

Classroom management. Dealing with discipline

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Abstract:

The teaching process with all its difficulties faces teachers with numerous challenges, and one of the biggest is dealing with discipline.

This article is organized in two parts, a theoretical and a practical one. They deal with discipline problems in classrooms.

The theoretical part will mainly cover the following topics;

What is meant by control on management?

What are some important qualities teachers need to manage discipline?

The nature of difficulties related to the topic

As a practical part of this article there are given some tips and actions teachers can implement in order to prevent and reduce discipline problems in the classroom.

Teachers' personal qualities as well as their technical skills are vital. Teachers have to be good in two senses of the word: they must be good in the sense of being effective in the skills of classroom management; and they must be good in that they must be morally good, possessing natural virtues.

Introduction:

The teaching process with all its difficulties faces teachers with numerous challenges, and one of the biggest is dealing with discipline. For hard-pressed teachers that have to teach difficult children, the whole concept of classroom management seems to represent an impossible ideal. Children whose behavior is predictable only in its unpredictability can effortlessly frustrate attempts to plan and implement any goal-directed activity.

Theory

Silcock (1993) seems to challenge the idea that effectiveness in the classroom can be taught, suggesting that preparing trainees for the social encounters is work enough. Control, which is what, is often meant by management, has already failed and persistent attempts at imposing it might even have contributed to pupils' problems. Control might itself be part of the problem. Laing and Chazan (1986) suggest that organizational routines that compel ordinary young children to participate can themselves create incentives to avoid and disrupt. Many disturbed children treat themselves more aggressively than they do with others. Rose (1991) noted that many of the children he cared for in a residential setting were unable to differentiate between well-meaning adults and those they had met first 'their frequently exploitative parents'. Such children easily mistake management (with the aim of securing education) for intimidation towards a threatening if undefined objective.

'Teachers' control strategies can sometimes aggravate rather than ease problem situations'. This sort of talk makes no impression on teachers faced with ungovernable pupils. Whatever the background and the ideal might be, someone has to cope with day-to-day responsibilities. Speaking so far it can be drawn to a conclusion:

Teachers' personal qualities as well as their technical skills are vital. Teachers have to be good in two senses of the word: they must be good in the sense of being effective in the skills of classroom management; and they must be good in that they must be morally good, possessing natural virtues.

In teaching, the concept of professionalism needs perhaps to incorporate the older notions of vocation and selfless service that have been displaced by a twentieth-century focus on functional expertise (Kimball, 1994). The teacher skills and qualities required by teachers of troublesome pupils are often those that any teacher might need. Hoghugh (1978) draws up a demanding list of qualities for those working with troublesome children: teachers must be stable, compassionate, sensitive, intelligent, flexible, and mature and, ominously, physically fit. Wills (1967), with characteristic elegance, says, 'to live with maladjusted children you must be able to live without them and indeed without anyone a whole complete person entirely

sufficient to yourself". Hewett and Blake, reviewing the literature in Travers (1973), suggest that teachers of troublesome pupils do not need to assume a unique professional role: 'A competent teacher is a competent teacher whether working with disturbed or normal children.' This is true in so far as all teachers must be teachers of groups, able to cope with the unpredictable demands, the overlapping activities and the dynamics of maintaining public order in the classroom.

It is fundamental for teachers to possess some basic classroom management skills, but it is far difficult to try to describe classroom teaching skills. These difficulties are related to those encountered in attempts to teach, or persuade others to teach, using behavioral objectives. The act of teaching is something more than the sum of its parts, and attempts to define it closely seem destined to destroy that which they would describe. To a considerable extent, human activities are beyond complete description: accounts, tape-recordings and films cannot capture the amount and complexity of events; some things are missed, changed or destroyed in the act of data gathering. In the example given by I.Reid (1986), watching a video of a football match is not the same as being there. In addition, observers have attempted to quantify the complexity of teaching: for example, Jackson (1968) estimated more than 500 interactions in a typical teacher's day. Teaching is rarely apprehended as the putting of skills into practice. When a lesson is going well it may be experienced as an energetic merge of interaction and involvement, varying pace and tempo, new insights and explanations, and unexpected outcomes. Teaching skills are difficult to get a purchase on because they are dynamic rather than mechanistic in character (Eisner, 1982). The skills used in a successful lesson, and the objectives achieved, are easier to think about after the event. This does not contradict the argument that a description of teaching skills cannot completely capture the reality of classroom life. Reflecting on the characteristics of a good lesson can help identify techniques for use in future encounters; this is a long way from claiming that the success of future lessons can be guaranteed if certain skills (or objectives, for that matter) are used.

It often appears that experienced teachers have trouble-free lessons, not through knowing how to cope with troublesome behavior, but simply because it does not seem to arise in their classrooms. The skills of classroom management become part of a taken-for-granted procedure, and often neither the practitioner nor the inexperienced observer is able to identify them. The ability to control pupils is regarded as so vital a part of a teacher's personal identity that many continue to

suffer in the isolation of their classrooms rather than admit weakness and seek advice. When advice is sought it is seldom easy to give without conveying personal criticism. Part of this problem is the tendency for teachers to be accustomed to working unobserved and to feel uncomfortable if called upon to work in teams. Lessons conducted in the traditional style often fall into phases to which varying rules and expectations are attached. Hargreaves *et al.* (1975) noted an entry phase, settling down, and the lesson proper which included teachers' exposition and pupils' work, clearing up and, finally, exit. The amount of movement and pupil talk varies from phase to phase and some pupils seem to have more difficulty than others in adjusting to this. It is therefore teacher qualities and classroom management skills necessary to give explicit directions and clear warnings when a change of phase is imminent.

The traditional form of lesson, the recitation or question-and-answer type, is by its very nature vulnerable to disruption. Ironically, it is a form of teaching that was intended to put voice and life in place of the deadness of print. There is no doubt that the whole-class recitation method generates a considerable number of easily breakable rules. A pupil need only speak to a neighbor upon the topic under inquiry to create a disruptive event. Mehan (1979) notes that the rules of turn-taking, and the ways of displaying knowledge which are appropriate to the classroom community, may remain implicit. Some pupils need these rules and expectations to be made explicit. The traditional teacher control of the classroom does not necessarily evaporate in open, resource-based environments. Whatever the limitations and difficulties of recitation as a classroom strategy, the traditional teacher presence is still necessary from time to time.

Practice

Some actions teachers can undertake in order to prevent or reduce discipline problems are:

- One of the most frequent observations made by researchers and experienced teachers is that control is easier to establish if the teacher is in position ready to receive the class. It is not an auspicious start to have to calm an already disorderly group. Rutter *et al.* (1979) reported that where teachers were waiting for classes and able to supervise their entry there was less school disorder. Research reported in

Wragg (1984) showed that experienced teachers, when compared with students, were more likely to greet the pupils, occupy a central position in the room, wait for silence before speaking, issue directions authoritatively and use eye contact. They did not rely on voice alone to convey their requirements: posture and expression were relaxed and confident. Goffman (1968) has observed that impressions given off, as distinct from those deliberately given, are normally taken as a more accurate guide to a person's inner state. Naturally, if a troublesome class is expected there is a temptation to cut short an unpleasant encounter by arriving late. Similarly, one is more likely to find oneself shouting and less confident about taking a position forward of the desk while looking pupils in the eye.

- One way of proceeding with classes that are already out of hand is to draw up jointly a short list of rules and make some sort of bargain with the class. This is especially effective with primary age pupils. When asked to suggest three rules for the class, both teachers and pupils tend to express them in negative terms for example: no shouting; no wandering about; no spoiling other people's work. It is more effective to express the rules positively, so that the pupils know what they have to do rather than not do. The three rules mentioned would therefore be written up on the board as follows: we must talk in quiet voices; we must stay in our own places; we must be helpful and polite to each other. The beginning of the year is crucial for establishing effective classroom procedures and it is advisable that planning should be done before school starts. Effective teachers had 'a better behavioral map of the classroom and what was required for students to function within it'. This map would not omit the basic precautions mentioned by Fontana (1985): any dead tape-decks, illegible visual aids or stiff glue.

- In addition, 'more effective managers tended to have more workable systems of rules, and they taught their rules and procedures systematically and thoroughly' (Evertson and Emmer, 1982:486). This seems to be stating the obvious, and in some respects all observational studies are vulnerable to this charge: effective teachers are found to do the things that effective teachers do.

- Giving the pupils an outline of the lesson's planned form helps to minimize interruptions and expressions of surprise at a later and possibly more vulnerable time. Similarly, to start with some deskwork ensures that all the pupils have the books and materials they will need for the lesson. This is particularly important with disorderly and forgetful groups. It is sometimes difficult to maintain a fresh and

vigorous demeanor with topics repeated from year to year, but some extra reading or resequencing the material can help.

- The first response to incipient disturbance need not be a verbal rebuke or comment. A stare, averting eyes sideways (not submissively down) if the stare is returned in an uncomfortable or defiant manner by the pupil, can sometimes prevent an escalation of the unwanted activity. Adopting an authoritative stance, for example folding one's arms, or moving closer to a disruptive pupil, invading his or her territory, are other possible ways of regaining control without attracting public attention. Sometimes an invitation to respond to a question serves a similar, low-key purpose and, with younger pupils, a touch on the shoulder perhaps. For the same reason (avoiding too public a profile early in a potential conflict), it is best to make corrective statements short: nagging, threats, interrogation and recitation of past misdemeanors should be avoided.

- Clearing up and exit. The completion stages of a lesson or individual learning session sometimes require planning and preparation in their own right. Often the most difficult pupils are the first to finish work (to their own satisfaction) and this should be planned for. With disaffected groups, an orderly and coherent end to a lesson can leave a general impression of having achieved something worth while. This feeling is not confined to the pupils. More effective schools in Rutter *et al.* (1979) tended not to have lessons finishing too early. Laslett and Smith (1984) note that 'hard-won control is most frequently lost and learning wasted at the end of lessons'. In so far as one lesson's end is another lesson's start, professional responsibility and staffroom harmony depend upon good management in the concluding phase. As the end of a lesson approaches and release for both parties is at hand, the teacher may find less difficulty in gaining attention. It is unwise to use this period for a recitation of the errors of the past session, perhaps mixed with demands for silence, backed by threats of instant detention. The opportunity is best used to summarize and draw together the themes of the lesson's work and perhaps relate them to the intended programme for the next meeting. Review what has been achieved as if all had achieved it; experience shows that even in the most disorderly and chaotic classes a majority of the pupils are engaged on task for most of the time. It does not depart so far from reality, therefore, for the teacher to take a positive view and to define the situation as a success.

An orderly dismissal, with a relaxed and smiling teacher, helps to minimize problems and is a better prelude to the next meeting than an atmosphere of recrimination and threats.

Conclusion

As a conclusion of this article I would like to list shortly top 10 tips for Classroom Discipline and Management and express my opinion that; As with all classroom management practices, adapt what you like to your classroom, taking account the age, ethnicity, and personality of the class as a group, and of you as a teacher. As true as it is that classroom management is sometimes a hard challenge, it is by no means impossible to overcome.

1. It's easier to get easier
2. Fairness is a key
3. Deal with Disruptions with as Little Interruption as Possible
4. Avoid confrontations in front of students
5. Stop disruptions with a little humor
6. Keep high expectations in your class
7. Overplan
8. Be consistent
9. Make Rules Understandable
10. Start Fresh Everyday¹

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¹ <http://712educators.about.com/od/discipline/tp/disciplinetips.htm>