

Discipline and the School

The word ‘discipline’ is rooted in a learning situation. It conveys the notion of submission to rules or to some state of order, of being the follower of a leader or a teacher. Ideally, a disciple who submits himself to a person or a system does so of his own free will. That is to say, he disciplines himself.

There are occasions, however, when discipline would involve the imposition of external restraint backed by sanctions of various kinds. That is to say, it involves forcing the acceptance of certain conditions under the threat of punishment for failure to do so. However, the continued use of this form of externally imposed discipline would be counterproductive unless it leads to the exercise of self discipline, a voluntary act which opens up the way to the freedom to choose for oneself a discipline or area of study.

In any school some measure of imposed discipline is called for since the disorderly must not be allowed to interfere with the freedom of others to take full advantage of what the school has to offer. In order to do this, externally imposed discipline has often been supported by sanctions such as (1) **the stimulus of competition**, (2) **the hope of rewards**, and (3) **the fear of punishment**. Although some educationists reject these devices, the usual justification for the use of these sanctions is that ordinarily children tend to be careless or lackadaisical, sometimes hostile to their work or to authority, and sometimes even anti-social. They therefore need to be coaxed or checked as the occasion demanded. As the topic is controversial, it is worthwhile examining these sanctions and their efficacy.

1. **THE STIMULUS OF COMPETITIONS**. First let us look at the different kinds of competitions. Competitions can be (a) **between groups**, which implies co-operation within each group; (b) **between individuals**, which implies counting the points scored, and therefore may be detrimental to the cause of co-operation and (c) **with oneself**.

(a) **Group competition** in games is only natural, since the desire to defeat the opponent brings out the best in the team and in its co-operative effort. On the other hand, if group competition is used in the classroom as an inducement to academic work, the child may lose sight of the true end of education, namely work for its own sake. It is important to remember that education, depending on the ethos of the society to which the pupil belongs, has a value or worthwhileness which is intrinsic in itself apart from its extrinsic aim of finding employment. If this is lost sight of, the joy and pleasure that the educational process of discovery and innovation can bring would yield place to sheer drudgery. Unless group competition in the classroom as an inducement to studies leads the child to self-imposed discipline, it may be difficult to justify it.

(b) **Competition between individuals** may be a ‘normal’ instinct, but the deliberate use of such an incentive in education poses the same danger as with group competition. The

children will lose sight of the intrinsic value of work and will be pre-occupied with counting scores. In an egalitarian society, what is needed is not so much a competitive ethos as the ethos of co-operation and work. Competitive ethos is only a short remove from exploitative ethos. This is not to say that a teacher should not try to ascertain the differences in aptitudes and attainments between the children under his care through grading tests. Only, he should be careful to back away from the danger of giving all his attention to the clever child while neglecting the not-so-clever.

(c) **Competing with oneself** is natural and healthy for it looks forward to the next level (to be) achieved, being both a challenge and a reward in itself. Needless to say, such a child would be self-disciplined and would not need externally-imposed sanctions to spur him to greater efforts. In reality, however, in the early years of a child when the child yearns for approval from society, such a child would be the exception rather than the rule.

2. **THE HOPE OF REWARDS.** Although, ideally, a child should have sufficient motivation for studies without constant reward, learning must in general be a rewarding exercise if a child is to sustain its level of interest in studies. Indiscipline is occasionally a sign that learning is devoid of this rewarding element. By introducing this element, the teacher can sometimes even go so far as to engineer success and reward it. In doing this, wrong responses from children may have to be temporarily overlooked while the desirable response is given the reward of praise so that the response is reinforced. And yet, reward should not be easy to come by. If pupils are rewarded far too often for routine work in the class, the element of challenge is weakened and children tend to become slap-happy or careless. If reinforcement by reward is only partial or selective and is in proportion to the quality of work, it strengthens the desire to learn.

3. **THE FEAR OF PUNISHMENT.** It is important for the teacher to ask himself, ‘Why do I scold, give impositions, inflict pain and impose penalties? How can I justify punishment?’ And he is likely to arrive at three possible answers: (a) **as retribution** (b) **as a deterrent** and (c) **as an instrument of reforming the child.**

(a) **Retributive Theory.** This suggests that punishment is justified for no other reason than that an offender should suffer an unpleasantness or pain that ‘fits the crime’. However, this is a relic of the Mosaic Law of an ‘eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’. This may help to get rid of ‘nuisances’, but it is unsatisfactory as an answer from a teacher, for it shows that he looks backward at the act of ‘crime’ rather than forward. i.e. to the consequences of his action to the child whose rehabilitation should be his aim. A teacher should be more concerned with interpersonal relationships with his pupils and his moral influence on them. He must bear in mind that he is not dealing with hardened criminals, but that he is dealing with children in their normative years. During these years, juvenile delinquency may be regarded as the norm rather than the exception

(b) **Deterrent Theory.** The second answer the teacher arrives at suggests that punishment is justified as it deters potential offenders or the offender himself from such offences. The system is intended to work by threat. If the technique were fully effective,

sooner or later, there should come a time when there would be no one to punish. Every new act of punishment is to that extent an admission of continuing failure.

(c) **Reformative Theory.** Reform is an ambiguous term. A punishment may often persuade a child that it does not pay to break school rules. But unless he was repentant and decided of his own volition not to repeat the deed, he would not be reformed. That is not all. His decision should be the result of moral reformation and not, fear of punishment. It is a moot point whether punishment would produce this kind of reformation. It is more likely that the perceived blow to his self-respect would lead to estrangement and in some cases even alienation from the objectives of the school. This would suggest that the teacher's intention of rehabilitating the child through the act of punishment itself could be counter-productive.

PROGNOSIS. To contend, however, that it would be possible to do without externally-imposed discipline supported by sanctions, and in particular punishment, would be to ignore factors which are not within the direct control of the school. In a school, some rules are necessary to ensure tidiness, punctuality, order and proper use of ordinary amenities. Some pupils will always be untidy, unpunctual or anti-social. They have to be checked. Nevertheless, the extent to which punishment is needed in a school, or done without, would depend on the tone of the school and its teachers. On no account should pupils be slapped or have their ears boxed. The use of the cane for hitting children's hands is apparently still not unknown in some countries and is used indiscriminately, often in a fit of temper. It is probably true that the abuse of it accounts largely for the teacher's lack of standing in society. Quite rightly, most civilized countries have given up the practice.

No good teacher would rate punishment as anything more than a necessary evil. Punishment will not prevent its recurrence unless it succeeded in preparing the pupil for a sense of responsibility. In order to achieve this, what the teacher needs most is patience, as disciplinary problems can be tackled only by understanding their causes.

Often, indiscipline is not the result of wilful rebellion, but rather a symptom of environmental maladjustment. It could be that the teacher himself has failed to provide his pupils with an environment that is congenial to learning. A teacher, who finds his class discipline much poorer than that of a colleague's in similar circumstances, may need to review his own attitudes, aims and techniques. He must be sure of the needs of his children and must have a good command of the material being taught, these two being essential ingredients in good discipline. It is said that if a teacher wants to teach John Latin, he must know both John and Latin.

If indiscipline cannot be traced to the teacher's inadequacies, then the cause may be found in the child's social environment. He may be a victim of his circumstances. The single factor most closely correlated with undesirable attitudes in children is defective discipline at home in pre-school years (**authoritarian, indulgent** or **variable**). Other factors are intellectual limitations, temperamental instability, defective family life and harmful friendships formed outside the home. Consistent sympathy, friendliness and

understanding on the part of the teacher is the most effective way of giving children a feeling of security, an essential pre-requisite for learning. If a child is goaded into indiscipline by forces outside the school, then it is necessary to obtain information about the child's life outside the school. Great tact must be exercised in obtaining this, particularly while dealing with parents and in offering advice to them.

Punishment, in particular corporal punishment, should only be used when other remedial measures had failed. In most cases, the knowledge of the likelihood of punishment was a sufficient deterrent. Punishment should never be meted out in the form of retribution for what a teacher conceives as an affront to his dignity. This argues a moral weakness on the part of the teacher and would be a confession of his failure. The better a teacher is, the less he punishes. The best teachers never need to give penalties for disorderly behaviour, and reserve them only for unsatisfactory class work or home work. Punishment of course is to be regarded as remedial not retributive. Before a teacher resorts to punishment, he must be quite sure that he has diagnosed the case aright. One should never administer punishment in a hurry or in a temper. Punishment should be responsibly given and responsibly received. That is to say, the child must be made aware that he deserves punishment, understanding fully why he is punished. If the teacher is known for his evenhandedness in dealing with offenders, the pupils would know that the teacher would be fair in deciding the nature of the punishment to be meted out and the quota that is fair and just.

Finally, if there is understanding between the teacher and the pupil, is it not possible that the teacher can get his point accepted without corporal punishment. For one thing, corporal punishment does not "let the punishment fit the crime"; and, for another, it tends to result in very different reactions; on the "tough" on the one hand and on the "highly-strung pupil" on the other. On the other side it may be said that, if it is reserved for really serious offences, it creates a great effect and may result in prompt mending of the ways on the part of the children. It may therefore be argued that occasionally the thunderstorm may be necessary to clear the air. More often than not, however, the offences committed by our pupils are only due to the misdirection of their positive impulses which, deprived of their normal outlets, are driven to seek satisfaction in irregular conduct, which are generally not so serious as to warrant punishment. The remedy suggested by psychologists in such cases is not punishment, which leads to further repression, but sublimation or the transference of vigorous impulses from undesirable fields to desirable ones by the teachers. Such teachers are teachers by the grace of God.

References

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EASAW JOSEPH JOHN