Rethinking Discipline

**The Traditional View of Discipline**

For the most part, our approaches to school discipline are still based on the punitive and exclusionary policies developed when public education began in the early 1900s and schools were oriented toward the academically inclined and socially acceptable. Today, the child at the schoolhouse door has created a swing in the balance of power in schools and classrooms. While the teacher’s authority was once taken virtually for granted, now teachers are confronted with students who challenge that authority. A resulting focus or greater emphasis on maintaining control has led to an increasingly reactive and often punitive approach.

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, schools have a long history of being exclusive. Discipline policies act as a means to weed out students less able, less motivated, or poorly behaved. When educators are asked to define discipline, the most common response is “punishment for rule-breaking behavior.” Schools develop lists of prohibitive rules and a series of increasingly severe punishments for violators of these rules. Unfortunately, such a punitive view of discipline results in approaches that have questionable, if not harmful effects (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Punishment focuses on what not to do, does not teach desired behaviors, can damage relationships, impede learning, and lead to students dropping out of school. Some educators feel that these punitive and exclusionary policies are fine and served them well to eliminate the irritating and unnecessary intrusions into their teaching agendas. Many believe that students know the right way to behave, that their behavior is a *performance deficit* and that they have the skills but are merely choosing defiance or subordination. They therefore assume that punishment will bring a halt to the problem behavior and the student will behave appropriately. Use is further supported because of the relief from the immediate effects offered by the short-term solution of removing the problem.

In reality, punishments satisfy the punisher, but have little lasting effect on the punished (Losen, 2011). Most sadly, these exclusionary approaches are in direct conflict with school missions to help all students achieve their fullest potential. Our punitive policies fail the very students they target. Is it reasonable to exclude students with social, emotional, and behavioral needs from the one environment that may allow them to learn the value of an education and the vital skills, behaviors, and attitudes necessary to function successfully, not only in school, but in the community and later on the job?

**Discipline is Teaching**

As we seek to ensure inclusive learning environments, our attitudes regarding discipline must change, Is discipline concerned with punishing misconduct or with preventing it? According to the dictionary, it refers to prevention and remediation, “training to act in accordance with rules;” and “instruction and exercise designed to train proper conduct or action;” “training that is expected to produce a specified character pattern of behavior;” and “controlled behavior resulting from such training.”

Dis•ci•pline *n.* (fr. Latin *disciplina*, teaching, learning) Instruction that corrects, molds, or perfects character and develops self-control.

Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary

Discipline is the slow, ongoing, sometimes time-consuming task of helping students see the sense of acting in certain ways. This thinking is in line with the high probability explanation for many discipline problems today-*skill* *deficit*. This understands that many students come from environments that have not taught or expected pro-social behavior for school success and they have a limited repertoire of behaviors and do not know how to behave responsibly in the school setting. Blaming the child and responding by “getting tough” will not alter this skill deficit; teaching will.

Reaching today’s students requires a teaching focus-teaching students how to be successful and behave responsibly in school. This is based on the belief that social behavior is learned, therefore it can be taught. Students can be taught socially acceptable ways of behaving just as one would teach any academic subject. Discipline should be based on the very same instructional concepts used to facilitate academic learning. Direct instruction in social behaviors can be provided to students, and practice, encouragement, and correction given as needed. And just as with academics, when behavior problems are complex or chronic, specialized interventions or intensive teaching arrangements may be necessary. A comparison of approaches to academic and social problems is seen in Figure 1.

Central to this teaching approach is the ability to view misbehavior as a teaching opportunity. When social errors occur, educators are given the opportunity to teach alternative behaviors that are more appropriate. This allows teachers and administrators to remain objective in the face of problem behavior, focusing on teaching out of care and concern rather than react angrily, personally, defensively, or punitive. The goal becomes teaching and maintaining high standards for responsible student behavior and keeping all students in school where they can learn the skills necessary for both academic and social success. Only then can schools fulfill their missions of helping students achieve their fullest potential.

**The Role of Social Competence**

As early as the 1970s, educators asserted that social development has more impact than cognitive development on determining success or failure in school as well as society. A lack of social skills has been linked to juvenile delinquency, grade retention, suspensions, truancy, dropping out, lower self-esteem, and delayed cognitive development (Gresham, 1984). In 1996, the Alliance for Curriculum Reform set goals for student learning in the 21st century: 1) learning how to learn and integrate knowledge, 2) communication skills, 3) thinking and reasoning, 4) interpersonal skills, and 5) personal and social responsibility. This emphasis on social competence by schools is resounded by the world of work. As adults, social deficits have been correlated with the inability to gain and

maintain employment, discharge from military service, involvement with the judicial system, and mental health problems.

Since social competence plays such a significant role in life-long success, it is a legitimate school task worthy of our time and resources.

Academic & Social Problems: A Comparison of Approaches:

Error Type Approaches for Academic Approaches for Social

Problems Problems

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| Infrequent | * Assume student is trying to make correct responses; error was accidental, a *skill deficit*. * Provide assistance (teach, model, guide, check) * Provide more practice and feedback; monitor progress. * Assume student has learned skill and will perform correctly in the future. | * Assume student is choosing to be “bad;” error was deliberate, a *performance deficit*. * Use consequences/punish. * Practice not required. * Assume student has “learned” lesson and will behave in the future. |
| Frequent | * Assume student has learned the wrong way or has inadvertently been taught the wrong way. * Diagnose problem; identify misrule or determine more effective way to teach. * Adjust teaching arrangements to accommodate learner needs. Provide practice and feedback. * Assume student has learned skill and will perform correctly in the future. | * Assume the student is refusing to cooperate; student knows what is right, has been told to stop, and is being insubordinate. * Provide more severe consequences; remove the student from normal context (office referral, detention, suspension, etc.) * Maintain student removal from the normal context. * Assume student has “learned” lesson and will behave in the future. |



Figure 1

Discussion:

What did you hear that gives you pause to rethink your understanding of discipline? Share the key ideas that restructure your view of discipline.