Rethinking Discipline to Improve School Climate*

Behavior problems clearly get in the way of schools meeting their mission. Misbehavior disrupts. In some forms, such as bullying and intimidating others, it is hurtful. And, observing such behavior may disinhibit others. Because of this, discipline and classroom management are daily topics at every school. Increasingly, however, concerns have been raised about inequities in applying consequences for misbehavior, and there is a growing appreciation of how traditional approaches to discipline can have a negative impact on school climate and culture.

Disparities in School Discipline Practices
Data from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights

Racial Disparities: Students of Color are suspended and expelled at disproportionately higher rates than their white peers.
- Compared to their white peers, African American students are three times more likely to be suspended and expelled.
- American Indian and Native-American students, who make up less than 1% of the student population, make up 2% of students suspended and 3% of students expelled from school.
- African American girls have the highest suspension rate (12%) in comparison to girls of any other race or ethnicity.
- Compared to their white male peers (6%) and white female peers (1%), American Indian and Native American girls are suspended at a rate of 7%

Gender Disparities: Of the students suspended multiple times out of school and expelled, boys are three times more likely than girls to be suspended and expelled.

Students with disabilities. Also suspended at higher rates (13%) than students without disabilities (6%).

As noted in a 2014 report by the Council of State Governments Justice Center, "millions of students are being removed from their classrooms each year, mostly in middle and high schools, and overwhelmingly for minor misconduct. When suspended, these students are at a significantly higher risk of falling behind academically, dropping out of school, and coming into contact with the juvenile justice system. A disproportionately large percentage of disciplined students are youth of color, students with disabilities, and youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT)."

About School Climate

It is noteworthy that the U.S. Department of Education urges educators to use the growing body of research in applying three "principles" for creating a positive school climate and improving discipline practices. The department states:

1. Create a positive school climate by focusing on prevention of behavioral problems
2. Expectations and consequences should be clear, appropriate, and consistent.
3. Fairness, equity and continuous improvement should be ensured.

As appropriate as these matters are, they do not underscore the psychological realities related to enhancing school climate.

Those concerned with enhancing a positive school climate want to develop an equitable, safe, friendly, caring, supportive, nurturing, empowering, and mutually respectful setting. These, of course, are emerging qualities. And psychologically, these qualities are in the eye of the beholder. From a psychological perspective, a setting is perceived positively when it is experienced as effectively enhancing, and as doing little to threaten, a student's feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness to significant others.

About Discipline

Students are seen in *compliance* when they adhere to established rules and positively respond to adult requests. When they don't, some form of discipline often is applied.

An often stated assumption is that stopping a student's misbehavior using social control practices will make her or him amenable to teaching. In a few cases, this may be so. However, the assumption ignores all the research that has led to understanding *psychological reactance* (i.e., the need for individuals to maintain and restore a sense of self-determination). Moreover, it belies two painful sets of data: the number of students who continue to manifest poor academic achievement and the staggering dropout rate in too many schools.

Ideally, consequences for misbehavior at school should be designed as learning and helping interactions. That is, more than obedience and compliance, the intent should be to

(a) help students by addressing factors causing the misbehavior and

(b) facilitate their learning (i.e., knowledge, skills, and attitudes) about
  • appropriate behavior and responsible self-control in a social context,
  • the boundaries and value of socially acceptable behavior,
  • their place in the social world that surrounds them.

With these matters in mind, traditional disciplinary practices need to give way to a personalized approach that accounts for factors causing misbehavior and how to address such factors.

> Misbehavior and how it is addressed play a sensitive role in determining school and classroom climate and culture. This is particularly a concern in schools where disparities in discipline practices are occurring and where discipline practices mainly employ social control strategies (as contrasted with using misbehavior as a "teachable moment").

About Traditional Disciplinary Practices

In a 2011-12 survey, about 38 percent of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that student misbehavior interfered with their teaching. In such instances, a natural reaction is to want those who misbehave to be disciplined and other students to see the consequences of misbehaving. An underlying assumption is that public awareness of consequences will deter subsequent problems. As a result, a considerable amount of time at schools is devoted to discipline and classroom management.

Thus, it is not too surprising that, in their efforts to deal with deviant and devious behavior and to create safe environments, many schools overrely on negative consequences and social control strategies. Unfortunately, such practices model behavior that can foster rather than counter the development of negative values and often produce other forms of undesired behavior. Moreover, the tactics often make schools look and feel more like prisons than community treasures.

In schools, short of suspending a student, punishment essentially takes the form of a decision to do something that the student does not want done. In addition, a demand for future compliance usually is made, along with threats of harsher punishment if compliance is not forthcoming. The discipline may be administered in ways that suggest the student is seen as an undesirable person, and such practices contribute to a negative attitude toward self and school.

In sum, overreliance on traditional discipline practices (e.g., using rewards and punishments to counter misbehavior, exerting power, excluding students) may temporarily control behavior, but such practices

- do not re-engage the student in classroom learning and can undermine intrinsic motivation for learning at school
- generally have a negative effect on relationships and communications with adults at school
- interfere with finding out from the student what is causing the misbehavior
- can exacerbate a negative self-image and emotional problems and increase devious and deviant attitudes and behaviors
- over time can lead to disengagement from academic and social interactions at school and eventual dropping out

All this is clearly inconsistent with efforts to develop a positive school climate.

> Students are not objects to be manipulated and controlled. The paradox of traditional discipline practices is that they tend to produce feelings of being compelled and coerced, and this leads to psychological reactance and further misbehaving. Avoiding such reactance requires a respectful approach that focuses on individual choice and preference and builds on a student's strengths, gifts and abilities to help the youngster gain a meaningful and empowered role at school and in society.

Enhancing School Climate and Addressing Student Misbehavior

The mission of schools is education. Good schools create an environment that continuously mobilizes the learner to pursue the curriculum with good behavior and effectively facilitates and enables learning. To these ends, *misbehavior must be addressed in ways that maximize the likelihood that the teacher can engage/re-engage the student in instruction and positive learning*. This is an essential foundation for enhancing a positive school climate.

The growing emphasis, in and out-of-the-classroom, on *positive* approaches for reducing misbehavior and on enhancing support for positive behavior are steps in the right direction. So is the emphasis in school guidelines stressing that discipline should be *reasonable, fair,* and *nondenigrating* (e.g., should be experienced by recipients as legitimate reactions that neither denigrate one's sense of worth nor reduce one's sense of autonomy). Missing, however, in most school improvement efforts are proactive strategies designed to promote positive social and emotional development, prevent and anticipate problems, assess the causes of incidents, and use incidents as opportunities to both address the causes and as teachable moments.

> Key facets of addressing misbehavior proactively include a focus on promoting healthy social and emotional development and addressing barriers to learning and teaching. These are critical elements in enhancing classroom and school climate and fostering conditions for learning that enhance student engagement and re-engage disconnected students.

An Environment that Promotes Social and Emotional Development/Learning

The aim of public education, of course, is not only to teach academics, but to turn out good citizens. This societal concern requires a fundamental focus on facilitating positive social and emotional development/learning that is fully integrated into school improvement efforts and not just relegated to adding a social-emotional unit to the curriculum.

In determining the degree to which this is the case, a regular school-wide assessment focuses on practices that can foster a positive environment for social and emotional, as well as academic growth. Various school climate surveys have been developed. Examples of what might be looked for are:

Social & Emotional Environment
- Contacts and supports are personalized in order to build trust and mutual respect
- Interactions and communication are encouraged: both between teachers and students; and with students and their peers
- School personnel promote opportunities to engage students in decision making and negotiation related to an event to take advantage of "teachable moments"
- Parent involvement is encouraged and incorporated in a variety of ways
- Interactions between school personnel and students are caring, responsive, supportive, and respectful
- Teachers and staff feel appreciated and acknowledge for their contributions to helping the school succeed
- Diversity is appreciation and respected
- Students, teachers, school personnel, and families feel connected to the school and to each other, as part of a community

Academic Environment
- Instructional practices are personalized (i.e., curriculum and instruction matches motivational and developmental differences)
- Assessment of progress is conducted in ways that use appropriate expectations and standards with a view to improving personalized instruction
- Regular use of informal and formal groupings and conferences for discussing options, making decisions, exploring learners' perceptions, and mutually evaluating progress;
- A strength-based approach is used to optimize learning
- Opportunities for cooperative learning
- Students are engaged in processes that offer participation in shared decision-making with respect to valued options and choices
- Regular reevaluations of decisions, reformulation of plans, and renegotiation of agreements based on mutual evaluations of progress

Why Do Students Misbehave?

In moving beyond socialization, social control, and behavior modification and with an emphasis on engagement, there is a need to address the root causes of misbehavior, especially the underlying motivational bases. An *intrinsic* motivational interpretation of the misbehavior of many students is that school is not a place where they experience a sense of competence, autonomy, and or relatedness to valued others. Over time, these perceptions develop into strong motivational dispositions and related patterns of misbehavior.

Differentiating students' motivation is critical to differentiating disciplinary responses. Assessment needs to determine:

- Is the misbehavior unintentional or intentional?
- If it is intentional, is it reactive or proactive?
- If the misbehavior is reactive, is it a reaction to threats to feelings of self-determination, competence, or relatedness?
- If it is proactive, are there other interests that might successfully compete with satisfaction derived from deviant behavior?

Negotiating consequences after an incident is an example of a strategy using misbehavior as a "teachable moment" and can inform a teacher about underlying motivation, how to respond now, and how to address the situation better if it arises again. In using negotiation, the emphasis moves beyond seeking automatic compliance. It can help differentiate between defiance and self-assertion. It can help identify levels of motivation and capability for responding appropriately.

Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching

Ultimately, matters such as disciplinary practices and school climate require school improvement practices that attend directly and with a high priority to the broad range of barriers to learning and teaching and the problem of re-engaging disconnected students. For this to happen requires embracing an expanded vision for school improvement policy and practice that promotes the transformation of student and learning supports. Such a vision encompasses:

- Expanding the policy framework for school improvement to fully integrate, as primary and essential, a student and learning supports component.

- Reframing student and learning support interventions to create a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports in-classrooms and school-wide.

- Reworking the operational infrastructure to ensure effective daily implementation and ongoing development of a unified and comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

- Enhancing approaches for systemic change in ways that ensure effective implementation, replication to scale, and sustainability.

Such new directions include weaving together and redeploying existing school and community resources and taking advantage of natural opportunities at schools for addressing problems and promoting student, staff, and other stakeholder development. Also emphasized are practices that stress building on strengths and enhancing intrinsic motivation.

We have covered all of this in-depth elsewhere (see references in the box below).

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For more resources related to the matters discussed in this set of practice notes, see our Online Clearinghouse Quick Finds on:

- *Classroom Management* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/clssroom.htm
- *Discipline Codes and Policies* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/Discip.htm
- *Behavior Problems and Conduct Disorders* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p3022_01.htm
- *Classroom Climate/Culture and School Climate/Culture and Environments that Support Learning* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/environments.htm
- School Improvement Planning – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/improvement.htm
- *School Turnaround and Transformation* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/turnaround.htm

Specific Center documents in the Quick Finds that may be of interest are:

>*Rethinking How Schools Address Student Misbehavior & Disengagement* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/spring08.pdf

>*Conduct and Behavior Problems in School Aged Youth* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/conduct/conduct.pdf

>*Common Behavior Problems at School: A Natural Opportunity for Social and Emotional Learning* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/behaviorsocialemot.pdf

>*School Engagement, Disengagement, Learning Supports, & School Climate* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/schooleng.pdf

>*Engaging and Re-engaging Students in Learning at School* – http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/engagingandre-engagingstudents.pdf

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Concluding Comments

School and classroom climate are emerging qualities stemming from the interactions within a school. Traditional approaches to disciplining students not only tend to work against enhancing positive perceptions of school climate but can increase negative attitudes toward school and school personnel. These attitudes often lead to more behavior problems, anti-social acts, and various mental health problems. Because disciplinary procedures also are associated with dropping out of school, it is not surprising that some concerned professionals refer to extreme disciplinary practices as "pushout" strategies.

All efforts to respond to behavior problems can and should be done in the context of a unified and comprehensive system designed to address barriers to learning and teaching. In this respect, the developmental trend in thinking about how to respond to misbehavior must be toward practices that embrace an expanded view of engagement and human motivation and that includes a focus on social and emotional learning and an appreciation of the power of intrinsic motivation.

All this is fundamental to enhancing school climate.

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