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How effective is school discipline in preparing students to become responsible citizens? Slovenian teachers' and students' views

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Abstract

Effective schoolwork includes discipline. Which disciplinary approach, however, is the most effective in a democratic society, and are schools practicing it? In this study 55 class teachers of 11–14 year-olds, and 245 6th-grade and 8th-grade students of primary school in Slovenia were surveyed to determine the teachers' predominant disciplinary techniques. The basic finding of the study is that disciplinary techniques with a higher degree of teacher control and low student autonomy predominate. That kind of discipline is not in accordance with democratic principles. In the future, special attention must be given to reshaping disciplinary practice to become more democratic.

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1. Introduction

The quest for more moderate ways of maintaining school discipline began in the second half of the twentieth century. With this intention, various discipline models started to appear, which were subject to repeated improvements. Their intention was not only to help teachers respond to student misbehaviour more supportively and effectively, but also to help them create a more supportive

classroom climate and a better relationship with students and to achieve better organization of and instruction in the classroom. Among these theorists, let us mention some of the most influential: William Glasser's reality therapy (1969), the democratic teaching of Rudolf Dreikurs (Dreikurs, Grunwald and Pepper, 1971), Thomas Gordon Effectiveness training (1974), and the Assertive Discipline of Lee Canter (1976).

Although, the basic endeavour of all these models was oriented towards better discipline in the classroom, certain differences exist between them. The major disagreement is the issue of how

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much control a teacher should have over students' behaviour and how much autonomy should be given, accordingly, to the students. On the basis of this issue, it is possible to classify discipline models into three fundamental disciplinary approaches (Burden, 1995; Lewis, 1997; Wolfgang, 1999; Wolfgang, Bennett, & Irvin, 1999; Wolfgang & Wolfgang, 1995).

The first approach, which is most evident in the writings of Thomas Gordon (1974), involves the use of minimum teacher control. It is based on the philosophy that students have the capacity to control their own behaviour. When misbehaviour occurs, the teacher's role is to make the misbehaving student aware of his/her actions and to get the student to talk about his/her emotional problems, a course of action which leads to more purposeful behaviour. When determining rules, the teacher guides the discussion and helps students to recognise appropriate behaviour and to select related consequences.

The second approach is based on the belief that control of student behaviour is the combined responsibility of both students and teachers. The essential element of this approach is co-operation. Teachers and students decide together how students should behave and set unpleasant consequences for inappropriate behaviour. When misbehaviour occurs, the teacher's role is to confront the misbehaving student in order to stop the misbehaviour. The teacher encourages the student to decide how he/she will change and brings him/her to a mutual agreement for behavioural change. These views are most evident in the writings of William Glasser (1969) and Rudolf Dreikurs et al. (1971). Their work reflects many democratic views about discipline. They stressed, for example, that pupils should have an opportunity to participate, and so should co-decide on experiencing democratic principles in school, since only in that way can they become responsible citizens.

The third approach represents the most powerful intervention by the teacher. It is based on the philosophy that students are not capable of realising what is best for them, and, therefore, that it is the teacher's responsibility to decide on behalf of the students. The teacher's role is to

select what behaviour is the most appropriate, to reinforce this type of behaviour and to eliminate inappropriate behaviour. When misbehaviour occurs, the teacher stops the disruption and redirects the student to more positive behaviour. Such views may be found in the work of Lee Canter (1976).

Wolfgang et al. (Wolfgang, 1999; Wolfgang et al., 1999; Wolfgang & Wolfgang, 1995) established that teachers who favour the first approach usually use minimal intervention techniques (such as nonverbal cueing and nondirective statements); teachers who favour the second approach usually use questioning techniques, while teachers who favour the third approach usually use power techniques (such as directive statements, threats of consequences, modelling, reinforcement and physical intervention).

In considering the variety of techniques for restoring discipline, the question arises of which one most effectively conduces to the realisation of the fundamental goals of discipline in a democratic society. Bagley (1914) described the first one as "The creation and preservation of the conditions that are essential to the orderly progress of the work for which the school exists" (p. 10) and the second one as "The preparation of the pupils for effective participation in an organised adult society, which while granting many liberties balances each one with a corresponding responsibility" (p. 10). Both of these functions of discipline should be discussed in the context of modern society.

Recently it has been possible to perceive fundamental changes in how we deal with school discipline. In the past, external experts defined which disciplinary approach was the most effective in tackling inappropriate behaviour. Today, the predominant belief is that no single approach has "the status of universal laws that can be applied to any classroom situation with predictable effect" (Martin & Sugarman, 1993, p. 11). The teacher him/herself knows the students and other circumstances best, so he/she can be the best judge as to the most effective disciplinary approach.

When a teacher makes decisions about the disciplinary approach, a number of factors need to be considered. How a teacher manages

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