

BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT IN PRIMARY CLASSROOMS

The aim of this essay is to create a body of knowledge for follow-on research in the field of behaviour management in primary classrooms. For this purpose, information was gathered through observations, as well as through the study and analysis of materials presented in books, research journals and professional publications, so as to determine how teachers and schools establish and maintain a high standard of behaviour in order to promote effective learning.

On initial consideration, the question posed here seemed to bracket nicely few main points of the subject, but that impression appeared to be inequitable, especially when it came to making judgments concerning different theories and approaches to the matter.

According to specialists in the field of education, school and classroom management aims at encouraging and establishing pupils' self-control through a process of promoting their positive achievement and behaviour. Thus, academic achievement, teacher efficiency, and children's behaviour are directly linked to the concept of school and classroom management.

As in many areas of educational research the field of behaviour management is full of controversy, which is directly connected with the debate about effectiveness of different strategies. These debates are not limited to simple account of existing tactics, but also include psychological analysis of children's behaviour in the classroom extending to their general development and to the very description of educational aims in this area.

One of the key theories of behaviour management, known as "behaviourism", is associated mainly with B.F. Skinner, who introduced the idea of behaviour modification, i.e. moulding all children to conform by use of a system of standard punishments and rewards. Reinforcement is one of the key elements in Skinner's theory. According to Skinner (1976), a "reinforcer" is anything that strengthens the desired response. It could be verbal praise, a good grade or a feeling of increased accomplishment or satisfaction. The theory also covers negative "reinforcers" – any stimulus that results in the increased frequency of a response when it is withdrawn. Skinner's ideas have often been considered the most influential in the field of learning theories that have been used in classrooms both in terms of managing behaviour and in terms of instructional strategies. A number of discipline models emerged from this theory to help teachers develop a structured approach to managing behaviour in primary classrooms in Britain.

One of the best-known models is the Behavioural Approach to Teaching Primary-Aged Children, produced by a team from Birmingham University. It places a primary focus on ethos, rules, rewards, punishment and strategies, and is particularly aimed at reducing low-level misbehaviour by encouraging a positive teacher approach in the classroom. Another model, Building a Better Behaved School, was developed in Leeds. It promotes the idea that the whole school ethos has to be right before considering behaviour at the classroom level. (Tassell, 2001)

An alternative acknowledged theory of behaviour management, developed by Lee and Marlene Canter in 1976, is known as Assertive Discipline. This scheme aims to establish a positive discipline system that reinforces the teacher's authority to control in order to promote an optimal learning environment. This entails teaching pupils to accept the consequences of their actions in a form of rewards and punishments in the behavioural sense. Positive consequences are believed to be more powerful in shaping children's behaviour than negative ones. Assertive Discipline has "as its basic premise the reinforcement of appropriate behaviour." (Render, Padilla, Krank, 1989: 609)

Many education authorities developed their own models based on the principles of Assertive Discipline. An offshoot of it, known as Positive Assertive Management, was introduced in Britain in 1991. The approach persuades teachers to promote pupil participation in discussions prior to developing the system, so that they can claim ownership of the rules through investment in the system, and can recognise the value of their chosen rewards. "Pupils have to learn that when they have freedom to choose what they want to do, they have to accept responsibility for that choice and the ensuing consequences." (Tassell, 2001) Many teachers of primary schools seem to appreciate the keystone of Canter's theory, which is that "once students are taught to be responsible for their own actions, teachers are freed from being disciplinarians." (Canter, 1988:24).

Educators' attempt to refocus from the organisational level of behaviour management to the learner came to fruition in a form of a relatively new model for primary classroom known as Turn Your School Round. It combines the need to foster a more positive impression of education in the minds of the pupils with their ability to function as team members. Mosley (1996) claims that Turn Your School Round provides the opportunity to help children move away from being trapped into a self-fulfilling negative cycle of unacceptable behaviour,

thereby improving behaviour, achievement, school ethos and, ultimately, enabling the teacher to focus on teaching. One of the principal purposes of the scheme is to improve on problematic behaviours through enhancing self-esteem. The model comprises several main components, such as Circle Time, Golden Rules, Rewards, and Sanctions, which seem to be widely used in primary schools.

The above-mentioned schemes in concert with many other theories and models provide a wide assortment for choosing strategies of behaviour management in primary classroom, which makes the process of selecting and implementing a suitable system quite problematic. Maslow's theory of Hierarchy of Needs can valuably be considered when selecting an appropriate behaviour management package. Maslow (1970) claims that self-esteem is a crucial indicator of academic success. He proposes that the behaviour management system can have "an immense impact on a child's need to feel good about himself, to receive recognition, attention, and appreciation." (Maslow, 1970: 72) Creating a positive and orderly environment in the classroom helps children to develop high self-esteem and optimises the learning process.

The most important factor in creating and maintaining a productive and well-managed classroom is establishing classroom routines. The nature of classroom routines and rules varies according to the school behaviour policy as well as to the teacher's belief system. "Rules often originate from the teacher anticipating problems or glitches in the functioning of the classroom and establishing rules and routines to circumvent their occurrence." (Pollard, 1996: 66)

Classroom rules make it clear to pupils what is expected of them, creating an important "framework for pupils' self-evaluation and positive correlation between self-esteem and achievement." (Lawrence, 1988: 35)

The process of establishing classroom rules is especially important in primary classrooms, since it forms the initial basis for managing young children's behaviour. McNamara and Moreton (1996: 54) think that the rule forming process "should ideally be undertaken when a group is just forming, and should be returned to if there is a problem with one particular rule being broken at any point later on."

Involving pupils in the process of creating rules is an important factor in increasing pupils' sense of personal meaning and responsibility toward the rules. In an extensive study, Rutter *et al.* (1979: 188) found that "the message of confidence that the pupils can be trusted to act with maturity and responsibility is likely to encourage pupils to fulfil those expectations." However,

not all the rules can be negotiated by children. School policy and national laws cannot be changed and need to be consistent throughout a school.

As personal teaching experience and observations show, a headteacher's point of view should be often factored in when discussing classroom rules. When headteachers openly support a policy, it is very difficult for other members of staff to challenge them, and student-teachers in this situation seem to be most susceptible.

Most educators suggest that there should be no more than five to ten classroom rules, which are specific, clear, and as brief as possible. This aspect becomes especially important in primary classrooms, where the classroom rules should be kept to a minimum. Cheeseman and Watts (1985: 83) affirm: "Class behaviour is more easily maintained if rules are few in number, but made explicit to the children".

The next stage after establishing the classroom rules comprises identifying rewards and sanctions. Osher (1998) believes that children's involvement in formulating rewards and sanctions makes them easier to apply, as pupils are more likely to see them as fair:

"The evidence suggests that even those children who have relatively little direct exposure to democratic participation are able to recognise its advantages. They clearly make the link between participation, good discipline, justice and fairness." (Osher, 1998:34)

Sanctions, or consequences for misbehaviour and breaking the rules, typically are arranged in a hierarchy: each time a pupil breaks a rule the sanction is more serious. Failure to specify consequences for misbehaviour often leaves pupils opportunity to "test the limits" to see what is and is not tolerable, resulting in misbehaviour. While discussing sanctions with a pupil, it must be also made clear what changes in behaviour are required to avoid future punishment. Following this principle, teachers of the nursery and reception classes in Riverside Primary School usually remove a child from the activity and explain him quietly the consequences of his misbehaviour and ways of avoiding it.

Sanctions used in primary schools range from expressions of disapproval, through withdrawal of privileges (e.g. exclusion from treats, loss of playtime or lunchtime) to referral to the headteacher, letters to parents and, ultimately and in the last resort, exclusion. Dockling (1998) states that for using sanctions productively they should be realistic, explicit, negotiated with pupils and positively phrased.

As Mosley (1996) highlights, it is not practical to expect teachers to focus on the positive at the exclusion of all else, but she suggests that new methods could be devised for combating

negative behaviours. This idea is supported by observations of classroom management strategy in Overchurch Infant School, where teachers, instead of reprimanding, use the technique of raising their hands consistently for “Listening Signal” or “Attention Signal”, when the noise level in the class is unacceptable. Another example of using “positive” types of sanctions has been observed in year 2 of the same school. During a Literacy Hour the teacher used a method of “planned ignoring”. This technique works for minimal off-task behaviour that is designed to get teacher’s attention, such as rocking, tapping a pencil, annoying hand waving, handling objects, combing hair, etc. The teacher ignored this type of behaviour, showing an absolute lack of attention. The idea was that calling attention to this problem would have elevated the behaviour to the disruptive level, thus causing the teacher a bigger problem. A private word with the pupil later let the pupil know that the teacher observed the behaviour, and that the teacher would like it to cease.

Where anti-social, disruptive, or aggressive behaviour is frequent sanctions alone seem to be ineffective. In such case careful evaluation of the curriculum, classroom management and whole school procedures should take place to eliminate these as contributory factors.

It is important to underline that an over-emphasis on negative behaviour destroys constructive atmosphere in the classroom. Wragg (1993: 12) states that “learning takes place where positive relationships exist between a teacher and class and among pupils.” Therefore, the teacher's role is to develop a healthy classroom climate within which learning will automatically thrive.

For this reason it is essential to have positive consequences, or rewards, to recognize good behaviour for both individual pupils and for the entire class. Typical range of rewards used in primary classroom includes: verbal praise, written comment, stickers, free choice of activity, extra playtime, work on display, certificates and badges, name on board, letter to parents, gifts. Docking (1998) suggests several ways of using rewards effectively in primary classroom, such as rewarding for variety of efforts and achievements, giving praise early in the lesson, catching the child being good, avoiding actions that could spoil the effects of rewards.

Research shows that most of the primary schools create and follow their own systems of rewards. For example, Riverside Primary School uses the Whole School Awards System, where the children collect stickers in their own workbook over a half term period. At the end of the term the children, who have enough stickers in their books are invited to join the whole key stage “treat”, such as a visit by a magician or a school trip.

Wragg suggests (1993: 12) that system of rewards helps to create environment, where "teachers are less likely to issue commands, use reprimands or punishment... Emphasis will be more on pupils taking responsibility for their own behaviour"

The idea of using rewards as part of behaviour management is rather controversial. Educators, who believe that external rewards and punishments are necessary, feel comfortable using the programs that emphasize the use of extrinsic rewards for "good behaviour." Others, who believe that the use of extrinsic rewards is detrimental, prefer not to use system of rewards and punishments, seeing that it diminishes intrinsic motivation. As Kohn (1995) affirms, both rewards and punishments are ways of manipulating children's behaviour, which destroy the potential for real learning:

"Rewards are *most* damaging to interest when the task is already intrinsically motivating. That may be simply because there is that much more interest to lose when extrinsics are introduced."

Instead, he advocates providing an engaging curriculum and a caring atmosphere, "so kids can act on their natural desire to find out."

Notwithstanding a number of differences in opinions on strategies of behaviour management, most educators agree that a high frequency of classroom disciplinary problems has a significant impact on the effectiveness of teaching and learning. In this respect, strong and consistent management and organizational skills have been identified as leading to fewer classroom discipline problems. Research shows that primary classrooms that have consistently maintained sets of standards are commonly characterized by more successful behaviour management. However, research also suggests, that no all-embracing behaviour management package has been devised, which proposes a perfect solution to all behaviour problems in schools. It seems unrealistic to expect a selected model to offer ultimate solutions in the context of a certain school or a classroom in view of the fact that a wide variety of different learning methods continuously develop to meet new educational needs. In the face of changes that time brings into schools the best management technique yet remains the same: get pupils interested, involved, excited about the material that is being presented. The behaviour of pupils will rarely be a problem when they are interested and focused on the subject matter. A well-prepared and well-performed lesson is the greatest way to establish positive control and authority necessary for an effective learning environment.