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Helping teachers help students act responsibly



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Ramon Lewis is an Associate Professor in the La Trobe University School of Educational Studies, Bundoora. Dr. Lewis has specialised in the area of classroom management for over 20 years and has published three related books and many articles describing the outcomes of his studies. Dr. Lewis is currently coordinating a research project examining the relationship between classroom discipline and student responsibility in Australia, China and Israel. In addition to his academic position, Dr. Lewis teaches part time or consults with schools in a bid to explore the gap between theory and practice.

Introduction

There is great interest nationally and internationally in having schools facilitate the development of responsible behaviour in children (Ainley, Batten, Collins & Withers, 1998; Bennet, 1998; Houston, 1998; Kohn, 1998; Richardson & Fenstermacher, 2001; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999).

For some, the interest is stimulated by a concern over a perceived decline in student values (Lickona, 1996) and behaviour (Bennet, 1998; Houston, 1998). For others, the interest stems from a belief that 'preparing good citizens, not higher test scores, has historically been the most important purpose of our public education system' (Rothstein, 2000: 419). For example, in Australia, both the Prime Minister and the Federal Minister for Education have recently stressed the role that values education should play in schooling. In the US, the question of the relative importance of various goals of schooling was last put to the community in 2000, via the Phi Delta Kappa polls of the public's attitudes towards the public schools. The function of schooling selected as the most important in that survey was 'to prepare people to become responsible citizens' (Lowell & Gallup, 2000: 47)

This paper examines the relationship between Australian students' responsibility in classrooms and their teachers' discipline strategies.

In general, interest in student responsibility is expressed in two distinct but overlapping ways. The first emphasises students' character (Benninga & Wynne, 1998; Fenstermacher, 2001; Fisher, 1998; Glanzer, 1998; Hansen, 2001; Jones, & Stoodley, 1999; Narvaez, Bentley,

Gleason & Samuels, 1998; Pring, 2001; Schaeffer, 1999; Siebold, 1998).

The second focus of those interested in the character of youth emphasises civics and citizenship education (Anderson, Avery, Pederson, Smith & Sullivan, 1997; Barber, 1998; Bennet, 1998; Bickmore, 1997; Cunat, 1996; Kennedy, 1996; McDonnell, 1998; Osborne, 1995; Osler & Starkey, 2001; Pearl & Knight, 1998; Schaeffer, 1999).

Within each camp there are also two divisions. One wants to develop new, appropriate curriculum, to be added to, and to augment the 'normal' curriculum. The others argue that the transmission of values is intrinsic to all aspects of the curriculum. For example, according to Pring (2001: 110)

Picking out citizenship as a subject in its own right fails to see that all teaching, when conceived as a moral practice concerned with values and conceptions of what it is to be human, necessarily is a preparation for citizenship broadly concerned.

Responsibility and classroom discipline

Ensuring that students behave responsibly in classrooms is important for two independent reasons. First, it serves as a means of preparing students to take their place in society as responsible citizens, an aim of primary importance to schooling (Rothstein, 2000). This function of classroom discipline can be referred to as its educational function (Lewis, 1997a). Secondly, without satisfactory levels of student responsibility, the best planned, and potentially most engaging lessons may fail to have the desired impact. Often it may only require a small proportion of students to misbehave

and they become sufficiently distracting to students, and frustrating to teachers, that the most carefully planned lesson fails to promote effective learning among the students (Barton, Coley & Wenglinsky, 1998). This focus for classroom discipline is called a managerial function (Lewis, 1997a).

The association between the responsibility of students and classroom discipline is examined because, of all the school-related factors capable of influencing student responsibility, discipline is among the most potent (Ingersoll, 1996; Lewis, 1997b).

The study

In order to investigate what kinds of discipline styles are associated with greater levels of responsibility in students, an investigation was completed in 21 primary schools and 21 secondary schools from the North East region of Victoria. From these schools approximately 600 teachers and 4000 year 6, 7, 9 and 11 students reported on the sort of classroom discipline being offered to students, and students' level of responsibility and misbehaviour. Within each school type (primary and secondary), the findings were very similar.

Student responsibility was assessed by having students rate how often they engaged in a range of responsible and irresponsible classroom behaviours. The behaviours related to protecting or negating students' and teachers' rights associated with learning, emotional and physical safety, and property. The proportion of students misbehaving in the classes conducted by the teacher whose discipline they were describing was also noted.

To assess discipline techniques, students indicated the extent to which their

teachers used each of the following six discipline strategies:

- giving hints and non-directional descriptions of unacceptable behaviour (e.g., describing what students are doing wrong, and expecting them to stop);
- talking with students, and discussing the impact of their behaviour on others (e.g., getting students to change the way they behave by helping them understand how their behaviour affects others);
- involving students in classroom discipline decision-making (e.g., organising the class to work out the rules for good behaviour);
- recognising the appropriate behaviour of individual students or the class (e.g., rewarding individual students who behave properly);
- punishing students who misbehave and increasing the level of punishment if resistance is met (e.g., increasing the level of punishment if a misbehaving student stops when told, but then does it again);
- abusing students' rights (e.g., yelling angrily at students who misbehave).

Results

The most important findings of this study concern the relationship between student responsibility and discipline. As stated earlier, the results for this analysis are consistent for both levels of schooling. More responsible classes are associated with teachers who are less abusive and punishment oriented and who are seen as more likely to discuss misbehaviour with their students, involve students in decision-making, hint when students misbehave and recognise appropriate student behaviour.

Consequently it can be argued that the greater use of strategies such as discussion, recognition, hinting and involvement has resulted in less student misbehaviour and more responsibility. It may also be argued that teachers who use more punishment, more aggressive techniques such as yelling in anger and class detentions, and fewer inclusive techniques promote more misbehaviour and less responsibility in their students (Hyman & Snook, 2000; Lewis, 2004, in Press).

Alternatively, it may not be the teachers' behaviour that is influencing student responsibility but vice versa. This could occur in two distinct ways, depending on whether students behave respectfully or not. When students have more self-discipline, teachers may use more hinting, discussion and involvement to provide them a voice, since that voice can be trusted. Teachers may also be more likely to recognise their students' behaviour because more responsible students do more praiseworthy things. Further, there may be little recourse to aggression, as more responsible students do not confront teachers' authority. In such situations, teachers may consider themselves to be choosing discipline techniques suitable for their clientele.

When students have less self-discipline, a second rationale may explain how the level of responsibility displayed by their students influences teachers' disciplinary strategies. When students act less responsibly in class, teachers may become frustrated. They may feel confronted by their inability to ensure that all students are respectful of rights. Teachers may even become angry and hostile towards less responsible students. Angry or upset teachers may, as Glasser (1997) argued, not be interested in being reasonable towards

unreasonable and disrespectful students. They may find it unpalatable to recognise difficult students when they act appropriately. Rewarding 'Neanderthals' for being normal may not come naturally. Teachers may find it unpleasant and unproductive to spend time letting such students tell their side of events, in a bid to try and get them to acknowledge that their behaviour is unfair and needs to change.

Regardless of which of the explanations applies to these findings, the data show that in each setting teacher aggression and, to a lesser extent, punishment are ineffective in fostering student responsibility, whereas hinting, discussion, recognition, and involvement may be helpful in this regard. That being the case, it is problematic to note that teachers who are teaching less responsible students are less likely to be utilising productive techniques (such as hinting, discussing, recognising, and involving). It is equally problematic to see an increased use of aggression and punishment, given that they are, at best, of limited usefulness and, at worst, counterproductive.

There are other reasons to be concerned over teachers' relative unwillingness to use inclusive strategies such as discussion and involvement with more difficult students. First, a number of experienced educators recommend their use as the only effective way of producing responsible students (Metzger, 2002; Roeser, Eccles & Sameroff, 2000; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). As Pastor (2002) stated, when determining which discipline strategies are most desirable we need to note that

[w]hen we separate our approach to discipline from our principles, we influence the ethical tone of

the school community. Valuing good character and seeking the development of personal responsibility determine the school's response to discipline problems. Discipline is not primarily a matter of keeping things under control by making choices for students... [I]t is a matter of helping students learn to make good choices and be responsible for those choices (p. 657).

Not only is the need to provide inclusive techniques recommended by experienced educators, so also is the need to avoid aggressive disciplinary techniques. For example, the two most important pieces of advice Margaret Metzger (2002) offers to teachers trying to ensure that students remain motivated to behave responsibly are, first, don't escalate, de-escalate; and second, let students save face. Clearly both of these strategies are incompatible with an aggressive teacher response to misbehaviour.

The second reason to ensure teachers increase their use of inclusive techniques and reduce their use of aggressive techniques when students are more difficult is the need to provide an appropriate model for children. For example, according to Fenstermacher (2001), the best way to create responsible or well-mannered students is to ensure that they are around responsible teachers.

The manner of a teacher takes on particular importance, insofar as it serves as a model for the students... as something the student will see and believe proper, or imitate, or accept as a standard for how things will be (p. 644).

The final implication of this study relates

to an observation by Roeser et al. (2000), commenting on how to facilitate the likelihood of increasing teachers' use of inclusive discipline techniques while decreasing aggressive responses, even to the most difficult of students.

Creating professional work environments where teachers feel supported by other professionals and school leaders in relation to their own needs for competence, autonomy, and quality relationships is essential to their decision to create these conditions for students (p. 466).

Teacher support

Facilitation of responsible classroom discipline practice by all teachers in a school may be achieved by way of a series of staff development activities.

First, staff need to examine the negative impact on students of aggressive discipline techniques such as sarcasm, group punishments, etc. Their negative impact on non-target children as well as misbehaving students should be noted.

After adequate discussion staff can be expected to provide support for a code of behaviour for teachers that specifies avoidance of such aggressive discipline strategies.

Such a code could also require teachers to allow students to have some input into rule definition in the area of behaviour management. In addition, it should make mandatory some systematic approach to providing recognition for students' responsible behaviour. Obviously the form these recognitions take depend to some extent on the age of the students. Ideally they may be negotiated with students but could be assumed to include descriptive praise or

encouragement, communication to parents or others, special activities or roles, control over time, and tangibles.

In addition to agreeing on the use of student involvement and recognitions, teachers should consider and agree on the need to discuss with misbehaving students the impact their behaviour has on the rights of others to feel safe and to have an opportunity to learn. Such a discussion would not take the form of a lecture by the teacher but would need to include statements about the 'problem', active listening, probably some confrontation of students' irrational ideas, negotiation of a plan for the future, and the setting of an evaluation and review period.

For a staff code of conduct to work effectively the culture of the school needs to become collegial to the extent that teachers manifesting unacceptable disciplinary strategies are seen as requiring support rather than condemnation. Recent research by Rogers (2002) indicates that within most schools there are teachers who want assistance and others who want to provide it. Unfortunately there is usually no way to minimise the perceived risk associated with the asking for, or the giving of, support.

Informing them that their colleagues are probably stressed by discipline can increase the likelihood of getting teachers to assist colleagues who are using aggressive techniques. Further, recent research (Lewis, 1999) indicates that such teachers are not likely to inform others of the stress they are experiencing as a result of the misbehaviour of students in their classes. Rather, such teachers are more likely to blame themselves, vary their eating or sleeping patterns, and get sick. Consequently, the identification of staff

utilising aggressive discipline techniques can be represented as a way of assisting stressed colleagues who, although requiring support, may not normally be expected to seek it voluntarily.

Some stressed staff avoid the possibility of becoming aggressive with students by refusing to confront them about their irresponsible behaviour. Consequently, it is helpful if the whole staff considers the range of expectations for student behaviour that should apply in the school and identify those expectations of highest priority. The staff then determine which, if any, expectations they should be obliged to pursue. The assumption is made that any teacher who fails to pursue these expectations is in need of support. Discussion then centres on the obligation of all staff to abide by a code of conduct that outlines not only which priority expectations for student behaviour have to be enforced by staff but also which discipline techniques need to be avoided.

To date, the author has facilitated at a number of schools the implementation of a program, whereby colleagues are offering support to staff who are known to be using aggressive discipline techniques such as repeatedly yelling in anger, sarcasm, sending students out of class without intermediate 'steps', labelling students and keeping classes in for detention, or who are failing to follow through on priority expectations for student behaviour. In these schools all staff have indicated how they would like to be notified if a problem were to arise with the way they were disciplining students. They have all nominated a 'buddy' who is expected to channel such communication. Schools maintain these programs because of the programs' perceived effectiveness. The first of these programs to be

implemented has been in place for 6 years.

In conclusion, encouraging teachers to build rather than destroy goodwill with students who are provocative is a challenging request. It will not be easy and can take many years of persistent effort accompanied by considerable support (Lewis, 2001). No matter how effective support is achieved, there is a need to support teachers, so that they can avoid becoming coercive in the face of increases in student misbehaviour and instead respond calmly and assertively while rewarding good behaviour; discussing with students the impact their misbehaviour has on others and involving them in some of the decision-making about rules and consequences. If teachers do not do this, it may mean less student time on task, less schoolwork learnt and, possibly more significantly, less responsible students.

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