Punishment in Classroom Management

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“For the love of everything good and holy, Johnny, sit in your desk this instant!” you, the beleaguered instructor, cry. “Or what?” snaps back that infernal hellion that is your to mould into some semblance of a decent human being. “Or what?” you think, “Or what indeed”.

Introduction

Classrooms are, in my mind, training grounds for making contributing members of society. Classrooms require their own set of laws and governance which both the students and teacher follow. Education, itself, is an institution that seeks to facilitate: “acquir[ing] the knowledge skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic, pluralistic society and a prosperous and sustainable economy” (Clark, 2007). This goal necessitates forming positive behaviours and attitudes in students and providing opportunities to exert their freedom in positive ways. It also means, of course, having to discourage negative behaviours.

The idea of punishment and discipline in classrooms is wrought from the goal mentioned above. This paper seeks to discuss the nature of punishment, it's role in the classroom, and constructive uses thereof. Using common legal terms, I will explain common punishment techniques and how these two institutions – education and the legal system – relate. A myriad of factors needs to be considered before punishing a student such as the perception of the consequence, the severity, understanding the rationale behind the punishment, alternative behaviours, consistency and timing (Jordan & Porath). Throughout this work I will interject my own views on punishment as a classroom management tool and end with how I perceive discipline in a classroom should be accomplished.

Punishment versus Discipline

According to Jordan and Porath “punishment is a reinforcer that decreases a behavior”.

This term, punishment, is more often associated with harsh consequences rather than a simple verbal reprimand (Jordan & Porath), but this reprimand is, too, considered a punishment. However, discipline is, in my own view, a state of a classroom rather than specific consequences or actions. Discipline comes from an internal motivation to behave properly and act according to that classroom’s rules. I am of the opinion that there is no better way to foster learning than by preventing a lot of the behaviour issues beforehand. Management of numerous aspects of a classroom contribute to discipline. Examples of these aspects include, but are not limited to the instructor’s manner of dress or speaking, general classroom expectations, and understanding of permissible behaviour. I believe that if you can work at the student’s level, pick your battles and remain the authority figure without being the authoritarian, respect and discipline go hand in hand. I do understand, however, that it will inevitably occur where a student is non-compliant to a degree where punishment, to any degree, is required punishment should be only as harsh as necessary to bring about learning and encourage student growth.

“An eye for an eye”: punishment should fit the crime

Punishment is a constant in lawful societies. The Code of Hammurabi, the first written law, states, “If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be strewn out” (Fish, 2008). In Canadian society it is no longer appropriate to dismember citizens for wrong doing, but the severity of a punishment needs to correlate to the severity of the transgression. This is also a part of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (CCRF). Section 12 of the CCRF governs that no person can be treated or punished in a cruel and unusual way (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 2010). This is ensures the punishment is proportional to the transgression and not
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overly severe or unjust. The proportionality of punishment to the crime is what makes our society just, according to Fish (2008). One must also consider proportionality when dealing with students to understand what they view as a fair punishment. It is mentioned by Jordan and Porath that even simply writing a student's name on the board can be highly stressful for that student. A student should view the punitive action as just and fair. They should understand why their conduct is unacceptable and also determine an alternative to their behaviour.

Johnny's transgression examined with these factors in mind means that any punishment given should match his knowledge of the inappropriateness of the incident. If I as his teacher proceed to make him stand at the back of the room until he is ready to sit he should see this as fair. If he thinks that would be awful and humiliating it won't be effective for creating a relationship and any chance I may have had at connecting with him could be utterly lost. In addition, Johnny might not know that sitting at a desk is the required format for my classes so in this case he is simply uninformed and not misbehaving. It is the educator's responsibility, then to ensure that he is aware of the rules of the classroom. If he is not able to sit for long periods of time it would behove me as his teacher to find alternate arrangements like alternating sitting and standing. All of these factors are important in determining how to proceed with managing the classroom. Any misstep could undermine the hope I have to get to know this student better and work with him to behave befittingly in class and succeed.

The right to a speedy trial

Every citizen has the right to a trial in a reasonable time, according to section 11(b) of the CCRF (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 2010). Another consideration before handing
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out a punishment is for the penalty itself to be delivered promptly and consistently. This means that a behaviour should be addressed right after it occurs and each time the action takes place. In this way, a teacher can prevent confusion within the class about what and when something is acceptable. It also makes the punishment fair because all of the students on equal ground with no one “getting away with” wrongdoings.

In the example about Johnny given above the verbal reprimand is not considered a punishment for two reasons: firstly, it had no negative repercussions from the teacher for that action and secondly, it didn’t work. Verbal reprimands are a form of punishment, though they should be given unobtrusively and dispassionately at the time of the incident (Jordan & Porath). The teacher above was clearly not unemotional or unobtrusive as (s)he screamed at little Johnny, which was probably the worst reaction of all. Jordan and Porath suggest that the best time to deal with problem behaviour is actually when it is not occurring. I agree with this idea because it removes the response to unwanted actions. I believe some students are seeking attention by misbehaving and that reacting to them in one form or another will only encourage the conduct. Ignoring the bad behaviour and addressing it when it is not present has its own challenges, however. One student has the ability to disrupt the entire classroom and derail the learning locomotive, so to speak. This makes it imperative to understand the entire situation, including environment, student, peers, and motive, before making a decision to punish or not.

This proactive method whereby you assess the entire state of affairs of when the unwanted actions are occurring and not occurring, is called a “functional assessment” (Jordan and Porath). This tool is used in conjunction with positive behavioural support to build an
environment conducive to learning and desirable behaviour (Jordan & Porath). If Johnny is constantly rebellious in my class and no other, or if he responds well in certain lessons rather than others leads to a holistic view of the behaviour issue. Using this knowledge a teacher can try to understand where the behaviour is coming from and act to prevent it in the future. Is Johnny acting out because he is seeking attention, because he has a crush on Jane in class and is showing off, or because he is having trouble understanding the material? By understanding the nature of the outburst, tantrum, or non-compliance an educator can seek to amend his or her own environment to prevent this. This would be my choice in classroom management rather than absolute punishment.

**To Punish or not to Punish**

The discourse until now has shed some light on what punishment is and how it can be used. The ultimate question left is “Is it worth it?” In my humble opinion I think that punishment has its place in the classroom but should be used as sparingly as possible if at all. According to Grote, it is possible and highly beneficial to have discipline without punishment (2006). His book discusses punishment and discipline in the workplace but the tenets are easily applicable to the classroom setting. He states that punishment is based on the legal system (Grote, 2006). This “traditional system is not a corrective process” he states; this structure seeks not to restore proper behaviour but only to punish what is unwanted (Grote, 2006). In addition, the legal-based punishment system “simply asks too little” in that people are punished into submission (2006). There is no way to promote a greater participation in the organization whether that is school or work using punishment alone.
In contrast to this punitive approach Grote suggests letting the transgressor be in control of their actions (2006). Consequences were created around individual decision making and responsibility, and were meant to make each person feel as if they were in charge of their work, accomplishments, and outcomes (Grote 2006). Harsh penalties like unpaid leaves were abolished with corrective remediation being favoured. In this framework the rehabilitative body works with the individual to change his or her behaviour and encourage loyalty to the company or what-have-you (Grote, 2006). This technique was quite successful and saw large drops in punitory layoffs and high increases in employee satisfaction (Grote, 2006). This framework is easily applied to a classroom setting and one I choose to personally employ.

Conclusion

While punishment has its position in classroom management I truly believe there is a far more successful approach available. Punishment without discourse on the action will accomplish nothing in the long run. I personally do not apply to a behaviourist point of view so taking a holistic approach to dealing with behaviour issues is my choice. In the case of Johnny, my infernal hellion, I might respond to his derisive “Or what?” with “What do you think should happen?” or possibly, “Stand for the rest of the class if you’d like, and sit when you are ready.” It is quite plausible that by employing a progressive approach to dealing with behaviour would prevent his outburst – and mine. Punishment, when used alone and without considering the above named factors, is an outdated construct and one that will find no footing in my classroom.
References:


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