

# A Primer on Classroom Discipline: Principles Old and New

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*By Bonnie W*

*Need help with classroom discipline? Mr. McDaniel provides 10 principles that can serve as general guidelines for teachers.*

BY THOMAS R. McDANIEL

FIFTY YEARS AGO, the topic of classroom control was virtually ignored in teacher education programs. Prospective teachers in those days were merely told to make good lesson plans, to be firm but gentle, and not to smile until Christmas. Not so long ago, the behaviorists came up with some interesting insights into the principles of reinforcement. They told teachers to catch the child being good — and to ignore bad behavior. Then the humanists came along and told us that good discipline is related to self-concept and communication. They reminded us to talk to our students as we would address visitors in our homes. Today we are told to be assertive, to negotiate, to analyze transactions, and to rely on logical consequences, reality therapy, and Teacher Effectiveness Training in our dealings with students. When it comes to disciplinary techniques for the classroom, the contemporary teacher suffers from sensory overload.

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Meanwhile, everyone — from burned-out teachers and Gallup Poll respondents to a never-ending stream of commissions and task forces — has been telling teachers that discipline must improve, if U.S. education is ever to rise above mediocrity. At the same time, researchers have been generating volumes of data on effective schools and effective teachers. Their studies indicate that certain teaching techniques lead to better learning and better behavior. Teachers must master these techniques, the researchers say, if they hope to have well-managed and effective classrooms.

Although all the attention paid to discipline by theorists, the public, and the research community is a bit confusing, the beleaguered teacher has reason for hope. Ten principles — an eclectic combination of traditional and modern, practical and theoretical, pedagogical and psychological — provide some general guidelines for teachers who wish to modify their own behaviors in ways that will yield effective group management and control.

**1. The focusing principle.** Widely supported by experienced teachers, this principle says, in effect, "Get everyone's attention before giving instructions or presenting material." Beginning teachers often make the mistake of trying to teach over the chatter of inattentive students. They assume that, if they begin the lesson (and there are many beginning points within each lesson), students will notice and quiet down. This approach may work occasionally. What the students really learn, however, is that the teacher is willing to compete with them, to speak loudly enough to be heard over the undercurrent, to tolerate inattention, and to condone chatter during instruction.

The focusing principle reminds teach-



ers that, during group instruction, they must request, demand, expect, and wait for attention before they begin to teach. A teacher can say, "I am ready to begin"; "I am ready to begin, boys in the back"; "I am ready to begin. Lillian, and I am waiting for you." The teacher may need to speak loudly, to flip the light switch, to stand with hand raised, to ring a bell — but he or she should insist on, work for, and secure attention before starting to teach. Then the teacher can begin the actual instruction in a calm and quiet voice. An in-charge beginning is not repressive authoritarianism; it is the essential first ingredient in a well-mannered classroom.

**2. The principle of direct instruction.** The point is to get students on-task quickly and to keep them on-task consistently, so that they stay out of trou-

ble. One of the most effective techniques for accomplishing this goal is to clearly state the assignment, the directions, and the time constraints. A teacher might say, for example: "Your task is here on the board, class. You need to use your textbook and the data-bank forms to collect information. You have only 10 minutes to work, so start right away." Some classes respond well when the teacher sets explicit goals: "We took five minutes yesterday just to distribute the construction paper. Let's see if we can distribute the paper in *three* minutes today." To keep students on-task, the teacher should make certain that the tasks are interesting, relevant, and varied and that students are motivated to engage in them. The next three principles also help to keep students on-task.

**3. The monitoring principle.** "Monitoring" means keeping a constant check on student performance and behavior. Teachers should make personal contact with each student during a lesson, and they should circulate frequently among their students. When students know that the teacher will evaluate their work and behavior from close range and hold them accountable, they are more likely to stay on-task. Monitoring encourages a teacher to move about the classroom and to engage in brief conferences with individual youngsters. These personal encounters enable the teacher to provide individualized instruction or feedback. The focus may be on the academic task at hand ("Freddy, your triangles look fine, but remember to label your angles") or on a student's behavior ("Mabel, put your comb away and begin your math problems, please"). In either case, such quiet conversations between teacher and student can have a significant positive effect on the classroom atmosphere.

**4. The modeling principle.** Long before the behavioral psychologists told us that students' behavior could be influenced by "models," good teachers recognized the importance of setting an example for their students. (As the adage goes, "Values are caught, not taught.") Teachers who are courteous, prompt, well-organized, enthusiastic, self-controlled, and patient tend to produce students who exhibit similar characteristics, at least to some degree. With sensitivity and tact, teachers can also employ students as models for the other youngsters to emulate.

One especially important modeling

technique that teachers should practice is the use of a soft, low-pitched voice. Students find such a voice restful and calming. "Soft reprimands" are also effective because they are not the norm and because, being private, they tend not to invite loud protests, denials, or retorts. It is especially important for teachers to model quiet voice levels when they are circulating among students and monitoring individual work.

**5. The cuing principle.** Behavioral psychology has given us new insights into the nature and effectiveness of cues (generally, nonverbal reminders about behavioral expectations) in improving classroom discipline. Of course, good teachers have always known that cues improve discipline. The teacher who raises a hand for silence, flips the light switch to get attention, or points to a group of gigglers and then presses an index finger to the lips is reminding students of certain rules, procedures, or expectations.

Some students seem oblivious to classroom cues. In these instances, teachers should 1) examine the cues they are using, 2) establish stronger and more explicit variations of these cues, 3) teach the cues to the students directly, and 4) pair the use of each new cue with a verbal explanation of the cue. A brief example may clarify this approach for the reader. Mrs. Jones always stands with her hands on her hips when she is waiting for attention. If members of the class fail to attend to her in this pose, she may decide to strengthen the cue by combining it with a movement toward the class and a clearing of the throat. Next, she may explain to the students that these cues are designed to let them know that she is waiting for attention. At the next opportunity, she will use the nonverbal cues while saying, "As you can see, class, I am waiting for your attention."

To keep behavioral expectations flowing from teacher to student, a creative teacher can develop a host of novel cues that employ proximity, facial expressions, gestures, and objects (e.g., bells, lights, "clickers") to supplement verbal cues ("Okay, boys and girls, in 10 seconds you will need your protractors"). I know of one teacher who teaches his students new ways to cue *him*, as well. Instead of asking them to raise their hands when they know the answer to a question, he asks them to put their heads on their desks (when

they are restless), or to stand up (when they need to stretch), or to pull on their right ear lobes (when they need to be amused). Such experimentation helps students become more sensitive to nonverbal cues as methods of communication. Effective communication is essential to effective discipline.

**6. The principle of environmental control.** There are many things in a student's life that a teacher cannot control, such as handicaps, the child-rearing practices of parents, and even whether or not the child eats breakfast each morning. But a wise teacher manipulates the classroom environment to improve both learning and behavior. A teacher can enrich, impoverish, restrict, enlarge, simplify, or systematize the classroom environment. Let us look more closely at a couple of these alternatives for improving discipline.

Often, classroom management is a problem because the students are bored, apathetic, uninterested, or unmotivated. In such situations, a teacher needs to *enrich* the classroom environment in order to improve students' motivation, attention, and involvement. A teacher might use learning centers, bulletin boards, music, or audiovisual aids to provide a variety of stimuli. He or she could open lessons with exercises requiring inductive reasoning: "Here is a replica of a kitchen implement used by the ancient Egyptians, class. What might they have used it for? What uses might we have for it today?" Enrichment involves consciously adding to or varying the classroom environment for an educational purpose. Done well, enrichment motivates students — and motivated students engage in learning rather than in misbehavior.

However, classroom management can just as frequently be a problem when students are overstimulated by the classroom environment. Overstimulated students have short attention spans, are easily distracted, and tend to be hyperactive. In such situations, a teacher needs to *impoverish* the classroom environment. If the teacher tries instead to be enthusiastic and to motivate students, the result is often disastrous; much like turning up the flame under a bubbling cauldron, the additional stimuli only raise the kinetic energy level in the classroom. Instead, the teacher should darken the room, install carpets, remove distracting materials and diversions, schedule quiet times, create quiet

corners, and use such focused teaching approaches as filmstrips and lessons involving directed study. The teacher should also be a model of controlled activity, concentration, and subdued behavior — especially with regard to voice, dress, and movement.

**7. The principle of low-profile intervention.** This principle is derived from some of the pioneering research on group management by Jacob Kounin, but it is enjoying renewed attention from contemporary researchers. According to this principle, the teacher should manage student behavior as discreetly, unobtrusively, and smoothly as possible — avoiding direct confrontations and public encounters with disruptive students. Without delivering constant orders and commands (i.e., high-profile interventions), the teacher needs to anticipate behavioral problems and to nip them in the bud. A particularly effective approach during large-group instruction is to drop the name of an inattentive student into the middle of an instructional statement: "We need to remember, Clarence, that Columbus was one of several discoverers of America." A teacher can "drop" the names of several students during a presentation, but the name-dropping should be casual, with no hint of reprisal and no pause for reply.

Another low-profile technique is to move close to students who are starting to wander off-task. The teacher's proximity often curtails misbehavior or inattention. Such "overlapping" of teacher behaviors (e.g., moving to a trouble spot in the classroom while continuing to conduct a lesson) becomes almost automatic with practice and can be enhanced by nonverbal cues, such as touching an inattentive student on the shoulder or quietly opening his or her book to the proper page.

**8. The principle of assertive discipline.** This principle, made popular by Lee Canter, calls for higher-profile but nonhostile interventions that effectively communicate a teacher's wants and needs for better discipline. Actually, assertive discipline is only a commonsense combination of behavioral psychology (praise) and traditional authoritarianism (limit setting).

A teacher should begin by identifying specific roadblocks to discipline; these are usually consequences of the teacher's low expectations regarding students' behavior. All teachers should proceed



Illustration by Ned Shaw

from the position that no child has the right to prevent classmates from learning or teachers from teaching. Teachers should also believe that their students are able to behave appropriately.

An assertive teacher communicates these expectations to students through clearly stated and carefully explained rules. When the rules are broken, the teacher consistently follows through with systematic consequences. Meanwhile, the teacher sets limits verbally through requests, hints, and demands, and he or she uses nonverbal communication (eye contact, proximity, touch, gestures) to communicate exactly what is required of whom. Finally, the teacher engages in "broken record" confrontations — repeating requests for compliance until students recognize that the teacher cannot be diverted or ignored.

These techniques, coupled with positive consequences for following rules and heeding the teacher's requests, convince students that the teacher knows what he or she wants and needs by way of student behavior. Students also come to realize that their responses will generate positive or negative consequences for them.

**9. The I-message principle.** Both the assertive discipline of Lee Canter and the humanistic discipline of Haim Ginott and Thomas Gordon rely on clear communication between teacher and students. Both approaches to discipline advocate the use of I-messages by teachers. Because assertive discipline and humanistic discipline operate on entirely different premises, however, the I-message takes two forms.

A teacher practicing assertive disci-

pline and the broken-record technique may communicate a demand, wish, or need in order to refocus a group or an individual student. The teacher prefaces his or her specific request with the words "I want you to. . ." or "I need you to. . ." Such I-message assertions are more effective than "You stop. . ." messages, which focus on confrontations ("you") and on past infractions ("stop"). An assertive I-message tells students exactly what the teacher wants and expects them to do.

A teacher practicing humanistic discipline, by contrast, uses I-messages to communicate his or her *feelings*, so that students can understand more clearly how their behavior affects the teacher. According to Gordon, an I-message has three elements: 1) the description of students' behavior ("When you leave our classroom in a mess. . ."); 2) the effect of that behavior on the teacher ("I have to use instructional time for cleaning up. . ."); and 3) the feeling this creates in the teacher ("which frustrates me"). Such messages encourage students to change their behavior voluntarily. Both forms of the I-message have their proper places in the repertoire of the effective classroom manager.

**10. The principle of positive reinforcement.** One of the best-known methods of classroom management derived from the work of the behaviorists is the "catch 'em being good" principle of positive reinforcement. Punishment does not change students' behavior (except temporarily), but it can increase the incidence of negative behaviors by calling attention to them. A teacher would do better to ignore minor misbehavior, while identifying and praising good behavior. In practice, however, this is easier said than done. Teachers understand the principle of positive reinforcement, but they are not very skillful in applying it. The techniques that follow may help.

One practice that a teacher can employ is to establish *positive* rules and expectations. Once students know that the rule is "Raise your hand for permission to talk," rather than "Do not call out if you have not been recognized," the teacher can praise students for doing the right thing instead of punishing students for doing the wrong thing: "Thank you for raising your hand, George; you have certainly followed our rule to the letter."

Praise is a major technique of positive reinforcement, but it should be sincere, personalized, descriptive, and focused

## A Checklist on Discipline For Classroom Teachers

Analyze your classroom disciplinary practices, and place a check in the appropriate column after each item. Then add your points (allowing four points for each "usually," two points for each "sometimes," and zero points for each "never"). Rate yourself as follows: 90-100 = excellent; 80-90 = good; 70-80 = fair; below 70 = poor.

|  | Usually                  | Sometimes                | Never                    |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. I get students' attention before giving instruction(s).                           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. I wait for students to attend rather than talk over chatter.                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. I quickly get students on-task.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. I give clear and specific directions.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. I set explicit time limits for task completion.                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. I circulate among students at work.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. I hold private conferences/conversations during class.                            | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. I model courtesy and politeness.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. I use a quiet voice in the classroom.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. I use the "soft reprimand" rather than raise my voice.                           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. I use a variety of cues to remind students of expected behavior.                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12. I teach students my cues.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13. I enrich my classroom to improve students' motivation.                           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 14. I impoverish my classroom to improve attention.                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 15. I am aware of the effects of my dress, voice, and movements on student behavior. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 16. I use students' names as low-profile correctors of inattention.                  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 17. I use proximity to improve classroom control.                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 18. I communicate positive expectations of good behavior to my class.                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 19. I have clear and specific rules that I teach my students.                        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 20. I refuse to threaten or plead with students.                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 21. I consistently follow through with consequences to enforce rules.                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 22. I use I-messages assertively to tell students what I want them to do.            | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 23. I use I-messages humanistically to communicate my feelings.                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 24. I respond to behaviors I like with specific, personal praise.                    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 25. I use nonverbal, social, and activity reinforcers.                               | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

on students' actions, not on their characters or personalities. Teachers can set up a positive expectation (e.g., "Let's see how quickly we can distribute the art supplies") and then follow with praise directed at individuals or groups who conform to the expectation (e.g., "The group in the back has set up all the paints and is ready to begin"). A teacher has to look for good behavior and then practice describing it in a complimentary fashion.

A teacher can reward good behavior with nonverbal reinforcers (nods, smiles, pats on the back); activity reinforcers (games, field trips, free time); and concrete or token reinforcers (food, stickers, check marks). For example, a teacher might write on the chalkboard each afternoon the names of "super citizens" — students who have made some special contribution that day to the welfare of the class. These students could be the first to go to lunch on the following day. When a class is restless, the teacher might set a timer for a short interval (one to three minutes) and direct students to work quietly until the timer goes off. If they are quiet when the timer goes off (catching them being good), the students should receive a reward — perhaps some free time at the end of the period. Initially, the teacher should set the timer for a short interval, so that the class is almost bound to be on-task when the timer goes off. As the students' study habits and concentration improve, the time should be lengthened. The length of time should not be predictable, however.

Establishing good discipline involves much more than most teachers realize. The 10 principles I have presented here, and the "tricks of the trade" that they generate, are but one aspect of the art of classroom control. In the final analysis, teachers must deal with such dysfunctional behavioral manifestations as hostility, frustration, discouragement, and apathy. Ultimately, then, the quality of a teacher's discipline rests on the quality of his or her instructional practices and long-term relationships with children and on his or her ability to convince young people that school is important. School becomes important to children when teachers reach them with meaningful lessons and a professional attitude that says, "I care about you; I know that you can behave; I want to help you to be a better you." ☐

Illustration by Duane Simshauser

# Return from the Tower



*Thinking of climbing down from the ivory tower to return to the classroom? Ms. Warshaw left her campus to teach ninth-grade English in Watts. Now "wiser and thinner," she presents a survivor's notebook.*

BY MIMI WARSHAW

**O**VER THE YEARS, we professors of education have taken our share of the blame for the problems of the schools. Allan Ornstein once wrote, for example, that "the professors of education who trained [U.S.] teachers and now criticize them would do well to accept the 'challenge' they talk about and apply for licenses and teach. . . . To be sure, it would be

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interesting to see if the professors . . . could do any better than the teachers."\*

More recently, the California state legislature passed an education reform bill that requires, among other things, that all professors who teach methods courses must return to the elementary or secondary classroom once every three years. Since California is reputed to be a trendsetter, we may soon see a phalanx of gray-haired professors descending from their ivory towers and tottering back to the schools.

After 15 years as a professor of education, I returned to the classroom last year. I am willing to share my experience with those readers who may climb down from their own towers soon, by choice or by legislative mandate.

For my return to the classroom, I chose a junior high school in Watts — an inner-city school that faces problems as severe as those encountered by any school in Los Angeles. Among the problems are extremely low achievement by students on standardized tests.

\*Allan C. Ornstein, "Why Ghetto School Teachers Fail," *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, Winter 1967, pp. 99-101.