Rethinking school discipline

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Compliance is a widespread, almost universal, term in school policy statements on behaviour and discipline, emphasising that students should behave in accordance with school rules. Yet virtually nothing has been written about the actual notion of compliance. Sometimes it appears to be a euphemism for obedience, but the two words do not have exactly the same meaning. For example, we talk of obedience training for animals – and the approach to discipline in some schools is very like this – but we would never talk of ‘compliance training for animals’. For whereas obedience refers to doing what one is told ‘first time, every time’, compliance involves following a set of rules, regulations and other requirements that carry some kind of institutional authority. To comply with a requirement in this way is to submit to the authority of the person or institution issuing the requirement, to accept that they have the right to issue it and to trust that it has some rational justification.

The reasons students comply may be many and varied: fear of sanctions or punishment; being too lazy, passive or unthinking to resist; wanting to ‘please the teacher’; actually accepting the authority of rules as rationally justifiable; or merely accepting the inevitability of compliance. However, a compliance-oriented discipline system is not normally concerned with children’s motives for compliance. The primary intention is to shape students’ behaviour and ensure that it conforms to expectations. In such a system, as Dewey notes, ‘Conformity, not transformation, is the essence of education’ (1966: 59-60) and conduct, not intention or disposition, is ‘the measure of morality’ (ibid.: 349).

The rhetoric of justification for the requirement of compliance in schools is usually couched in terms of the need to maintain a safe and orderly environment, in which people and property are respected and the educational function of the school can be pursued without interruption. It is less common for a developmental justification of compliance to be provided, but where it is, the focus is usually on socialisation: children gradually learn what socially appropriate behaviour is.

So why is there a certain unease among many parents and teachers about the emphasis on compliance in school policy? It is not just that the enforcement of compliance raises profound questions about the morality of compulsion (cf. Wilson, 1971: 70-77), important though this point is, but the very notion of compliance is itself suspect. For example, compliance never features on lists of desirable qualities of character promoted and instilled through programmes of character education. And as Kohn reminds us (1996: 61), few if any parents want their children to learn compliance in the sense of passively conforming to requirements. Compliance is associated with a meek, submissive disposition and with conformity and yielding readily to the will of others. In spite of this unease, however, large numbers of schools – with government support – are developing whole-school behaviour policies in which compliance is central.

What is needed in the present situation is a much more systematic examination of the concept of compliance that moves beyond a discussion of implementation strategies and focuses on the complex relationship between education and compliance. All I can do here is to outline with a few broad brush strokes some of the key democratic, ethical and educational issues involved.

If students are to grow into citizens with a commitment to democratic values, they need to learn to participate in shared decision-making, to make their voice heard and to assume shared
responsibility for the welfare and smooth running of their school. A compliance-oriented school, on the other hand, may actually prepare children more for life in a repressive, totalitarian regime than a democratic one. ‘Gentling the masses’ (Kelly 1995: 171) is best achieved where young people internalise the values of compliance and unquestioning acceptance of the status quo while at school. This enables social organisations (and the state itself) to control their members more easily and ensure they accept the norms of society as self-evident and fully justified (Ezra 2004). It is also undoubtedly in the interests of any wealthy elite to have a loyal, productive workforce in whom habits of compliance have already become ingrained.

If students are to learn how to become morally mature, autonomous individuals, however, they need to learn much more than to comply with regulations. Teachers cannot simply take care of the behaviour and let the values and attitudes take care of themselves. They need to be aware of the ethics of the things they do to children. Clearly compliance could be achieved (as Porter reminds us: 2008: 21) ‘by cattle prods or physical restraint’, but it would be unethical to do so. Children learn respect and trust by being respected and trusted; they need to be able to observe examples of ethical decision-making around them, and to be given opportunities to make their own moral decisions rather than being coerced into compliance. Using unethical means to achieve an orderly environment sets back the process of moral education – the more so if the demand for compliance remains static as the students themselves mature throughout their school career. Arguably, children who have participated in the construction of rules and regulations will be more likely to comply with them in situations where compliance is rational and justified.

Compliance discourages students from thinking for themselves, since the ‘appropriate behaviour’ is defined by someone else. The continued reliance on authority figures discourages critical reflection, autonomous decision-making, self-regulation or any of the other skills needed for success in life, and in this sense the enforcement of compliance is anti-educational. Indeed, it may be argued that non-compliance is more educational, because non-compliant children are actually engaging with the teacher’s demands rather than being passively acquiescent – and engagement is a positive learning outcome even if the particular response involves resistance or subversion (Halstead and Xiao 2010: 316). Compliance may be a short-cut to passivity and conformity in the class so that teachers can concentrate on other goals, but a wider view of student development and education is lost.

References


The consequence-based approach to classroom discipline, referred to as Assertive (Canter and Canter 1992) or Positive (Rogers 2000) Discipline, has become increasingly popular in schools in England since the early 1990s. It is, however, the subject of considerable debate (cf. Rigoni and Walford 1998; Melling and Swinson 1998). This system presupposes that young people can be conditioned through the consequences of their actions. If they like being praised and correspondingly don’t like being punished, ultimately they will engage solely in behaviour which produces a pleasant result. But what does such conditioning mean in terms of young people’s learning about right action? At best it can be argued that schools are training students to adopt a consequentialist approach in judging behaviour.

But if consequences have become integral to judgments about right action, shouldn’t a consequence have some direct correlation with the act that produces it, so that students can anticipate the results of their conduct in novel situations? Dreikurs and Grey (1968) distinguish natural from logical consequences; the former occurring in the normal course of events and the latter being created by an authority figure for educative purposes. It is logical consequences which are of interest in the school setting.

A logical consequence must by definition have a rational connection with its issuing action. This helps students to understand cause and effect and thus to accept that there are justifiable reasons for the pleasant or unpleasant treatment they receive from their teachers. However, this remains true only to the extent of the rational connection. Shrigley calls consequences which lack such a connection ‘contrived consequences’. These are purely arbitrary and their effectiveness ‘resides within the teacher’s authority’ (1985: 30). What distinguishes them from logical consequences is their lack of educative purpose. Both emanate from an authority figure, but contrived consequences are rooted in respect for authority per se whereas logical consequences derive their value from their broader educational content.

Current government education policy emphasises the importance of teacher authority: ‘we need to act to restore the authority of teachers and headteachers, so that they can establish a culture of respect’ (DFE 2010: 32). It is difficult not to interpret ‘a culture of respect’ as ‘a culture of compliance’ in the light of government guidance which reinforces the statutory authority of teachers to discipline students (DFE 2014). Within this legal and political context schools are resorting to the use of contrived consequences in order to display ‘outstanding behaviour’ which Ofsted explains is demonstrated when ‘students know what is expected of them and the consequences that follow should they fall out of line’ (2014: 25). There is, however, something missing here. Ofsted are looking for knowledge of expected behaviour and knowledge of consequences for non-compliance, but what about knowledge of the reasons and justifications for those consequences? It seems that ‘outstanding’ schools are those which respect authority per se.

Although Ofsted may not be advocating a deeper understanding of reasons for action, is it possible that students are actually learning these obliquely through their experience of school discipline? Research suggests that students readily accept the logic of suffering consequences for actions which they believe impinge negatively on other members of the school community but are less...
convinced by punishments which appear arbitrary and have no educative or moral purpose (Thornberg 2008; Raby 2012). Falling within this latter category are rules about personal appearance. Strict adherence to compulsory uniform codes is symbolic of good discipline in the majority of schools in England. One school in West Yorkshire which is representative of current practice places students in immediate isolation for ‘incorrect uniform (wearing trainers, no blazer, second occasion a pupil forgets their tie)’. Isolation means students are separated from the school community from 8.40am until 4pm. They sit in a small booth and are subject to an extreme discipline regime, not being allowed inter alia to ‘rest their head on the table’, ‘turn around for any reason’, ‘lean on the sides of the booth, or lean back on their chair’. If they are found engaging in any of these prohibited activities three times they are excluded from school.

There is clearly no rational or explicit causal link between the act and resultant consequence but can it be justified in terms of educative purpose? What are students learning here? It might be argued they are being initiated into accepted modes of conduct, but training like this is merely conditioning and boils down to submission to authority. As such it fails to engage students in a deeper understanding of reasons for action beyond respect for authority per se.

The problem with this approach is that students are not being taught to act on the basis of principles, and positive consequences may be just as contrived as negative ones. Another West Yorkshire school with an identical approach to discipline offers reward stamps as a consequence for good behaviour. In the unforgettable words of Bruce Forsyth in Play Your Cards Right, ‘points make prizes’ and 100 stamps can be traded for a ‘Break Q Jump’ allowing students not to wait their turn in the queue for food but go straight to the front. There seems something inherently wrong about being rewarded with the freedom to disregard the rights of others who have courteously been waiting their turn. Implicitly, students are being taught that it is acceptable to violate the principles of fairness and respect for others.

A burgeoning ethos of control can end up subjecting even the teachers to the same regime. To quote another school policy document: ‘members of staff who ‘opt out’ of the agreed framework should be prepared to face the consequences. This is likely to include admonishment from a senior member of staff.’ It is to be hoped that fear of punishment will not prevent schools from reflecting on the nature of the consequences they contrive. School discipline must operate on the basis of sound principles or the consequence may be that they no longer develop principled, critically aware, autonomous members of society.

References


Although the behaviour policies quoted are available online I have chosen not to name the schools directly.
Teachers are expected to keep the children they teach under control. Indeed, if pupils are out of control, this is taken (by parents, by senior staff and by the children themselves) as a sign of teacher ineffectiveness. Worries about controlling pupils gives many trainee teachers and even experienced teachers sleepless nights. No doubt this explains why books about how to control pupils (such as Cowley 2010) outsell all other books for teachers. One would therefore expect the ability to keep control to be a key quality of teachers. Yet to describe someone, including a teacher, as ‘controlling’, or, even worse, as a ‘control freak’, is far from complimentary, and many teachers would doubtless rather be described as ‘caring’ than ‘controlling’ (McLaughlin 1991). Control, then, is a more complex concept than it first appears, so it may be helpful to step back from questions about how to exercise control and ask instead what control actually implies in the context of schooling and why it is considered important. In this paper I shall argue (unlike Peters 1966, who sees control as essentially about authority) that the central issue in control is its educative value.

If a teacher is in control of a classroom, she has the authority to decide how the classroom is run and the power to coerce pupils to act according to her decision. Wilson (1971), and following him Clark (1998), make an interesting distinction between control and discipline. Both involve compulsion, Wilson argues, but whereas ‘control’ merely involves telling pupils what to do and requiring obedience before anything else, ‘discipline’ is more to do with encouraging pupils to consider the point of the commands, so that they comply thoughtfully rather than from fear of punishment. Of course, the terminology is rather arbitrary, because in practice the terms ‘control’ and ‘discipline’ are often used interchangeably, but the distinction does draw attention to two philosophically different approaches to establishing control in the classroom. One is about teachers having the power to make pupils comply, the other about them providing meaningful guidance and regulation.

There are other important distinctions too. One is between partial control, where the teacher controls only those aspects of pupils’ behaviour which are relevant to creating order in the classroom so that formal teaching can proceed, and full control, where the teacher also controls aspects of pupil behaviour which are irrelevant to formal teaching such as the wearing of make-up or shoes of a specific colour. Another distinction is between direct control (telling children to be quiet, pay attention, etc) and indirect control (manipulating pupils’ perceptions to encourage compliance, for example, by rewarding obedience or by masking control as a choice that students have to make: cf. Cowley 2010: 45).

There are certain key assumptions that lie behind all these different forms of control (cf. Clark 1998):

i. Order is a prerequisite of learning, and only the teacher is capable of deciding what is an appropriately ordered environment.

ii. Pupils do not naturally act in an orderly, civilised way, and therefore must be controlled in order to maximise their learning potential.

iii. Teachers have the right (and duty) to control pupils by insisting that they do exactly what they are told.
iv. If pupils' behaviour is subject to tight control in school, they will eventually become habitualised to behaving according to society's expectations.

I want to argue, however, that these assumptions are educationally unhelpful. First, as Kohn (1996: 7) points out, treating pupils as if they need to be controlled all the time can end up as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Second, Ofsted's mantra that 'classrooms must be orderly places' (Wilshaw 2013: 9) leaves teachers feeling that the creation of an orderly classroom is a more pressing objective than its educational goals. Third, the more reliant on being controlled pupils become, the harder it is for them to take responsibility for their own lives and move towards moral maturity. Clark suggests that the best control can achieve is superficial compliance, while 'the real lives of the children – what they really value – remains hidden, unaffected by the educational process' (1998: 292).

What are the alternatives? It is hard to avoid the conclusion that from an educational point of view 'discipline' (as defined by Wilson 1971: 77-80) is a more promising way forward than 'control'. Because discipline involves getting children to understand the principles that underlie the need for order (like respect for others) and getting children 'into a disciplined frame of mind' (ibid.: 78), it supports educational goals rather than undermining them. Peters argues that there are some situations (on a battlefield, for example) where controlling people by issuing commands and expecting instant obedience is vital (1966: 263), but his parallel between a battlefield and a classroom overlooks the latter's educative function. According to Wilson, discipline (unlike control) does not involve one party giving commands to another, but rather requires both parties (teacher and pupils) to submit to the 'educative order of the task in hand' (1971: 79). Dewey (1966) similarly argues that although an element of social control is necessary in a community where people are working together, teachers should exercise control 'as the representative and agent of the interests of the group as a whole'. This shifts the motivation for control away from simply being able to demonstrate an 'orderly' classroom towards enabling all members of the class to work effectively. In this situation, compliance with classroom norms will be based on a more intrinsic, supportive motivation than external control based on punishment and rewards, and will be part of the broader process of fostering wisdom in pupils (MacAllister 2013). Also, by acting in the best interests of the group, the teacher does not assume that she will know what these best interests are: there are much clearer channels for student input in making this judgement. Like a driving instructor, the teacher may start by using a dual control system, but the aim is that the learner becomes fully empowered to take the controls for himself.

References


Consistency seems to be Ofsted’s latest platitude in advice to schools about how to deal with pupils’ disruptive behaviour. In their recent report on low-level disruption in the country’s schools, the term is used 37 times (Ofsted 2014). The trouble is, there seems to be little consistency in what they want teachers to be consistent about; they mention the need for consistent teaching (p. 19), consistent expectations (p. 14), consistent punishment (p. 16), consistent ‘application of systems’ (p. 25), consistent enforcement of the school’s codes of conduct (p. 21), and for pupil behaviour to be consistently good (p. 22). Nor is it clear whether the calls for consistency are directed towards the behaviour of a single teacher (internal consistency), or to the behaviour of teachers generally (consistency with others), or to consistent values between home and school, or indeed to the need for consistency between policy and practice. In its enthusiasm for consistency, the report seems to lean heavily on Lee Canter’s work on assertive discipline; he writes of the need for students to be given ‘clear consistent choices’ and for teachers to set ‘firm and consistent limits’, with ‘consistent negative consequences’ for bad behaviour (Canter 1989). It is hard to find such enthusiasm for consistency anywhere, except perhaps in the field of obedience training for dogs.

So what is it that is so appealing to Ofsted, to school managers and to dog trainers about the notion of consistency? What does the concept actually mean? In the field of rational argument and intellectual debate, the term ‘consistent’ indicates approval of an argument that is coherent, rational, logically structured and not self-contradictory. In the field of ethics, inconsistency is associated with unreliability, unfairness, partiality, injustice and hypocrisy. In the field of behaviour management, consistency refers to an unvarying regime of positive and negative reinforcement used in operant conditioning to control patterns of behaviour. However, the use of such techniques in the classroom raises a number of questions about their educational value and ethical justifiability. I shall argue that the positive connotations of consistency in intellectual debate and moral standards are being hijacked in order to give some credibility to a psychological method of maintaining order in schools that would otherwise be considered of dubious worth.

Although the Ofsted report requires teachers to provide consistent teaching, consistent punishment and consistent expectations, it is clear that there is nothing intrinsically good in consistency. If someone is consistently evil, it’s not a mitigating circumstance to say, ‘Well, at least they’re consistent’. The worth of consistency lies in the worth of the practice that is consistent. If pupils complain that a teacher is inconsistent in enforcing discipline, they are not complaining that she sometimes enforces discipline fairly and sometimes doesn’t (which is what inconsistency means); they are simply complaining about those occasions when she is unfair. They would not be satisfied if she were unfair all the time, even though this would be consistent. In other words, it is not the lack of consistency, but the lack of fairness which is the problem.

On this basis we can argue that punishing pupils consistently only has value if punishing them has value. Behaviourists may argue that it has value because it conditions them to obey the rules that schools deem important; the end justifies the means. But what if the means itself is harmful because it is manipulative, and the goal is not real learning at all, because the uncritical assimilation of the required behaviour does not develop reason or understanding?
Let's return to the question of consistency. Is there anything of educational value in consistency? We've already seen that there is educational value in learning to argue consistently; but that is precisely what the practice of conditioning through consistent reinforcement does not teach. Indeed, there is nothing educational going on if pupils are simply being conditioned into ways of behaving that bear no relation to the real world. In the world outside, they will face diversity of attitudes and behaviours, and they will have to make their own decisions in life; but in school the artificial consistency of expectations they face runs the risk of dehumanising them, demonstrating cultural insensitivity and hindering the development of personal autonomy; on top of this, opportunities for pupils to learn about differences in the real world are lost.

If consistency in behaviour policies is of dubious educational value, the ethical messages pupils can pick up from the approach are even more worrying. To start with, there is no mention in the Ofsted report of the need for consistent respect for pupils, or for consistent care and support – which in my view should be the starting point for any behaviour policy. Nor is there any reference to teachers setting a consistent example of ethical behaviour or ensuring that their own behaviour is consistent with what they require pupils to do. Even more seriously, the point of moral education is surely that pupils should grow and develop in their moral understanding, but the consistent enforcement of a school’s code of conduct makes no contribution to this, because it’s a static policy. Indeed, the consistent use of threats of punishment to keep pupils in line is in danger of holding them back in Kohlberg’s stage one of moral development, where the morality of an action is determined by its consequences (‘Am I likely to get punished for this action?’) and there is ‘deference to superior power or prestige’ (Kohlberg 1974). Surely it is better to encourage pupils to move towards higher stages of moral maturity by learning about human rights, democracy and the principles that underpin and justify moral decisions.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Ofsted’s emphasis on consistency as a way of conditioning pupils into adopting certain patterns of behaviour is disrespectful and anti-educational, and in danger of reducing their massive human potential to ‘just another brick in the wall’.

References


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