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Students' reaction to classroom discipline in Australia, Israel, and China

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Abstract

This study investigates the extent to which students from Australia, Israel, and China report that their teachers' classroom disciplinary behaviour affects their attitudes towards schoolwork and the teacher. They also report how justifiable a teacher's intervention appeared. In all three settings, both punishment and aggression relate significantly to the level of students' distraction and negative affect towards the teacher. Teachers' recognition of responsible behaviour and discussion with students relate to less distraction and greater belief that the intervention was necessary. Hinting and the involvement of students in classroom discipline decision making relate to a stronger belief that the disciplinary actions taken are warranted. Implications are discussed.

Keywords: Classroom management; Teacher–student relationship; Students' reaction

1. Approaches to classroom discipline

Without effective behaviour management, a positive and productive classroom environment is impossible to achieve. Finding the most effective techniques for producing behaviour change and preventing the development of classroom discipline problems is a moderately stressful part of the professional lives of many teachers (Fields, 1986; Hart, Wearing, & Conn, 1995; Johnson, Oswald, & Adey, 1993; Lewis, 2001; Oswald, Johnson, & Whitington, 1997). Some report it as a major concern for teachers, administrators, and the public (Hardman & Smith, 2003; Macciomei, 1999) and a major reason for job dissatisfaction (Liu & Meyer, 2005). Part of the teachers' concern relates to uncertainty as to what approaches are most reasonable and effective. The need for confidence regarding the impact of particular strategies is important to teachers given that the ability to manage students effectively is a critical component of their sense of professional identity (McCormick & Shi, 1999), and that "disciplinarian" ranks third, after "leader" and "knowledge dispenser" in the metaphors teachers provide for their work (Goddard, 2000).

There are at least three main approaches to classroom discipline, each advocating particular techniques (Lewis, 1997; Wolfgang, 1995). Some

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educationalists argue that in order to promote responsibility in children, teachers need to develop clear expectations for student behaviour and then judiciously apply a range of rewards and recognitions for good behaviour as well as punishments for misbehaviour (Canter & Canter, 2002; Swinson & Melling, 1995; Swinson & Cording, 2002). Others argue that the aim can only be attained by less emphasis on student obedience and teacher coercion, and more on student self-regulation. This is facilitated by techniques such as negotiating, discussing, and contracting (e.g., Freiberg, 1996; Pearl & Knight, 1998; Schneider, 1996; Vitto, 2003; Wade, 2000). The third orientation favours group participation and decision making, whereby the group takes responsibility for ensuring the appropriateness of the behaviour of all its members (Edwards & Mullis, 2003; Glasser, 1984; Johnson & Johnson, 2006; Schneider, 1996).

In practice, however, most programmes addressing classroom behaviour management combine techniques from all three approaches, with varying emphases. Even a behavioural programme such as Assertive Discipline, as it has developed in schools, has incorporated counselling techniques (Canter & Canter, 1976, 2002). Similarly, a heavily negotiation-oriented programme such as "Stop, Think, Do" includes the options of logical consequences (Beck & Horne, 1992).

Recent research addressing classroom discipline suggests that there are a number of discipline strategies which students perceive to be more common in classes containing greater numbers of misbehaving students (Lewis, 2001). Some of these strategies, however, such as the application of punishment, which increases in severity when resisted or ignored, appear to be of limited usefulness in promoting responsible student behaviour (Lewis, 2001). One tactic, namely teachers' aggression, comprising group punishment, humiliation, and yelling in anger, even appears to be associated with more student misbehaviour and higher levels of negative student attitudes towards learning. These techniques have similar effects in classrooms in Israel, China, and Australia (Lewis, Romi, Xing, & Katz, 2005). In contrast, there are strategies that may be more productive, resulting in less misbehaviour and more responsibility. These include recognition of responsible behaviour, discussions with misbehaving students about the impact their behaviour has on others, and hints that identify the existence of unacceptable behaviour but do not demand improvement. Unfortunately, however, the findings of these studies (Lewis, 2001; Lewis et al., 2005) have been based on correlational analyses. Correlational studies do not generally permit the interpretation of causal relationships. Consequently, the findings reported could be interpreted either in terms of teacher strategies influencing student behaviour or teachers selecting particular discipline strategies in response to the levels of misbehaviour or the responsibility displayed by their students.

2. Purpose of study

The impetus for the present research was the reporting of students' reactions to classroom discipline in Australia (Lewis, 2006). In an attempt to examine the extent to which the relationships reported for Australian students applied to students from varying cultural settings, replication studies were carried out in China and Israel. China and Israel were selected because, whereas Australia is a typically western country, China is a typically eastern country, and Israel is somewhere in between. These differences provided the opportunity to examine students' reactions to various discipline strategies in systematically varying national settings. The researchers from China and Israel were senior, very experienced faculty members who had been involved in teacher training for many years. Given their interest in replicating the Australian study, the assumption was made that classroom discipline and students' reactions were issues of relevance to schools in their respective environments, as was the particular research design of the initial study (Lewis, 2001).

3. Sampling

The three samples utilized in this study were restricted to students in grades 7–12 in coeducational schools. Although the sampled schools were not representative, they were chosen carefully to ensure that the sample included both larger and smaller schools, located in a range of socioeconomic and geographic areas. In addition, schools that were judged by the researchers to be "atypical" were not included (e.g., extremely large, small, or isolated schools, or those that selected students on the basis of sex or ability). Despite the care taken to see that the sampling was not obviously biased, issues of small samples and lack of representativeness preclude generalizations related to national differences.