Chapter 5 : Discipline Strategies with Case Illustrations

Application of discipline strategies

5.1 Many people may have a wrong concept that discipline is a hard approach and guidance a soft one in managing students' behaviour problems. Therefore many teachers would rather take up the role of a guidance teacher and become rather uncomfortable if they are offered positions as discipline teachers instead. What is more important here is not a matter of hardness or softness. The Educative Approach to Discipline does not encourage permissiveness or giving " unconditional acceptance". It advocates that students should be steered towards making a decision on the appropriate solution to the problem situation. The following cases help illustrate this approach in managing problem behaviour.

Scenario 1: Resolving student conflicts

In a Geography class, the students were asked to complete a work sheet by copying a diagram from the blackboard. While the teacher was working on the blackboard, two boys at the back row started to tease each other. The one who was less verbal curled up the paper of his neighbour to show his anger. His friend quickly reciprocated. The two sheets of paper turned into two paper lumps on the desk and a fight seemed inevitable. The teacher went over and asked for the diagrams. The boys stared at the paper balls and asked the teacher for new worksheets. The teacher took the paper balls and showed non-verbal disapproval. She then asked the boys to continue to draw on the crumpled sheets, as the logical consequence of their action. As she spoke, the teacher helped to smooth out the papers on the desk and hurried the boys to continue with their work. The boys seemed to have accepted the consequence. They stopped their conflict and continued working the rest of the lesson.

In this situation, the teacher chose to resolve conflicts by non-punitive intervention before it blew out of control. The teacher re-established limits and order in the class. She did not waste the instruction time to find out the cause of the conflict because it might stir up stronger emotions and disrupt the teaching process altogether. Timely intervention can prevent situations from deteriorating and blowing up to serious disruptions.

* You may think that requiring the boys to complete their work on a crumpled work sheet is not the kind of "punishment" that you would endorse but that is the logical consequence of the boys' behaviour. This is an alternative to discipline measures such as writing lines, isolation and detention etc. It does not have the side effects of punishment. The students complied with the teachers' words. This was neither because of the authority of the teacher nor because of fear. They accepted the discipline method as the logical consequence of their misbehaviour.

Scenario 2: Handling an assault case

A teacher was strolling along the corridor during recess while on duty. Suddenly, she saw a Secondary I student being assaulted publicly by another student. Several other students looked on but did not take any action to ease the tension. The teacher was ignored when she tried to stop the assault by ordering the assailant to stop the attack at once. Considering that she might not be physically strong enough to stop the fight on her own, she told the students to stay calm and stop fighting. On the other hand, she sent another student to ask for help in the teachers' room. Then she examined the seriousness of the victim's injury to see whether immediate medical treatment was necessary and she also expressed her concern for both students. She further identified those onlookers who might recall the cause of the incident and provide more information later. The rest of the students were dismissed once the matter came to a close.

With the help of the class teachers concerned, the teacher on duty interviewed the students separately in a quiet corner, first the victim, then the assailant and finally the witnesses to gather information about the incident. During the investigation, the teachers did not pass any personal judgement until they were satisfied with the situation as described. They analyzed the situation with the students to let those involved understand that the teachers were fair and firm in their stand. When the students involved agreed with the findings of the investigation, the teachers invited the views of the students, in particular those of the victim and the assailant regarding the appropriate consequence and follow-up activities. At the same time the teachers attempted to help the two students reconcile. The teachers also ensured that the victim and the assailant were satisfied with the outcome. These steps were taken to ensure that the follow-up action plan could be enforced and to prevent retaliation by either student. The teachers also informed the students that the matter would be disclosed to their parents.

When the teachers completed all the necessary procedures, the parents of the students were informed. The teachers also assured the students that they would discuss the matter with them again if they were not satisfied with the development.

The discipline and the guidance team met with the principal and the teachers involved to work out follow-up programmes. At the class level, the class teacher made use of the incident to illustrate the need for self-control and conflict resolution. More details regarding conflict resolution could be found in Appendix VI. The incident was discussed with the whole class without disclosing the names of the students involved. The purpose was to explain the consequence of the assault behaviour and the rationale for the follow-up action. At the school level, the discipline master addressed the whole school at an earliest convenient time to explain what had happened so that there would not be any rumour or conjecture and let the students know that the school had dealt with the incident with fairness and reasons.

In such situations, the teachers may like to consider using brainstorming techniques to draw out the inner resources of the students in solving problems. Some information on "Helping Students Generate Ideas" could be found in the Guidance – A Resource Book published by the Education Department. For your convenience, it has been enclosed at Appendix VII for your reference.

* In handling violence cases, the teacher must take prompt and determined actions to protect all those involved from serious injury. During the intervention, the attitude and the approach of the teacher is of vital importance because the readiness of the students to co-operate depends on the friendliness, fairness and firmness of the teacher. Making any judgement too early may reduce the trust and cooperation of the students involved. Since the primary objective of the teacher is to educate, inviting students to suggest appropriate follow-up actions help them to be responsible for their wrongdoing. This also increases the teacher's flexibility in administering discipline actions.

Scenario 3: To tell or not to tell

A thirteen-year old Secondary 2 girl was caught red-handed by a discipline teacher in her attempt to steal several hundred dollars from her classmates during recess.

When probed by the discipline teacher, the girl revealed that she had just broken

up with her boy-friend and she felt upset and depressed. The girl told the teacher that she planned to buy her boy-friend a branded watch, which he yearned for. She believed that the boy would be much delighted to receive the present and their relationship could be restored. The teacher was alarmed to find that the girl had been strongly attached to her boy-friend and she would even commit theft to please him.

The girl begged the teacher not to relate the information to her parents and classmates because her parents would react very strongly to her theft and her obsession with dating and the classmates would laugh at her.

Immediately the teacher was caught in a dilemma of whether to inform the parents or to concede to the student's request for confidentiality. What actions should she take under such circumstances? In this case, the discipline teacher took the following measures:

1. Seeing that the girl was weeping incessantly, the teacher expressed her empathy and stressed that her primary concerns were to find out the causes of her misconduct and work out some mutually agreed solutions to the problem.
2. The teacher assured the girl that she was ready to help and listen instead of simply enforcing punishment.
3. Having obtained trust from the girl, the teacher steered the girl towards facing her problems and be responsible for what she had done.
4. The teacher explained clearly to the girl that she had to inform her parents about the theft. The purpose was to assist the parents to understand the incident and support the girl but not to punish her.
5. In view of her misconduct, she would be given a demerit. But she could take part in voluntary services organised by the school with the hope that her demerit could be deregistered at a later stage. This was in line with the existing school regulation and policy, and she had to bear the consequence of her misbehaviour.
6. The teacher assured that the theft and her love affair would not be revealed to her classmates.
7. The teacher also explored with the student the proper courses of action she should have taken in the situation instead of attempting to restore friendship with a present and committing theft.
8. Through rehearsing with the girl about the proper ways of handling her parents' reactions, the student became less anxious about having her parents know about her theft. The girl was persuaded to receive the assistance of the school social worker so that she could learn how to handle relationship with her peers,

especially friends of the opposite sex.

After the teacher explained and analysed the behaviour and consequence with the girl and helped her understand and accept her responsibilities, the girl was willing to accept the arrangement. The teacher then phoned her father and invited him for a joint interview.

During the interview, the father was informed of the incident and reminded that the girl had been punished by the school and would be referred to the school social worker. He was advised not to reprimand the girl, as she was much distressed by and regretful about the incident. The teacher explained to the father that the girl needed support and guidance from parents to overcome the social and personal problems which girls of this age-group would experience in their adolescence.

1. It can be seen that, for discipline problems like the one described above, the Educative Approach to Discipline is a more appropriate intervention approach.
2. The intervention techniques should be educative, problem-solving and non-punitive in nature.
3. The problem of stealing in school is usually handled by teachers. If the students exhibit the problem of habitual stealing, the police might be called in.
4. Since the student refused to disclose the matter to parents, the teacher should not force her at the early stage, lest she would take some impulsive actions, thinking that no one would help her.
5. However, the teacher tried her best to guide the student to face her problems and to accept her responsibility. The teacher should assure the student of her good will and that she was trying to help her out. Once the student felt that the teacher was empathetic and fair, she would consent to revealing the matter and receiving help from the school social worker. The support of the school social worker should be solicited as soon as possible. In this way the teacher ensured the well-being of the student and made her understand the right attitude and appropriate ways to handle the difficult situations she had put herself into and yet maintained a trusting relationship with the student.
6. At the meeting with the parent, it was equally important for the teacher to encourage the parents to stay calm and handle the problem carefully without damaging the parent-child relationship.
7. Since the student had been caught red-handed, the teacher had to help her understand that she had to be punished according to the discipline policy of the school. The teacher should also discuss with her the proper and available

> problem-solving strategies she could apply in similar situations and in any circumstances, illegal acts such as theft was unacceptable.
> 8. In handling the case, the teacher maintained a good relationship with the student and helped her learn the proper ways to solve her personal problems.

Success factors in handling problem behaviour

5.2 As demonstrated in the above three scenarios in adopting an Educative Approach to Discipline, we could summarize the following success factors in handling problem behaviour:

- **Timely intervention**

Minor misbehaviour may blow out of control. Before the misbehaviour spreads or intensifies, the teacher should intervene promptly. This timely intervention, which aims at discouraging inappropriate behaviour and reinforcing appropriate one, can quickly re-establish limits and order so that teaching and learning can go on with minimal interruption.

- **Follow-up support**

By planning the follow-up action with the students and teaching critical thinking and problem-solving skills, the teacher can help students develop a set of socially acceptable behaviours. In the long run, the students would learn to be responsible for their own action and be self-disciplined.

- **Logical consequence**

The consequence to be borne by the students should be directly and logically related to their misbehaviour. When the students fail to hand in homework assignments, they should be made to finish their work after lesson or after school instead of simply being given demerits. In discussing logical consequences, students are allowed to learn and take appropriate and responsible actions.

- **Non-punitive undertone**

The intervention is non-judgemental and the students' dignity is cared for. It guides students towards taking their responsibility without the feelings of shame, humiliation and being ridiculed. Therefore students will not retaliate.

- **Fairness**

Students should be given the opportunities to explain the reasons for his misbehaviour. Taking into consideration its seriousness, causes and situational factors, the teachers can then carry out appropriate corrective actions.

- **Cooperation**

Misbehaved students usually have low self-esteem and feel insecure and alienated from school. By disapproving only their behaviour but affirming their worth and potential for improvement, mutual trust can be established and cooperation invited.

- **Firmness**

Once an action is agreed, teachers and pupils have to follow through the agreement with continuous review of the progress. Having to follow through an agreement, the students have to think twice before they take any action and learn to be better self-controlled and more responsible.

Other common discipline measures/strategies and an analysis of their level of success

School rules

5.3 All schools have school rules as a guide of the basic expectations of proper behaviour among students in the school premises. They serve as standards for teachers, students and their parents in dealing with student affairs in school. In setting standards for the rules and regulations in a school, the following aspects are usually considered:

- School rules must be simple, clear, kept to a minimum number and made known to all parties concerned including the parents.
- The rules are drawn up with input from teachers, students and their parents.
- The rules are meant to be enforced fairly, consistently and reasonably.
- The rules are to be reviewed on a regular basis.

School rules which are drawn up with the above characteristics are effective in bringing about good moral values for students to be self-reliant, disciplined and responsible beings.

Punishment

5.4 Some teachers view punishment as a deterrent and concrete measure of handling misbehaviour. They feel obliged to punish misbehaving students so as to be fair to all those who follow rules and regulations. Punishment is a preferred practice in many schools because of its educational and deterrent effect. In fact, when punishment is meaningful and educative, it serves more than a deterrent. In the school setting, punishment should be designed as a process of education providing an opportunity for students to learn appropriate behaviour and be responsible for the consequences of their action. Various forms of punishment used in school range from teacher's frowning and looks of displeasure to copying lines; from demerits to time-out and isolation; as well as from detention to suspension. The effect of detention is analyzed in details as follows.

Detention

5.5 This is commonly practiced in dealing with students who hand in incomplete homework or who are late for school or class. The purpose is to help the students understand that the logical consequence of incomplete homework and/or lateness is to stay at school to make up for the time lost and complete the work under the guidance of the teacher. Usually the teacher will help the student think critically for a solution to the problem behaviour and understand the need to observe school rules. In so doing, the teacher creates an opportunity for reconciliation at the end of the detention. The success of this method as a deterrent of misbehaviour depends on whether the teacher takes detention merely as a punishment or a means to render extra support to the students in order to improve the situation and to build up a good teacher-student relationship. Therefore in weighing against the success factors, the situations will be as follows:

As punishment:		As an educative process:	
Timely intervention?	This is not timely because detention usually takes place some time after the incident when the parents are formally informed.	**Timely intervention?**	Detention usually takes place after parents are formally informed. Therefore the intervention is usually not as timely as what the teacher has thought.

Follow-up support?	The teachers only help the students to complete the homework to make up for the time lost. There is no attempt to solve the root of the problem.	**Follow-up support?**	Teachers help the students complete the homework as well as guiding them in their skills/habits in doing homework or making a behavioural contract.
Logical consequence?	Detention is a logical consequence for coming to school late or failing to hand in home assignments.	**Logical consequence?**	Detention is a logical consequence for coming to school late or failing to hand in home assignments.
Non-punitive undertone?	Detention could be humiliating if there is a public announcement and condemnation of the students involved.	**Non-punitive undertone?**	Teachers would care about students' feelings. It is only the "misbehaviour" but not "students' worth" that is disapproved.
Fairness?	The students may think that teachers do not understand their difficulties when not given the opportunity to discuss.	**Fairness?**	When teachers listen to the students' reasons and possible difficulties behind their misbehaviour, the students will think that the teachers are fair.
Cooperation?	Low level of cooperation is attained if students find that they are unfairly treated and feeling humiliated.	**Cooperation?**	High level of cooperation and trust can be solicited if the teachers can guide the students to understand the meaning of school rules and the need to bear the consequence of their behaviour.
Firmness?	It depends whether the teacher could firmly carry out the agreed measures.	**Firmness?**	If students are put under detention, teachers should ensure that students are detained in school as agreed during the detention period.

Having analyzed the situations along the success factors, you may like to decide now which approach to adopt.

Developing alternative perspectives and strategies

5.6 As can be seen from the paragraphs above, if a certain discipline measure is adopted not merely as a form of punishment but as an educative process, it should have the following characteristics:
- focuses on rules and not the power of the teacher;
- proves to students that they are being cared for;
- is fair, reasonable and flexible, taking every situations into account, rather than erratic or irrational;
- is accompanied by desirable alternatives; and
- is followed with guidance activities.

5.7 The essence of discipline is finding effective alternatives for punishment to help students learn self-discipline. Some educationists believe that ineffective punishment may enrage the student and make him uneducable. Therefore teachers should perceive punishment as a last resort after the more positive measures have failed to get through. Now that you have been guided through the success factors in the management methods and strategies, you may like to develop your alternative perspectives and strategies in dealing with some common problem behaviour in schools. In Appendix VIII, there are five scenarios covering aspects of dyed hair, failing to hand in homework, leaving class by pretending to be sick, using foul language and playing fool to disrupt classroom routine. For each scenario, your are guided to think of some possible questions, identify the possible causes and explore management strategies at the individual level, class level and school level.

Summary

*   The effectiveness of discipline strategies can be measured against the following success factors:
- Timely intervention
- Follow-up support
- Logical consequence
- Non-punitive undertone
- Fairness
- Cooperation
- Firmness