

EFFECTIVE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE – THE PRECONDITION FOR SUCCESSFUL TEACHING

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***Abstract.** Students and their behaviour at school has been the subject matter of many scientific texts. This article aims to present Croatian and international literature of the past 30 years on the subject of school discipline. School and classroom discipline, or lack thereof, is a problem that troubles many schools around the world. The article discusses the epistemological roots of the term discipline. Looking at discipline from a pedagogical point of view, it is not considered to mean unquestioned obedience, but a requirement for achieving a high quality learning and teaching process. As such, discipline does not represent the objective of the teaching process, but rather a means of ensuring optimal and encouraging circumstances, as well as harmonious cooperation between students and teachers. Working in such conditions is characterized by a high degree of commitment and motivation of all participants of the teaching process. The article presents possible causes of indiscipline, the importance of a teacher's personality in achieving the desired discipline and possible strategies for classroom management. The authors present several suggestions that could help teachers practitioners in establishing and maintaining discipline.*

***Keywords:** school discipline; students; teachers; teaching.*

Introduction

Students and their behaviour at school are the topic of many scientific texts. The number of students that have problems with discipline is increasing every day. School and classroom discipline, or lack thereof, is a problem that troubles many schools around the world. Even students do not want indiscipline. When observing classroom (in)discipline, we could say that it evolved along with the development of society. Unfortunately, schools have to pay increasingly more attention to discipline, and consequently dedicate less time to education (Shaw & Wood, 2009).

An attempt to define the term discipline

The word discipline originates from Latin, and actually means – *to learn*; it originally referred to the self discipline necessary to complete certain tasks

(Vizek Vidović et al., 2014). When talking about school or classroom discipline, in literature that deals with this pedagogical phenomenon, we can find different definitions. Kyriacou (1997) states that discipline is the order in a classroom required for students to successfully learn. The term discipline also refers to the teacher's behaviour that represents a reaction to student behaviour that disturbs order, safety and the learning process (Vizek Vidović et al., 2014). Eisenbraun (2007) points out that the objective of discipline is to ensure a safe and calm learning environment. The authors include discipline to mean obeying ingrained, agreed upon rules of behaviour, communication and mutual respect.

Therefore, when looking at discipline from a pedagogical point of view, we do not consider it to be unquestioned obedience, but a requirement for achieving a high quality learning and teaching process. As such, discipline does not represent the objective of the teaching process, but rather a means of ensuring optimal and encouraging circumstances, as well as harmonious cooperation between students and teachers. Working in such conditions is characterized by a high degree of commitment and motivation of all participants of the teaching process.

In a pedagogical and didactic context, discipline is defined as achieving the conditions that enable an effective realization of the school's function in a classroom environment. The last thirty years saw an increase in scientific interest for the ways in which teachers interpret and respond to discipline problems that occur in the classroom (Johnston, 1989; Taylor, 1990).

Causes of indiscipline

When we talk about classroom discipline, the question arises as to what can impede it. There are many ways of disrupting classroom discipline, and some of them are: talking during class, interrupting a classmate or the teacher, making offensive and inappropriate remarks, ignoring the teacher's instructions, getting up unnecessarily and walking around the classroom, throwing papers, pieces of rubber or chalk at other students, texting or recording videos with a cell phone, making unnecessary noise, cheating on tests, destroying property, and even physically assaulting and attacking other students or any adult in the school. In scientific literature, there are different ways of classifying the causes of student disobedience. In general, they can be classified into three groups: biological characteristics of children, children's emotional problems and the situation in the school or class (Andrilović & Čudina Obradović, 1996).

In his book *Essential teaching skills*, Kyriacou (1997) devotes a whole chapter to discipline. Discipline is important for novice teachers, but also teachers with many years of classroom teaching experience. The author points

out that in order to establish the required order in the classroom, the art of effective teaching is more important than the attitude towards student disobedience, because a well-designed and implemented lecture leaves little room for the violation of discipline.

Even teaching itself can significantly contribute to the creation of discipline, because engaging ways of teaching, frequent change of activities, using various sources of knowledge, dynamic changes in teaching methods, and introducing unexpected elements in the teaching process will result in the reduction of discipline problems. Changing strategies, methods and procedures aimed at students reduces indiscipline by making work seem less cumbersome and more authentic, and turns students into active participants interested in the teaching process. According to the author, the usual causes of student disobedience are: boredom, long-lasting mental strain, inability to perform an activity, sociability, low academic self-awareness, emotional problems, a negative attitude, lack of negative consequences.

Boredom is certainly one of the most common causes of classroom indiscipline. Götz, Frenzel and Pekrun (2007) point out the alarming fact that students are, on average, bored almost half of the time during almost every period. The situation is not any better in universities. Daniels et al. (2009) cite the experience of first year college students: they say that they are bored during 40 % of the time spent in class.

Glasser (1994) states that children actually love to learn if the content they are learning about meets their needs and interests. They learn until learning becomes boring. "Boring" usually means failure to connect work with life. For example, it is deathly boring to memorize facts that will not be useful to us or anyone we know, except for the school test. The authors suggest defining boredom during class as inadequate or absent stimuli, resulting in students failing to follow the teaching process, and often disrupting it.

Teachers must be aware of this fact and try to make teaching interesting, applicable in everyday life, more diverse, more connected with the experience, interests and abilities of students. They should not ignore the fact that they have students of the third millennium in their class, a new, net-generation. Today's children and teenagers live and grow up with all the advantages (and disadvantages) of new technologies. Teachers must take this into account when preparing teaching materials. Growing up and learning in the new (multi)media learning environment requires different didactic strategies and situations from those who were able to meet the needs (of generations) of students thirty or fifty years ago (Matijević, 2013).

The personality of the teacher and classroom discipline

We must be realistic when considering the personality of teachers, which has great significance in assessing acceptable or unacceptable student behaviour. What will concern or astonish one teacher, others may not even notice it or may consider it to be a child's joke or mischief. Teachers should not be too critical of their student's every step (Previšić, 1999).

The personality of effective teachers is an important field of research. Scientists around the world are investigating the personal characteristics that make teachers effective in the classroom. During the last few decades, over a 1000 research papers focusing on some aspect of the teacher's personality have been written and published (Nussbaum, 1992). Personal traits are relatively stable characteristics that affect the behaviour of individuals in a certain way (Gao & Liu, 2013).

The personality of the teacher is extremely important in creating a positive discipline in the classroom. Students are good at estimating personality traits of teachers. Literature identifies the following desirable characteristics of a good teacher: amiability, fairness, positive attitude, competence, flexibility, objectivity, honesty, accountability, sense of humour, creativity, admitting mistakes, patience, forgiveness, respect, high expectations, compassion and a sense of belonging (Brajša, 1995; Bratanić, 1993; Cruickshank et al., 2003; Eryilmaz, 2014; Gao & Liu, 2013; Glasser, 1999; Irvine, 2001; Kneipp et al., 2010; Kyriacou, 1997; Norton, 2015; Thompson et al., 2004).

Along with the desirable characteristics of teachers, students also cite the undesirable. According to a research study conducted by Eryilmaz (2014), students listed the following undesirable characteristics of teachers: introversion, distrust of others, emotional instability, emotional distance, neglect of students.

This brings up the question of which traits of excellent teachers are more important: affective or cognitive? The best response is – both. All of these personality traits, if used appropriately, become catalysts for optimal student learning and are therefore an indispensable part of the teacher's work, as well as for establishing interaction with students. The teacher's personal traits do are not manifested only when conducting class, but also in the selecting learning activities, materials, classroom management strategies and techniques, and establishing social interaction with students (Henson & Chambers, 2002).

Nobody wants to offend or cause problems for a person they hold in high esteem, so students treat such teachers with respect, recognizing them as competent professionals as well as good people. These teachers manage to create a friendly classroom atmosphere in which work discipline becomes the usual *modus operandi*.

Competent teachers should develop the ability to detect the causes of student disobedience, because only then will they be able to act adequately (Kyriacou, 1997). The authority of the teacher should not be the sole source of power, but a means of directing, organizing and managing which relies on mutual appreciation, trust and respect.

Classroom management and classroom discipline

The first place where future teachers gain insight into classroom management is their personal experience as students. Another place to learn about classroom management are schools where they do their own student training, and the third source of knowledge are college classes, or the learning content of certain courses (Allen, 2010). Teachers often report that they feel inadequately prepared in the field related to classroom management (Clement, 2002; Duck, 2007; Kagan, 1992; Meister & Melnick, 2003; Stoughton, 2007). Furthermore, as another important fact, they mention a poor connection between the program under which they receive their education, and the real classroom environment that awaits them (Clement, 2002; Flores, 2006). Therefore it is not surprising that teachers tend to leave their profession within the first years of their employment, precisely because of problems with classroom discipline, or classroom management (Charles, 1992; Liu & Meyer, 2005).

Scientific literature about class (in)discipline often mentions two concepts: discipline and classroom management. In everyday language, the following terms are often used interchangeably and it is therefore important to stress the difference between them. Marshall (2005) states that the fundamental difference between classroom management and classroom discipline lies in the distribution of responsibility – the teacher is responsible for classroom management, while students are responsible for discipline. However, nowadays teachers are also responsible for the behaviour of students. When teachers take on the role of disciplining students, they deprive them of the opportunity to become more responsible. It is a far more effective approach to let students find ways to redirect their undesirable behaviour on their own. Classroom management, in the narrow sense, refers to the discipline and management of bad student behaviour. However, successful teaching requires much more than controlling bad student behaviour (Allen, 2010).

Rijavec and Miljković (2010: p. 11) state that there are two (positive) models of school discipline: the positive discipline of Jane Nelsen and her associates, and the assertive discipline of Lee Canter and Marianne Canter.

Positive discipline is student oriented and emphasizes the development of self discipline and the importance of meeting the students' needs for:

- autonomy – the need to independently choose certain activities and make decisions
- competence – the need to feel successful, and
- good relationships with others – the need for close and safe relationships with other people.

This model opposes the use of awards, praise and punishment and is based on a good relationship between the teacher and the students and their constant negotiation as a way of preventing problems in the classroom (Rijavec & Miljković, 2010: p. 11, 12).

Assertive discipline is teacher oriented. It is based on rules and corrective actions in case the specific agreed upon rules are broken. Corrective actions (awards, praise, punishment) are essential to treating and preventing problems, and again, to the development of self-discipline (Rijavec & Miljković, 2010). This approach was developed in order to train teachers to manage student behaviour and is based on the idea that teachers have the right to teach in well-managed classrooms, and, in the same time, that students have the right to learn in a controlled environment. The assumption of assertive discipline is that teachers will design and establish a plan for classroom discipline before the start of the school year, and then to acquaint students with the information about that is expected of them, and what are the consequences in case they fail to comply with the plan. Praise and punishment should be applied fairly to all students. Teachers should set punishment that is appropriate to the age of students and to the classroom situation (Malmgren et al., 2005). In the short term, it seems that assertive discipline is more effective, but positive discipline is a better choice in the long term. (Rijavec & Miljkovic, 2010: p. 13).

Studies have shown that students accept classroom rules if they are delivered in an appropriate and reasonable manner (Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2006, as cited in de Jong et al., 2014). Classroom rules provide structure and consistency. The rules also allow the teacher to create and maintain a positive classroom environment (Anderson & Spaulding, 2007). There are several characteristics of good classroom rules (Little & Akin-Little, 2003, Rhodeet et al., 1993, as cited in Little & Akin-Little, 2008):

- reduce the number of rules to a minimum (the maximum is 5)
- rules should be expressed as simply as possible
- express rules in positive terms
- rules should be unambiguous and understandable
- rules should describe observable behaviours (with emphasis on those that are measurable)
- rules should be placed on a visible spot in the classroom
- ensure that the rules are linked with consequences.

In order to better and more actively abide by the class rules, students themselves should participate in their creation (Anderson & Spaulding, 2007; Zirkle, 2013). The consequences, or punishment, for breaking the rules should be given fairly and consistently to all students. Mayer and Leone (1999) found that a well-developed awareness of school rules and consequences, as well as an understanding of how they are applied, reduces classroom indiscipline.

The teacher's choice of a model of discipline certainly depends on several factors, some of which are certainly the personality of the teacher, years of work experience, and the classroom in which they teach (Wolfgang, 1999, as cited in Polat, Kaya, & Akdağ, 2013). However, it is also important to note that the teacher's choice of a particular model of discipline depends on the culture and atmosphere of the school as a whole, the impact of the immediate and wider local community, and in general the social order and dominating educational policy.

Teachers differ in their preferred models of discipline. Such research in Croatia is almost nonexistent, so it would certainly be a scientific challenge to examine which disciplinary model is favoured by Croatian teachers.

Guidelines for improving classroom discipline

All students should be educated in safe, tidy and well-disciplined schools (Yell & Rozalski, 2008). The post-modern society that we live in today requires high-quality work at schools and training students for numerous challenges that await them in the future. High-quality work in schools is not something that occurs spontaneously, but must be carefully planned out, and a lot of effort, knowledge and patience must be put in for its realization. One of the conditions for achieving quality work in schools is establishing classroom discipline, or, more precisely, positive discipline, which encourages all students to be active.

Finding strategies to effectively eliminate challenging student behaviour is one of the major concerns of teachers (Van Acker & Wehby, 2000). The teachers are faced with a really difficult and complex task. In fact, there is no universal strategy for classroom management that will provide a positive classroom discipline. A strategy used by one teacher that is effective within their class is not guaranteed to be effective when used in the same class by another teacher. Similarly, the fact that a strategy for classroom management proved to be an excellent choice in one class, does not mean that the same strategy will be as effective in another class (even though it is used by the same teacher).

Therefore, some kind of safe and reliable recipe for establishing a positive classroom discipline doesn't yet exist. Therefore, further in this text, we are going to try to give some guidelines that could help teachers establish a more positive classroom discipline:

- the importance of rules set during the first few days of class play an important role in establishing discipline in the classroom
- addressing students by name has a positive effect on discipline, unlike addressing them with the pronoun “you”.
- addressing students with a calm voice reduces and relieves a tense and undesirable situation
- talking to a student about problems in private (after school, not in front of everyone) shows caring for a person
- appreciating a child’s personality, encouraging students in their effort to abide by the classroom rules and behave pro-socially, and encouraging their persistence and drive to not give up as soon as the first obstacle is encountered
- carefully designing classroom activities that will engage students (give both oral and written instructions)
- a good relationship with parents improves discipline, a relationship of trust and mutual respect.

In order to develop a comprehensive set of skills and strategies that will help teachers stimulate children's social growth and development, and promote prosocial behaviour (and thus establishing a positive classroom discipline), teachers need the help and support of the entire school community (Cartledge & Loe, 2001; Lo et al., 2002). School professional staff can be of great help to teachers In this domain – professionals like educators, psychologists, speech therapists.

Conclusion

The behaviour of today's students is hardly comparable with the behaviour of students twenty or more years ago. Why is that so? Have the students, teachers, parents, society or circumstances changed that much? The answer probably lies in the synergy between all these factors. Regardless of the overall changes in society, schools still have a major role in education, and without proper discipline (not the strict, military one, but the more educational, work discipline) teaching becomes almost impossible or, in a milder form, incomplete and not optimal.

Disciplinary problems should be resolved so that “an atmosphere of love, consistency and integrity is maintained. Students need to know that they are still good people; their behaviour is unacceptable” (Jensen, 2003: p. 282). Students’ self-esteem should constantly be encouraged, and, if necessary, developed. The dignity of students should be kept in mind and the teacher will achieve this by showing understanding, empathy, willingness to forgive, respect for the child's

personality, a friendly approach, giving positive guidelines, not judging the person but the inappropriate act.

Probably one of the greatest challenges of today's educational activity is creating a supportive environment in schools in which all students and all teachers feel dignified and satisfied. Discipline is just one piece that forms this desired (hopefully not utopian) mosaic.

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