

Why Punish? Why not Cope with it?

Mihaela Haldan

PhD candidate at Doctoral School of Philological Studies

Faculty of Letters, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania

Abstract

One of the most puzzling and frustrating problems confronting schools today, more so than ever before, seems to be discipline. Whereas most teachers are struggling in terms of establishing discipline, there are some educators who are coping with it. The present study deals with a series of concepts and perspectives regarding disruptive behaviour in schools and it also raises teachers' awareness of several possible alternatives to punishment.

Keywords: *discipline, disruptive behaviour, tolerance, alternative, punishment.*

Teaching is a leadership position, therefore “teachers are completely responsible for what takes place under their supervision in their classroom. This responsibility entails that they must fully understand the inputs and conditions that affect the real outcomes of the actions they take. It is never acceptable for a leader to make a decision based on insufficient information and later claim ignorance. Teachers’ discipline decisions are no different”¹. Children's engagement in learning activities is influenced both by their perceptions of teachers and directly by teachers' actual behaviours.

Throughout my struggle to define disruptive behaviour, I have realized that there is no perfect delimitation for the term. The same way, discipline in the classroom context is perceived differently by individual educators in schools. Some perceive it as a form of moral character, some perceive it as control over learners, and some see it as a preventive and corrective measure, some as self-discipline, whereas some others understand it more narrowly, as a form of punishment.

¹J.M. Englehart, Five half-truths about classroom management. The Clearing House, 2012, p 72.

In any common educational setting, behaviours frequently identified by teachers as problematic are high-frequency, low-intensity disruptive behaviours such as off-task behaviour, out-of-seat behaviour, inappropriate vocalizations (e.g., making noises, talking out of turn), touching or disturbing others, playing with objects, and noncompliance. More than that, aggression and bullying are additional problem behaviours cited by teachers but are more likely to occur in the absence of adults and at lower frequencies. “Zero tolerance”² approaches to discipline over the last several years have led to increased reliance on traditional discipline procedures such as expelling or expulsion.

Two opponents of corporal punishment Elizabeth D. Evans and Rita C. Richardson argued that it should be eliminated completely from schools due to the fact that it models violence, does not teach appropriate behaviours or problem-solving skills. They also suggested a series of alternatives to corporal punishment: non-acknowledgement of disruptive behaviour and reinforcement of appropriate behaviour, signal interference, proximity control, interest boosting, tension reduction through humour, hurdle helping, programme restructuring, the use of routine to provide security, direct appeal, removal of seductive objects, and positive removal of student from the classroom. (Evans, E. D., & Richardson, R. C. 1995)³

Planned Ignoring

The teacher basically ignores the disruptive behaviour (pencil tapping, hand waving, body movement, or grimacing) and reinforces students when they exhibit the appropriate behaviour. This technique is appropriate for behaviours that although benign, are annoying to others.

Signal Interference

The teacher uses nonverbal techniques or signals, such as eye contact, a frown, finger snapping, toe tapping, light flicking, index finger on lips, can alert students

² Zero tolerance is as a disciplinary policy that is “intended primarily as a method of sending a message that certain behaviours will not be tolerated, by punishing all offenses severely, no matter how minor” (Skiba& Peterson, 1999, p. 373).

³ The procedures are adapted from Redl and Wineman's Behavior Influence Techniques (1957), designed to prevent potential disruptions from occurring.

their unacceptable behaviour. Conversely nonverbal signals can be used to reinforce acceptable behaviours in the classroom.

Proximity Control

The teacher moves inconspicuously closer to the student without calling attention to the behaviour. Very frequently the proximity or the closeness of an authority figure (teacher, parent, police officer, etc.) results in the termination of unacceptable behaviours. In addition, proximity can have a positive effect on children who are anxious and insecure.

Interest Boosting

The teacher provides an interest boost by helping a student or by changing the activity when the student is experiencing difficulty, or losing interest in a task. For example, when working with sight word flash cards give the students their own cards and allow them to illustrate the words on the back of each card. Older students can provide mnemonics to remember the word.

Tension Reduction through Humour

The teacher smiles, laughs, and makes light of a tense situation. A joke or a humorous comment will frequently reduce tension. Humor should not be used at the expense of hurting any student and sarcasm must be avoided.

Hurdle Helping

The teacher provides help before the student becomes disruptive or discouraged. Hurdle helping may include an encouraging word, help with an assignment, providing additional materials etc.

Programme Restructuring

The teacher restructures a lesson when he or she observes that the students are not responding. This must be done before the students become disruptive or lose all interest in the lesson.

Support from Routine

The teacher organizes, announces, posts and discusses daily schedules with the students. Students with behaviour problems feel secure and comfortable with fixed routines and schedules.

Direct Appeal

The teacher can resolve a problem quickly and effectively through direct appeal to the students' sense of fairness. The direct appeal will be more successful when the following are present:

1. The teacher's genuinely cares about the students.
2. Consequences for unacceptable behaviour. Consequences must be fair, clarified and understood in advance.
3. The impact of the behaviour on the students' peers.
4. The teacher's influence and control over the students.
5. A democratic and positive climate.

Removal of Seductive Objects

The teacher removes objects (phones, magazines, toys etc.) which may be distracting or a possible target for disruption.

Antiseptic Bouncing

The teacher removes an agitated student from the environment before he or she becomes physically or verbally disruptive. The removal is perceived as positive, such as sending the agitated student on an errand, to defuse a possible explosive situation.

Power Struggles

The teacher provides the student with space. Avoid backing the student to a corner. It takes two to engage in a struggle and the students should be allowed to save face. Confronting situation can be used to model conflict resolutions techniques.

Frustration Level

The teacher avoids teaching up to the students' frustration level. Lessons should be challenging but attainable and motivating.

Listen, Listen, Listen!

The teacher uses active and reflective listening and listens to the feeling as well as to the words. The teacher avoids threatening, admonishing, preaching, condemning, criticizing, and using sarcasm.

A Warm and Orderly Climate

The teacher provides an orderly climate while maintaining a warm and positive attitude. He or she must convey to the students a message that is perceived as caring and helping.

Consistent and Fair

The teacher is consistent and fair in the use of positive reinforcement and in administering consequences. Students quickly recognize when teachers are inconsistent in their classroom management. Lack of consistency and fairness often create a disruptive climate. However, the teacher must also be flexible and consider situations and individual differences.

Separate the Misbehaviour from the Child

The teacher accepts the students unconditionally and as persons of worth. It is important for the teacher to identify the behaviour that is not acceptable, and keep it separate from the value of the person. Communicate "I" messages instead of "You" messages: Cursing is not acceptable and interferes with teaching and

learning, and I don't like it" NOT "You have a filthy mouth and you should be ashamed of yourself".

Group Membership

The teacher empowers students by encouraging cooperative learning procedures and class ownership activities. This is important in promoting positive behaviour. When students are allowed to participate in their learning they are less likely to become bored and disruptive.

Leave Your Luggage on the Doorstep

The teacher sets aside personal problems and biases. Everybody has personal problems and opinions. It is critical for teachers to be non-judgmental and leave their problems out of the classroom. When personal problems and prejudices are transferred to the teaching environment, teachers are less effective and students' misbehaviour is magnified.

Radiate Enthusiasm

The teacher shows enthusiasm and confidence. When teachers do not radiate excitement, the students cannot be expected to be enthusiastic about learning. The outcome is often student misbehaviour and/or apathy.

Antecedent Control

The teacher controls antecedent events to avoid conflict situations. The teacher manipulates the environment to produce positive results and avoid conflict. For example, plan the seating arrangement to separate disruptive students.

Self-Management

The teacher models and teaches each student how to use self-regulation, self-recording, self-evaluation, and self-rewarding.

Teach verbal mediation (thinking out loud) and problem solving. For example, target a behaviour such as interrupting, discuss the intervention with the student

teach him or her to record the instances of interrupting using a wrist golf counter. Together graph and discuss the data.

Conflict Resolution

The teacher teaches students conflict resolution skills such as compromise, communication, brainstorming solutions, prioritizing solution, apologizing and restitution. Form peer mediation groups at the school or classroom levels.

Social Skills Training

The teacher teaches social skills, there is an abundance of social skills programmes on the market. Teachers can develop social skills objectives and activities in the following area: Social Cognition, Social Interaction, Social Effectiveness, Decision Making, and Social Competence.

Discover the Cause

The teacher considers the cause. The teacher does not have to be a psychoanalyst to discover the cause of the misbehaviour; however, students misbehave for varied obvious reasons. Some want attention, some seek power and control, some want revenge, while others feel helpless and become passive aggressive.

Personalizing the Large

Students behave in large classes in ways they never would in small classes. Many students find from the start that the impersonal nature of large classes is alienating, and their uncivil behaviour is often an offshoot of this alienation. Making a large class more personal can ameliorate this situation.⁴

Maryellen Gleason suggested treating the large class as if it were a small class. In other words, “behave as you would in your classes of twenty-five or thirty: come in early and chat with a few

⁴E. D. Evans, & R. C. Richardson, *Changing Community Policies: Your Role in Eliminating Corporal Punishment in Schools*, 1995, pp. 7-13.

students, when a student asks a question move closer as you answer it, stay after class to talk with interested students, make an effort to learn as many names as possible.”⁵

Two behavioural researchers J. M. Kauffman and T. J. Landrum proved that among the most frequent criticisms of the behavioural view of classroom management are concerns that teachers become too controlling, and merely coerce or bribe students to behave in ways that the teacher chooses. While terms like “coercion” and “bribe” certainly carry intended negative connotations, the use of behavioural procedures, such as positive reinforcement, are quite distinct from bribes or even coercion in that professional use of these procedures does not induce students to engage in behaviours that are illegal or immoral.⁶

Teachers cannot make learners feel a particular emotion, but they can reassure them or attend to their emotional needs. They may not be successful in changing student behaviour, but they can change themselves, their own behaviour, their feelings, and their expectations of coping with uncivil behaviour. They can try to alter the disruptive environment or at least take action to prevent the problem from occurring again. They can remind everyone of the rules. They can also change tasks or sometimes they can redirect or rechannel student behaviour or distract student attention.

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⁵ Gleason, Maryellen, *Better Communication in Large Courses*, *College Teaching*, 34:1, 1986, pp.20-24.

⁶ Carolyn Evertson & S. Carol Weinstein, *Handbook of Classroom Management: Research, Practice, and Contemporary*, 2011, p 60.

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