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Student Discipline: A School-Wide Approach

Dennis Rose

INTRODUCTION

Student discipline in school is of concern to educators and members of the public in Singapore. The printed and electronic media has often devoted considerable space to issues related to student behaviour.

This paper identifies some of the problems that accompany punishment-only solutions to student behaviour problems. An alternative, school-wide approach directed at the development of responsible student behaviour is described. Such an approach usually begins with workshops for teachers in which they first learn how to support one another through consistently following a set of discipline procedures. They then specify (i) what student behaviour is desired and acceptable, (ii) what student behaviour is unacceptable, and (iii) the consequences for both. There is strong emphasis on encouraging students to develop responsible behaviour through accepting the consistently applied consequences of their actions.

APPROACHES TO DISCIPLINE

The behaviour of students in Singapore’s schools is of growing concern. Teachers believe that student discipline problems are increasing in both frequency and severity (Singapore Teachers’ Union 1995). Newspapers have reported incidents involving discipline and in March 1995, The New Paper published a photograph of a student being restrained physically by three teachers.

Some public discussion in newspaper columns and on television has led to calls for parents to exert stricter discipline at home and for teachers to be stricter at school. Commentators indicated that teachers and parents should punish students when they misbehaved. Indeed, punishment is sometimes effective. However, the reliance on punishment presents some problems:
1. Punishment only suppresses behaviour. It does not teach new
behaviours and so the student does not usually gain information
about alternative and preferable ways to behave.

2. If used often, students sometimes feel that they do not know how
to avoid being punished. This can lead to two types of behaviour:

- Students do not accept responsibility for their behaviour,
attributing being punished to factors such as teacher’s mood,
being disliked by the teacher, or bad luck. They do not make
the connection between the punishment and their behaviour.
This means that punishment will have little or no effect on
behaviour and so they behave regardless of the consequences.

- Students become fearful of punishments and attempt to be
inconspicuous so that they do not attract the teacher’s attention.
This often leads to students not volunteering answers in class
and not contributing to discussions in case they make a mistake
and get punished for it.

Some of the public discussions about student discipline suggested
an alternative approach in which schools create conditions that
decrease the probability of discipline problems occurring and which
teach students to take personal responsibility for their behaviour. For
example, *The Straits Times* reprinted an article from *The Times of London*
describing a systematic approach to student discipline problems in
schools (Tytler 1995).

The use of planned and systematic strategies is not new. Tytler
(1995) referred to the *Assertive Discipline* programme (Canter 1979,
1989), which is based on a set of rules and clearly specified
consequences for following them and for not following them. These
consequences include punishment and reinforcement and emphasize
their link to student behaviour, that is, they occur because of student
behaviour rather than teacher choice. This approach has been
successful in controlling student behaviour in schools (e.g. Ferguson &
Houghton 1992). However, some educators have expressed concern
that *Assertive Discipline* is repressive and that it subdues and stifles
children with a “Behave or else!” ethos (e.g. Curwin & Mendler 1989).

Another popular approach is based on the reality therapy of
Glasser (1965). Glasser interprets behaviour in terms of a quest to fulfil
two basic needs common to all people: the need to love and be loved,
and the need to feel that we are worthwhile to ourselves and others. In Glasser’s view, these needs can only be met through responsible involvement with other people.

When Glasser applied reality therapy to schools (Glasser 1969), he recognized that schools require students and teachers to follow a set of rules and he characterized breaking the rules as irresponsible behaviour. To teach students to take responsibility for their behaviour, Glasser required them to identify what they had done and acknowledge that it was against the rules. When students did this, they received a consequence and the matter ended. If the student refused to comply, a predictable, step-wise process began in which they received increasingly onerous consequences.

Both the Canter & Glasser approaches emphasise providing students with an environment in which they learn that their behaviour has consequences and that they are responsible for their behaviour and the consequences that follow. This can only occur if the consequences are rational and predictable and are applied uniformly by teachers. Where schools and teachers are prepared to use such an approach, they usually find that student misbehaviour can be managed with little punishment and that students do develop self-control and personal responsibility (e.g. Canter 1989; Ferguson & Houghton 1992; Gill 1986). The key seems to be that students eventually recognizes that it is their behaviour that matters.

Schools must maintain reasonable control over student behaviour. Most teachers also have the objective of assisting their students to learn self-control and to behave responsibly. Because schools differ, many of them develop a unique approach to student discipline. The result frequently comprises several elements, especially those recommended by Canter (1989) and Glasser (1978). Usually these approaches cover all behaviours of all students in the school, including out of class behaviour. They are termed “school-wide” — that teachers develop a single set of rules and procedures and they require students to exhibit responsible behaviour by following them.

**Steps in Setting up a School-Wide Student Discipline Programme**

The process usually begins when a school principal decides that such a scheme would assist staff and students. Often, an external facilitator
will work with the staff to develop a scheme that meets the specific needs of the school.

The facilitator will usually survey the teachers and examine school discipline records to gain an approximate idea of the nature, range and frequency of any discipline concerns. Some direct recording of student behaviour is used to gain a baseline. This ensures that the scheme meets the particular needs of the school. It also provides a basis on which the impact of the new scheme can be measured. Concerns identified in this way typically include bullying, truancy, lateness, littering, disruption of class, defiance, and refusal to do work. Teachers often state that they feel stressed because of discipline issues and that they are unsure of what to do when discipline problems occur.

After the discipline problems have been identified and measured, the facilitator consults with the principal and some teachers to develop a plan of action. A typical plan will require the principal to allow staff time to develop a school-wide approach to discipline and to acquire skills to implement it. The facilitator will work with staff to:

- develop an agreed set of rules for student behaviour;
- construct a series of steps to follow when rule breaking occurs;
- design a recording system to monitor the programme;
- agree that they will consistently use the programme; and
- identify some key teachers who will act as support for others.

When they consider these matters, teachers often realize that their perceptions of what behaviour is acceptable and the best remedies for misbehaviour are not shared by the staff. They find that students encounter staff with varying expectations and responses to behaviour. This inconsistency may contribute to many of the discipline problems they experience. Teachers often state that they would feel more confident and less stressed if there was a common set of procedures for enforcing the rules.

Schools sometimes develop rules reactively as crises occur. As a consequence, they may be numerous, self-contradictory, and eventually redundant. The more rules there are, the less likely it is for staff and students to recall them. Rules are most effective when they are briefly stated in simple language and are accompanied by examples of the behaviour expected of students who follow the rules and of students who do not follow the rules. The staff of a high school developed the following rules after several hours of examining current rules and data on student behaviour:
1. Do what you are asked to do.
2. Do not disrupt learning.
3. Leave other people and their property alone.
4. Come to school with the materials necessary for schoolwork.
5. Be in the right place at the right time.
6. No "put downs" or offensive language.

The next step is to identify strategies that teachers can use when students obey the rules. Teachers frequently ignore students who heed the rules as the urgency of new discipline problems capture staff time and energy. Strategies for heeding the rules may include giving positive feedback, providing special access to facilities such as a computer room or a sports facility or other privileges, or sending commendatory letters home.

Finally, teachers design a sequence of steps to use when students break the rules. Teachers usually require their students to acknowledge their behaviour and to realize that their behaviour has consequences. They design the steps to promote this and to teach students to take responsibility for resolving the issue.

The procedures usually have a standard routine that a teacher uses when confronted with rule-breaking. The first part of the procedure may require the teacher to ask students to identify their behaviour and to acknowledge that it is against the rules. Glasser (1978) suggests that teachers simply ask, "What are you doing?" If the student replies correctly, the teacher should then ask, "Is it against the rules?" If the student replies affirmatively, the teacher then tells the student the consequence according to the steps below. If the student fails to answer correctly, the teacher will say, "You were [description of the rule breaking behaviour] and it is against the rules." The teacher will then tell the student the consequence.

In the second part of the procedure, the teacher delivers a consequence. The consequence depends on how many times the student has broken the rule. A series of steps ensures that persistent rule breaking leads to increasingly severe consequences. An example of a series of steps follows:

**APOLOGY**

The first time a student breaks a rule, he must orally apologize to the teacher and the class for breaking it.
WRITTEN APOLOGY

On the second occasion he breaks a rule, the student writes an apology to the teacher and the class.

DETENTION

The third breaking of a rule results in a 30-minute detention. This takes place during the student’s own time in a room out of sight of other students. While there, the student must write a letter to his parents describing the rule he has broken, and stating that this is the third occasion he has broken the rule. Sometimes, this is a form letter on which the student fills in the gaps. This ensures that the student identifies what he has done, that it is against the rules, and that he is aware of the consequences should he break the rule again.

LOSS OF PEER CONTACT FOR ONE DAY

After the fourth breaking of a rule, the student goes to detention for an entire day. He misses any outings, sport, or field trips. He also writes another letter to his parents to keep them informed.

LOSS OF PEER CONTACT FOR THREE DAYS

As above but for three days on the fifth breaking of a rule.

CONTRACT

When a student has broken a rule six times, he is denied all peer contact until there is a conference between the student, the counsellor, the principal (or vice principal) and the student’s parents. At the meeting, the participants devise a contract that specifies the consequences for further transgressions. These often depend on the particular rule and the characteristics of the student. Referral to an outside agency is also considered.

WITHDRAWAL/SUPERVISION

If the contract is ineffective, the school informs the parents. The student is removed from all regular school programmes and independently works on material assigned by his teachers for a minimum of one week and until he has undertaken to follow the rules. This includes written descriptions of how he will behave in situations that have earlier proven problematic.
Note that the more severe consequences deny the student access to other students. This denies him the opportunity to meet social needs of acceptance and affiliation until the current issue is concluded. This isolation, while seemingly passive compared to many punishments used in schools, has proven very effective as long as it is monitored and staff ensure that the student is indeed isolated from peers while at school.

Staff usually develop a monitoring form so that they can go through the steps systematically and so that the information is available for all teachers. The steps are listed, and there is a space for the teacher’s name and date beside each step. When a student begins the steps, the teacher completes the form and posts it on a staff room notice board. If the student does not come to notice for two weeks, the form is filed and any subsequent infractions begin again at the first step.

**USING THE PROGRAMME**

School-wide discipline schemes are usually implemented at the beginning of a new school term. One or two school periods need to be set aside for the programme to be briefly explained at a school assembly and in class by teachers. It is important that students are well informed and that they can see that all staff support the scheme.

The writer has assisted several schools to implement school-wide student discipline schemes. A number of interesting features have emerged in these schools:

- Staff sometimes set up a small committee of teachers to whom persistent problems are referred. The committee posts its decisions in the staff room and all staff are expected to follow their direction. Initially, the committee needs to meet two or more times a week but this reduces to once per week or once a fortnight after about a term. Where teachers are uncertain about what to do, they can refer to the committee and receive advice that is consistent with the school’s policy.

- Students frequently ask teachers for explanations of the process. In one school, the staff suspected that some students did this to excuse their behaviour by saying that they were confused by it. The staff committee lodged copies of all aspects of the programme in the library. Teachers were instructed to respond to “I’m
confused" statements by telling students that the details were in the library and that students were responsible for informing themselves about it.

- Some students "try out" the system by refusing to comply. Teachers who face this need support from their colleagues to follow the programme. Students who go through all the steps sometimes state that they feel coerced by the programme. When they are asked what choices they made and to predict what would occur should they break the rules again, they usually acknowledge that the programme is consistent and predictable and that they are able to decide how far through the steps they will go. A few students persist in describing the programme as "unfair", but most agree that they are responsible for their behaviour and its consequences and that they can terminate their progression through the steps by behaving responsibly and following the rules.

- Some teachers may be inconsistent in their use of the programme. For example, they sometimes deal with rule-breaking by imposing punishments not prescribed by the scheme. More frequently, they omit steps. This results in complaints by other staff and students. This is a matter for the principal who may discuss it with those staff members in terms of professionalism and their responsible behaviour.

Can such an approach work in Singapore? The use of a systematic, step-wise approach to school-wide discipline has been documented in several western countries (e.g. Canter 1989; Ferguson & Houghton 1992; Gill 1986). While the principles of behaviour change used in such approaches are universal, the contexts in which those principles are applied differ from culture to culture. Singapore schools might well choose different rules and different consequences for following or not following those rules. Some teachers may be inclined to view such an approach as not having sufficiently severe punishments. However, the experience of teachers in New Zealand, Australia and the US suggest that a consistent stepwise approach which includes isolation from peers is most effective.

Following rules and developing responsible behaviour is expected of Singapore school students. A school-wide approach to student discipline may be of benefit to those who learn and teach in Singapore's schools.
Dennis Rose lectures in Specialized Education at the National Institute of Education. His teaching and research interests are behaviour management and direct instruction.

REFERENCES


