to prevent students from becoming physical or emotional victims of the unruly behavior of peers. Overall, because the Malaysian approach to discipline adheres to the philosophy "to spare the rod would in turn spoil the child," strictly controlled corporal punishment is allowed in schools.

Learner misconduct in Turkey does not seem to be much of a problem and is trivial in nature: Talking in class counts among the most frequent forms of misconduct. In Turkey students are expected to obey teachers. In this regard, the chapter reports on a recent study which revealed that a significant majority of fifteen-year-old students in Turkey consider that a significant majority of fifteen-year-old students in Turkey consider their classrooms to be calm environments. Although corporal punishment has been banned from schools, a majority of students continue to be subjected to a degree of corporal punishment. Further, as in other nations due process in schools is just about nonexistent.

Learner misconduct in South Africa is regulated by legislative provisions based on a progressive constitution. Since the promulgation of the South African Constitution in 1996, issues related to student misconduct such as freedom of expression, cultural and religious rights, the right to privacy,

violence, sexual assault and assault in schools, the application of corporal punishment in schools, expulsion and suspension of learners as well as various aspects of administrative justice have been scrutinized in the South African High Court.

It is unfortunate that during the past twenty years the quality of education in public schools in South Africa has not improved and departmental administration has stumbled from one crisis to the next. Moreover, in many respects, learner conduct in public schools has taken a plunge.

CONCLUSION

The sound management of learner misconduct is essential for optimal teaching and learning. In many instances schools and societies lost track in dealing with learner misconduct to the detriment of orderly teaching and learning environments. In other settings it appears that school officials found the key to enhance positive student conduct to the best interest of the young.

All who are interested in education should seek to capture some of these successful strategies for application in their own challenging circumstances. The global overview of learner conduct in the following chapters provides a window of opportunity for reciprocity, there creating an option to exchange the pages from one another's experiences.

NOTES

1. Available at <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/43023606.pdf> (OECD Report). See also <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/creatingeffectiveteachingandlearningenvironmentsfirstresults-fromtalis.htm>.

2. Id. at 40.

3. For a commentary on this tragedy, see Charles J. Russo, "Armed Teachers and Guards Won't Make Schools Safer." *Education Week* 32(19) (2013): 27, 32.