

Discipline Concerns among Preservice Teachers

Leslie Irwin

Funmi Amobi

Arizona State University at the West Campus

Abstract

This paper was prompted by conversations with preservice teachers concerning the concept of discipline. The paper explored some background theory of discipline, leading to maintenance of desired behavior in the classroom. It addressed dimensions of discipline touching on the locus of control of discipline, purposes of discipline, and factors that affect discipline. Finally, the paper dealt with the preventive aspect of discipline. Though instigated by preservice teachers in mind, the issue is of significance to all practitioners. This paper is more informational than prescriptive.

Introduction

From recent casual conversations with preservice teachers enrolled in our classes, we discovered that as they prepare to step into the classroom, preservice teachers' expressed anxiety / apprehensions have frequently centered on the behavior of pupils in the classroom. Some of the students had actually encountered behavior problems during their classroom observations, and had expressed a feeling of helplessness and inability to do anything. When asked why they felt that way, they simply indicated that they did not know what to do. We realized that these preservice teachers could benefit from a general understanding of the nature of behavior in order to affect acceptable students' behavior in the classroom. For this reason, we present brief useful background information on discipline to give students and practitioners some understanding of the theory, leading to practical preventative issues of discipline in the classroom.

From our point of view, behavior needs to be understood as anything a student does, and misbehavior as anything in which a student chooses to engage, but one that is not appropriate in a particular situation. For example, if students choose to talk when they are supposed to be working quietly, talking becomes misbehavior since that is not the required or prescribed behavior at that particular time. Talking is appropriate when the teacher asks a question or during discussion time in the classroom at which time talking is allowed and required. Behavior that is not warranted by any demand of a specific situation is misbehavior. What teachers do to guide or assist students behave appropriately as demanded by specific circumstances constitute discipline, and discipline is needed to maintain order to the extent that learning and teaching can best take place (Emmer et. al. 2003). We believe that to ensure proper classroom discipline and prior to embarking on a preventative and maintenance program of good behavior in the classroom, teachers need to understand the dimensions of discipline, be cognizant of the purposes of discipline, and finally be aware of some causes of children's discipline problems.

Dimensions of Discipline

Four dimensions of discipline that should provide some theoretical knowledge to enhance understanding of this subject matter consist of (a) the locus of control or the source of behavior, (b) the motivation, (c) the basis, and (d) the mechanism of control of behavior. According to Hoover & Kindsvatter (1997), when teachers are able to comprehend the culminating factors in students' behaviors, the teachers will be appropriately informed to interpret these misbehaviors in a variety of ways based on the context in which the behaviors occur. Teachers' awareness of students' locus of control of discipline can affect teachers' personal philosophy and leadership style, which invariably may influence intervention strategies to curb any eminent misbehavior or prevention of ongoing misbehaviors from escalating. Behavior in the classroom is most commonly educed by some compelling intrinsic or extrinsic event. According to Lefcourt (1982), locus of control describes perceptions of events as within or beyond one's personal control. People who ascribe to an internal locus of control may interpret events as consequences of personal actions and therefore under their sphere of control. For example, an angry student from home may go to school with this internalized displaced anger only to manifest it in aggressive behavior towards others at school and in the classroom. The source of the latter behavior is internal since it was not externally triggered by any event, items, or stimuli in the classroom. By the same token, items in the classroom such as plants, pet animals, pictures on the wall, or other stimuli may be external triggers of behaviors in the student. Irwin & Nucci (2004) agreed that "if teachers neglect to base the interpretation of misbehavior on sound knowledge of the controlling causes of the misbehavior, it could be assumed that they consider the misbehavior to be an isolated expression of rebelliousness, insubordination or non-compliance with acceptable behavior" (p.62). Such assumptions according to Hoover & Kindsvatter, (1997) would preclude one from realistically exploring other probable origins of behavior. Any intervention approach may consequently address symptoms rather than actual instigators of misbehavior. The misbehavior may consequently persist until the root cause is correctly identified and dealt with (Fields & Boesser, 2002). To determine the source of students' behavior/misbehavior, teachers ought to be able to identify the compelling internal or external occurrences that trigger misbehavior in the classroom.

Motivation is another dimension that affects behavior. Motivating factors that inspire behavior in the classroom could be positive consequences or satisfaction derived from reward as a result of complying with classroom rules of conduct. On the contrary, these factors could also echo apprehensions of reprimand and/or fear of punishment or other negative consequences from past misbehaviors. Examples of classroom misbehavior include such off task activities as fooling around, disturbing others, and activities which obstruct classroom activities when students are supposed to be engaged in assignments or prescribed activities (Senter, 1999). Other types of misbehaviors identified by Charles (2005) include aggression, immorality, defiance of authority, class disruptions, and generally not adhering to school and classroom rules and procedures. According to Charles (2005), "behavior refers to everything people do, good or bad, right or wrong, helpful or useless, productive or wasteful" (p. 3). To him, misbehavior is "the same as behavior except that, first, it is inappropriate for the setting or situation in which it occurs, and second, it is done willfully, that is, on purpose, or else out of ignorance of what is expected" (p. 3). From this viewpoint, behavior and misbehavior are used interchangeably in this paper, within the context in which use of either conveys the desired meaning.

A third dimension deals with the basis of discipline – behavior that has been well thought-out by the student as appropriate under the circumstances, or whether it is behavior compelled by teachers by way of rules and procedures and to which adherence is obligatory and hence compliance is mandatory. The former is preferable since the preferred behavior is likely to be maintained at all times whereas with the latter, compliance is likely to be the norm only when the teacher is present in the classroom. The issue here is whether children's behaviors are instigated by reason, in other words whether they have thought things through before the behavior, or whether the behavior is unreasoned, hence a blind conformity with teachers' requests. Reasoning implies a conscious behavior in consonance with the assertion that discipline implies teaching children a set of inner controls to provide them with acceptable patterns of behavior (Dreikers and Grey, 1995).

A further dimension of discipline that warrants attention is the mechanism of the behavior. This implies that behavior is the result of either a problem solving approach whose consequences could be positive and constructive, or on the other hand, behavior resulting out of habit or routine occurrences and for which the student is seemingly unmindful or heedless of consequences. As a problem solving approach, a student deliberately seeks the best of alternative behaviors available to him, considers the consequences and makes a positive choice. If the behavior occurs as a result of habit, the student may be unaware of the effect and consequences, and the behavior may recur more often especially if some satisfaction or notoriety is gained.

As may have been noticed, the locus of control in each dimension can be external or internal or both, based on the context in which behavior occurs and within which it is interpreted. Teachers' misinterpretation or misunderstanding of the locus of control of students' behavior in the classroom according to Irwin & Nucci (2004) may culminate in the use of non-constructive, inefficient, insensitive, or inappropriate discipline intervention strategies which may heighten resentment among students. This may unintentionally result in unruly behaviors among students who may interpret the teacher's response as lack of care or respect. Hence, with a good understanding of the various dimensions of discipline, when misbehavior occurs, teachers' reactions or responses are likely to be governed more by a genuine assessment of the cause of the misbehavior and the motivation driving that behavior. Inevitably, this should guide the decision of logical and equitable intervention strategies to help maintain order in the classroom.

Purposes of discipline

The purposes of discipline are another aspect of the concept of discipline of which teachers must be aware. There must be reasons or purposes for discipline, and the responses that preservice teachers have given when challenged about their purposes for discipline have been varied, from not knowing what to say, to expressions of maintaining order in the classroom without any specificity. The manner and choice of strategies to deal with behavior problems effectively will be driven by the purposes or end results of discipline that the teacher expects of students. Three themes were identified by Emmer et al (2003) in their discussion of the purposes of discipline: learning, safety, and character building.

To maintain an academically focused classroom for learning and teaching to take place, some standard of behavior must be encouraged or cultivated. Thus, one purpose of discipline is to promote learning, or at least provide conditions which may promote or facilitate learning and / or a favorable learning environment. For example, what behavior does a teacher expect when he/she is explaining or teaching at the board? Does the behavior promote learning and/or is it favorable to teaching?

Application of good classroom management skills will ensure effective management of time, keeping students on task, and eventually promoting learning.

Discipline is also meant to discourage disorderly conduct that may threaten safety in the classroom and in the school in general. Students should be provided a safe learning environment where pushing and shoving, poking, tripping, hitting, horseplay and other distractions are prohibited. These are undesired activities that can result in time wasting, injury to self or others in the classroom, and eventually teachers could be held liable. Safety should be ensured not only of persons but also school property. Such activities as writing in library or school textbooks, graffiti on walls, slashing things, ripping hooks off walls, etching on desks, etc can all be costly to schools and also create a state of deprivation of use for others. Defacing of property in the form of graffiti on school buildings and walls seem rampant as one drives around neighborhood schools. Such undesired behaviors could be curbed through enforcement of rules and logical consequences as describe later in the paper.

An essential purpose of discipline and for that matter education in general, is good citizenship, instilling good character in students. We believe that the school might be the only place to provide opportunities for children to interact and learn to live and work harmoniously with each other. Here, they may learn how to relate responsibly with others, how to tolerate others, how to show courtesy, and how to show consideration to others. The school, being a microcosm of the larger society further provides an opportunity for students to learn about and become good citizens with rights and responsibilities in a diverse and democratic society.

Factors that may affect discipline

A third aspect of discipline that warrants preservice teachers' attention deals with the factors that may affect discipline, the causal factors over which teachers, parents, and children have some control. While society in general has a decisive role, some of these factors deal directly with mind-sets and expectations of parents, students, and teachers themselves. Overall competency of teachers and their teaching styles also have effects on discipline in the diverse classroom.

Teachers need to be sensitive to community and school philosophies and policies on discipline, and be aware of what support to expect for their choice of discipline methods or strategies in the classroom. If teachers' discipline practices are perceived to be unreasonable, or demeaning to students' self-esteem, there is likely to be considerable objection and hostility which will in turn erode any conviction for students to behave in accordance with prescribed code of behavior. It is prudent to be mindful that some students especially in upper grades, may be going to school not purposely to learn but to enjoy the 'buddy-buddy' camaraderie and type of notoriety or non-constructive peer support achieved through acts of misbehavior. These are the class clowns, gang members, school athletes, bullies, whose behaviors may be detrimental not only to themselves but disruptive and intimidating to others. These students may display a lack of respect for authority and property, lack of interest in learning, poor attitudes, disregard for rules and regulations, and general irresponsible behaviors. These behaviors may either be tolerated or ignored by parents at home where there may be a lack of discipline or ineffective discipline, or where the home is a hostile and abusive environment for children. Parents may not be setting good examples for children when they do not encourage students to study or do home work, or show respect to teachers and for authority. Irresponsible behavior such as cursing or using abusive language at home and bad-mouthing

teachers for example, inadvertently give children permission to misbehave accordingly at school. When such children become unruly or aggressive and angry at school, the teacher and / or other students become the recipients of this misplaced anger. Parental show of senseless love by supporting or defending the inappropriate behavior of their children may also contribute to non-adherence to appropriate rules or required behavior in the classroom and the school in general.

Needless to say, some undesirable behaviors may be further exacerbated by teachers who insensitively demonstrate lack of respect and consideration for students, treat students improperly or unfairly, and do not make their classrooms safe and inviting places for learning. To further compound the problem of discipline, there may be incompetent and nonassertive teachers who lack classroom management skills and as a result do not have good control of their classes. Some teachers may compromise by being overly friendly with students at the expense of not checking students' misbehavior and not doing anything that may displease students. Teacher competency therefore plays a paramount role and has considerable bearing on the quality of classroom discipline. Competent teachers get the job done, they are well versed in classroom management and organization and they use multiple teaching methods to accommodate students learning style preferences. Competent teachers differentiate the curriculum to meet students' needs thereby avoiding boredom or disinterest, and they provide structure to guide student behaviors in the classroom. They are in control in the classroom.

Planning and maintaining good student behavior

With the appropriate background information on the concept of discipline as presented above, teachers can then embark on planning and maintaining discipline in the classroom. This is where the formulation and teaching of rules and procedures are introduced. Children need guidance and structure to understand what is expected of them, and how they are supposed to behave in socially acceptable ways. Structure is created in the classroom in the form of rules and procedures. Apart from the laws of the land, society provides its citizens with visible structures such as traffic lights and road signs to guide orderly driving behaviors. Vehicles stop at the red light, and go on green, there are signs that indicate driving in only certain directions and how fast one can drive. These are structures provided by society to which citizens or members of society must abide in order to maintain civility amongst people. In order to ensure orderly behavior in the classroom, teachers must decide on what structures to introduce in the classroom in order to elicit desirable behaviors or to accentuate what behaviors are acceptable and what behaviors are unacceptable. This is accomplished through rules and procedures which are formulated and taught to students. Teachers can plan classroom rules by themselves or democratically with the input of their students, keeping in mind that when the children participate, there is ownership on their part. The authors suggest that a good starting point is to discuss the necessity for laws or civic codes of conduct in society in general and then narrow it to the school and eventually to rules in the classroom. Explain to students the importance of those rules to you, to them individually, and to the class collectively. This way rules and procedures are made to be relevant and have meaning to the students who have to abide by them. According to Charles (2005), rules are expected norms of general behavior, and they function to either encourage or discourage certain behaviors.

Procedures on the other hand are ways in which students are expected to do things or carry out classroom activities appropriately. Examples of procedures may include the way students line up

to go to the gym or lunchroom, the way they prepare for end of day dismissal, getting permission to do or get things in class, and a host of other classroom activities. Charles (2005), indicates that procedures, (commonly referred to as classroom routines), function to make tasks routine so that time is not wasted, and so that students know what to do and how to carry out class activities. He also indicates that when rules and procedures are carefully planned and thoroughly taught, disruptive and inappropriate behaviors will be curtailed and instructional activities will dominate class time. Time on task will be at a premium in a classroom with well defined and purposely taught rules and procedures. It is very essential for students to clearly understand and internalize rules and procedures before teachers embark on any serious academic instructions. To be successful, school and classroom rules must be consistently enforced by all empowered school personnel – classroom teachers, substitute teachers, principal, class captains, or designated representatives.

When rules and procedures have been developed and taught to the extent that students have internalized them, teachers then embark on implementation and maintenance of desirable behaviors in accordance to the rules and procedures. Enforcement of these rules and procedures and the concomitant logical outcomes are then explained to students. The teacher decides in advance and communicates to students, what constitutes acceptable and/or unacceptable behaviors, and what strategies will be invoked to curb any off-task activities (Emmer et al, 2003). In other words, teachers should make their behavior expectations clearly known to students. According to Emmer et al (2003), maintaining good student behavior requires a combination of consequences, intervention strategies, and communication.

Briefly defined, a consequence is what happens as a result of behavior. To be successful and confident that classroom discipline will be maintained, teachers ought to decide when and what consequences to use for behavior in various fitting occasions. Rules without consequences, according to Wong (1998), do not carry any meaning, as there is always a causal effect of not abiding by them and further more, consequences provide students with the knowledge that their choices concerning behavior have predictable results. Consequences can be positive, negative, or remedial, based on the behavior. A positive consequence is an incentive, a positive reinforcement, or reward that serves to strengthen or maintain a desired behavior. For example, if students are rewarded for working quietly or participating appropriately in an activity, chances are that this behavior will often occur in the same or similar conditions. A negative consequence on the other hand is a deterrent or penalty that serves to decrease or eradicate an undesired behavior. A typical example is, if students are reprimanded or punished for a behavior in class, it is most unlikely that the behavior will be repeated as the result is unpleasant. A remedial consequence is a corrective application that teaches a student correct or desired behavior when an inappropriate behavior occurs or is exhibited. Misbehavior in this situation is interpreted as an opportunity or a teachable moment to help students replace an inappropriate behavior with an appropriate one. Sometimes students may misbehave or fail to adhere to rules or procedures only because they have neither learned nor internalized the appropriate behavior. In this situation, a remedial consequence that teaches the desired behavior with some practice or some prompting may be the most reasonable and appropriate consequence. Evertson & Harris (1994), posit that the ultimate goal for inappropriate behaviors is not only curtailing them, but instead instructing students on replacing them with acceptable behaviors. Some useful guidelines that they proposed for consequences include, identifying what to reward or discourage, using appropriate and logical consequences, and consistently stressing compliance.

Intervention strategies are another means of maintaining classroom discipline. A teacher can maintain good student behavior by anticipating and readily identifying and intercepting emerging misbehaviors before they occur. If these behaviors are prevented from the initial stages from occurring, they will not escalate into undesirable disruptive behaviors in class. A simple eye contact or a stroll toward a student would often halt an impending behavior. There are other interventions strategies that might be more intrusive. According to Evertson & Harris (1994), the most effective intervention strategy is one that immobilizes the undesirable behavior before it becomes disruptive to class activities, and also one that reroutes the student's attention back to the prescribed task at hand.

When consequences and intervention strategies have not been very effective or successful, a good and serious teacher-student talk might just be what would elicit cooperation from an unruly student. This is when teachers communicate assertively and unambiguously to students, their expectations for change in students' attitudes and behaviors. Emmer et al (2003) reiterated that teachers need to equip themselves with skills in effective communication in order to clearly articulate the situation to students and make their position well understood. They suggested three skills that will assist teachers to become effective communicators:

1. "Constructive assertiveness. This includes communicating your concerns clearly, insisting that misbehavior be corrected, and resisting being coerced or manipulated.
2. Empathic responding. This refers to listening to the student's perspective and reacting in ways that maintain a positive relationship and encourage further discussion.
3. Problem solving. This component includes several steps for reaching mutually satisfactory resolutions to problems; it requires working with the student to develop a plan for change." (P. 147).

Soliciting desirable behavior among students therefore implies changes in students' behavior patterns, and for that reason, teachers need to be patient with students but very consistent, fair, and firm in their requirements for compliance.

Conclusion

Maintaining student discipline begins with understanding the root causes of misbehavior and other conditions that may affect student behavior. This is a precursor to implementing a classroom discipline system that is guaranteed to work. The conventional and technical approach of using sweeping and well-rehearsed formulaic strategies to keep students on task may turn out to be a temporary band-aid if it is not applied within the context of introspection into the causes of misbehavior. In fact, such blind and unexamined interventions may become counterproductive when the punishment does not fit the crime.

We reiterate that the essential purpose of discipline is not to necessarily force students to comply with imperious mandates backed with the threat of the consequences that noncompliance might incur. Rather, it is partly to inculcate in students "a preferred way of being with others in the classroom and in the world." (Bullough, Jr., 1994, p.3). The teaching of rules, classroom procedures and routines must be extended to include a clear explanation of the need for embracing rules and regulations as a means of maintaining law and order in society at large. In this way, students are oriented to see the classroom and school as microcosms of society that thrive on every member's

voluntary action/interest to established codes of conduct. It is important that novice teachers understand where students are coming from as they plan their classroom discipline systems. It is also important that such discipline systems elucidate to students the far-reaching purpose of discipline that extend beyond keeping quiet in the classroom, to include the rules of engagement for productive citizenship in the classroom, school, the community outside the school, and the world at large. For this purpose, we recommend an orientation to classroom discipline that facilitates and produces good behavior, rather than a focus on exercising custodial power and control over students.

References

- Bullough, R. V., Jr. (1994). *Digging at the roots: Discipline, management, and metaphor*. *Action in Teacher Education*, 16, (1), 1-10.
- Charles, C.M. (2005). *Building Classroom Discipline*. 8th Edition. Boston: Allyn & Bacon
- Dreikurs, R. & Grey, L. (1995). *Logical Consequences*. NY: Penguin-NAL
- Emmer, E. T., Evertson, C. M., & Worsham, M. E. (2003). *Classroom Management for Elementary Teachers (6th Ed.)*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Evertson, C. M. & Harris, A. H. (1994). *COMP Workshop manual for elementary teachers*. Nashville, TN
- Fields, M. V. & Boesser, C. (2002). *Constructive Guidance and Discipline: Preschool and Primary Education*. Columbus, OH: Merrill Prentice Hall Publication.
- Hoover, R.L., & Kindsvatter, R. (1997). *Democratic Discipline-Foundation and Practice*. Upper Saddle River, OH: Merrill Publication.
- Irwin, L. & Nucci, C. (2004). Perceptions of students' locus of control of discipline among pre-service and in-service teachers in multicultural classrooms. *Intercultural Education*. v15 (1). p 59-71
- Lefcourt, H.M. (1982). *Locus of Control – Current Trends in Theory and Research*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Senter, Gail. (1999). *Instructor's Manual to accompany Charles Building Classroom Discipline*. 6th Edition. NY: Longman
- Wong, H. & Wong, R., (1998). *The First Days of School*. Sunnyvale, CA. Harry Wong Publications.