

**From Assertive Discipline to Participatory Democracy:
The Spectrum of Behavior Management Approaches**

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ECE 5020 Approaches to Young Children's Learning
April 29, 2007

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I can distinctly remember the one and only time I got my name on the board in school. It was in third grade, and we had been out at recess. I was being chased around the playground by a boy who had cornered me and tried to kiss me. This then resulted in my lining up late to go back to class. I can still see my name up there from my desk in the third row, and I can still feel the sting of the injustice of it all. What did I learn from that encounter? I learned that “life isn’t fair” – a phrase I remember hearing repeated frequently as a child. I also remember thinking “why can’t it be fair?” Now as a teacher, in my classroom of three- and four-year-olds, I have witnessed the opposite extreme from my experience described above. Our children are encouraged to work together to create class rules that they all agree with. Recently they created a rule stating that toys from home can only be brought out for “show and tell” time, but otherwise must remain in one’s cubby. This rule was created in response to a series of conflicts that had arisen from sharing difficulties. My classroom, however, is not necessarily the norm. I have discovered that there is a broad spectrum of classroom management techniques still in use today – from “Assertive Discipline” (Canter, 1989) to “participatory democracy” (Mintz, 2006). In today’s society, should we still be using the rigid discipline techniques I remember from my childhood, or is the approach in my current classroom now more appropriate?

Rewards & Punishment

As it applies to early childhood education, Behaviorism is “the belief that child behavior and development are subject to scientific analysis and can be improved

through environmental engineering” (Neisworth & Buggey, 2005, p. 186). According to this philosophy, behavior is controlled by the results it produces. Thus, in observing and analyzing a child’s behavior, one can discover its antecedents in order to select the appropriate techniques required for behavior modification (Neisworth & Buggey, 2005). Some of the methods used to change behavior are shaping, sequencing, modeling, prompting, behavior rehearsal, and discrimination training. These different strategies each involve having adults “engineer” specific environmental events. One example is that providing a particular “cue,” such as turning on the light when children should remain quiet, can help children to do something they wouldn’t be able to do on their own. Alternatively, the adult might use some type of positive reinforcement, such as candy or toys, to encourage desired behavior or a negative consequence like “Time-Out” to discourage undesirable behavior.

One application of behaviorist techniques for classroom management, termed “Assertive Discipline,” was developed in the 1970’s by Lee Canter as a response to the lack of teacher training at the time (Canter, 1989). His method involved the following plan: determine what you require of the children, state your directions clearly, model the behavior, have the children restate it, engage in the activity, and begin reinforcement. The reinforcement should be primarily positive or “catching students being good” (Canter, 1989, p. 313). Then if children are still misbehaving, as a last resort, teachers should apply a consistent sequence of increasingly negative consequences. These could be warnings, time-outs or even calling home. Canter (1989) states that this method is research-based and is more efficient than stopping a lesson to determine a

specific consequence on the spot. He believes that “every student has the right to a learning environment free from disruption” (p. 315).

In addition to being used for classroom management, “time out” also became a popular parenting style during the 1970s (Preuisse, 2006). It was seen as being the humane replacement for spanking. However the intent was still to control and extinguish undesirable behavior. This technique is still fairly common, its use being encouraged by television shows such as *Nanny 911*. Generally, it is now implemented by having the child sit in a chair or corner for one minute per year of their age, as a consequence for the child having lost their self control. However, Preuisse (2006) believes that “the lost opportunities and deprivation of positive interactions move this technique into the punishment category,” which is in direct contradiction with the NAEYC’s Code of Ethical Conduct (p. 137). Whaley (2005) states that time-out may be appropriate in some cases for older children, but not for infants and toddlers because they “do not yet have the cognitive ability to ‘think about’ what they have done” (p. 57). While it may be necessary to temporarily remove a child from a situation to help them calm down, it is important for an adult to stay close and help reassure them (Whaley, 2005). In addition she agrees with Preuisse that time-out does not provide the child with an alternative positive behavior and thus teaches nothing.

The goal of the behaviorist approach is to control the children’s behavior in order for the teacher to provide instruction as effectively as possible. Slavin’s (2003) educational psychology textbook essentially agrees that the most effective classroom management is accomplished by first introducing clear rules, then teaching children how to follow the rules, and finally responding immediately to stop any misbehavior. He

states that children should be given the following choice: “either comply or suffer the consequences” (Slavin, 2003, p. 385). Both Slavin (2003) and Canter (1989) agree that children must be taught how to behave, as many will not come to school ready to learn. This again implies that the purpose of the discipline approach is to extinguish any behavior that might detract from the learning goals of the school. Learning to behave is not, in and of itself, a part of the curriculum.

Self-Regulation

Maria Montessori had a somewhat different take on discipline – developed in the early 1900’s – also in reaction to the existing social milieu. At that time, children were seen as having fixed intelligence with predetermined development (Torrence & Chattin-McNichols, 2005). Most believed that behavior needed to be controlled purely via external motivators, just as described above. On the contrary, her view of children was that they could “actively construct not only their own understanding of the world, but also their own sense of inner discipline” (Torrence & Chattin-McNichols, 2005, p. 370). Thus, a child must be given space to develop their own “will” through actions on the environment. However, in order to avoid complete chaos, the teacher must also impose limits in order to allow all children the opportunity to “work in peace” (Torrence & Chattin-McNichols, 2005, p. 370). These limits would generally take the form of requiring children to respect themselves, others and the environment. In order to allow the children to experience the freedom necessary to develop their own self-discipline, Montessori believed that they should be involved in purposeful work (Torrence & Chattin-McNichols, 2005). This work might be helping to clean the room, working with

structured Montessori materials, or practicing zipping their own coat. MacDonald (2005) states that:

The drive for independence, self care, and the enjoyment of work supports the development of responsibility. It calls children to a deeper sense of calm, purposeful activity and gives the child a sense of self-confidence. It also eliminates all kinds of negative, challenging behaviors. (p. 51)

Although it is difficult to believe that all behavior problems could be so easily done away with, one can certainly see how such an environment would promote the ability to self-regulate. Although there is still a focus on creating a peaceful learning environment, the goal of this discipline approach is to allow children to develop intrinsic motivation to behave, rather than teaching them to be driven by external reinforcement.

Piaget, who initially developed his theory of constructivism in the early 1900's, also believed in the importance of encouraging moral autonomy (Kamii, 1984). As opposed to heteronomy, which is being governed by others, moral autonomy is the ability to self-regulate. Kamii (1984) explains how Piaget felt that behaviorist techniques produce heteronomous individuals who are then prone to avoiding being caught, blindly conforming, or revolting against authority. Rather than developing morals, punishments and rewards merely keep children obedient. Autonomy, on the other hand is encouraged by exchanging points of view with children so that they may construct their own understanding. In so doing, one must at times impose restraints, but rather than using unrelated punishments, he encourages the use of "sanctions of reciprocity" or "fitting consequences" (Kamii, 1984, p. 412). These sanctions could be temporary exclusion from a group as a result of disruptive behavior, calling attention to negative behaviors such as lies, depriving a child of something they misused, or requiring restitution such as cleaning up one's own mess. In each case, though, these sanctions

must be used within a relationship of mutual trust and affection, and must allow for the child to return to the group when they feel ready. Kamii (1984) believes that in utilizing Piaget's theories we can shift our focus "away from what we do to children to how children develop, [so that] we can begin – socially, intellectually, and morally – to allow and encourage them to construct their own ideas" (p. 415). Because this method requires more time and energy, Kamii (1984) believes that development of morality should be included as one of the goals of the school curriculum.

Regulation within Community

Hall & Rudkin (2003) have developed and practiced a theory of "Social Supportive Learning" at the Boulder Journey School. The goal is to "create compassionate communities rather than compliant individuals" (Hall & Rudkin, p. 12). This approach is similar to Montessori's and Piaget's in that it views conflict, either with the environment or with others, as an opportunity for learning rather than something to be summarily extinguished. However, they take the importance of this type of social constructivism one step further, stating that "relationships-in-community take precedence over other agenda" (Hall & Rudkin, 2003, p. 14). Rather than seeing discipline as a means towards promoting classroom learning, this method underscores the value of fostering relationships and creating community by placing its priority above all else. As the authors state, "SSL developed as an alternative approach to discipline but is not primarily about discipline at all; it reflects a general orientation to the classroom" (Hall & Rudkin, 2003, p. 12). In this approach, the teacher appreciates all perspectives and works to create an inclusive community. In addition, the teacher

begins with an image of the child as successful and capable of working through problems within a group. Lastly, a teacher must be committed to honest communication through questions and conversation. Once again, though, “an unwillingness to condemn children *does not* mean that all behaviors are viewed as acceptable” (Hall & Rudkin, 2003, p. 14). The teacher’s role is to ensure that children are held responsible for their actions, whether that is helping another child get ice for their pain or clearing their dishes from the table after lunch. A fundamental difference between SSL and the approaches mentioned thus far is the acknowledgement of the classroom community. Rather than using discipline in order to create an environment for individual learning, the goal of SSL is to promote group learning. This implies that one of the goals of education should be to learn how to work with others, something that certainly isn’t a goal in a more behaviorist, direct-instruction classroom.

Another technique for promoting group interaction, which is not mutually exclusive with the SSL theory, is having children participate in making rules:

When children care about a classroom problem... and take part in solving it, they are more likely to view the resulting rules as fair. Having *made* the rules, they are more likely to observe them. Just as important, participating in the process of rule making supports children’s growth as moral, self-regulating human beings. (DeVries & Zan, 2006, p. 134)

This perspective coincides with Piaget’s constructivist perspective, but also minimizes adult authority, coercion, and unnecessary external control (DeVries & Zan, 2006).

Working with children to create the classroom rules helps promote an atmosphere of mutual respect, a cooperative community, and clear expectations (DeVries & Zan, 2006). The teacher can still ensure that certain norms, such as safety and health concerns, are accounted for, but must truly relinquish control to the group (themselves

included) as much as possible. The goal of this approach is again self-regulation, but also an understanding of community and the democratic process.

Taking this concept to the extreme, some schools have based their entire philosophy on the idea of democratic education. The common features of such “free” schools are: freedom to direct one’s own education, equality among staff and students, participatory democracy and learning that extends beyond the classroom (Graves, 2006). In such a school, discipline is not a means to an end, rather discipline is the method and the end. Interactions are based on learning respect and tolerance as well as gaining the ability to self-regulate (Graves, 2006). In the 1960’s, Jerry Mintz founded the democratic Shaker Mountain School, with the contention that:

The more the student learner can be empowered, involved in making decisions about his or her education, the more powerful that force can be toward helping them to take true responsibility for their own education. (Mintz, 2006, p. 1)

This school made all decisions, even from the very beginning, via a trustee meeting within which the students were the majority. Mintz (2006) felt that the students must truly be given the creative power and authority without any overriding veto group, so they were involved even in buying and selling buildings and creating school policies. One such policy they created was called the “stop rule” (Mintz, 2006, p. 4). This rule was created out of the recognition that conflicts frequently would arise when two students were “horsing around” and one person started to become upset (Mintz, 2006, p. 4). So the students determined that if anyone said “stop” it would indicate they were reaching a point of real frustration. Thus when a conflict was brought to the meeting for resolution, and it was determined that the “stop rule” had been ignored, “it was taken to be a very serious transgression” (Mintz, 2006, p. 5). Giving the students this

opportunity to create their own rules allowed them to take ownership of their actions. Mintz (2006) notes that the “process of conflict resolution by meeting was so effective that we would often go an entire school year without any kind of a physical fight between students” (p. 5). The more traditional academic learning in such a school is a much lower priority than the goals of empowering students to take responsibility of their own actions while also learning how to create communities that can work together for the common good.

Conclusion

In evaluating various approaches to what could be called behavior management, classroom management, discipline, or even a social constructivist curriculum, it seems quite clear that one’s take on the matter will be deeply impacted by their overall educational philosophy. It would certainly not be feasible to use conflict resolution by meeting within a direct-instruction classroom. If a school’s goal is to impart as much knowledge from teacher to child as efficiently as possible, then a two hour meeting about one rule would be ludicrous. Similarly, if the educational philosophy is based on promoting well-rounded individuals that can communicate effectively and work cooperatively even without authority, one would certainly not choose to manage individual behaviors with external motivators. It makes sense then, as Covalleskie (1992) said in his response to Assertive Discipline, that:

Rather than endlessly continue the debate about which program best controls student behaviors, we might look at the question from the other end: What is it that we hope to teach children about being good people, and does this mean more than what schools call ‘discipline’? If we can better define our ends, we might have a better standard by which to evaluate the means to achieve them. (p. 319)

There may have at one point been a need for schools that could produce obedient individuals who could conform to standards and fulfill roles in a corporate and factory driven world (Miller, 2006). However, with the rise of technology, globalization, and threats to planetary ecology, children need schools that can “reconnect the individual to culture, to community, to the organic processes and cycle of the earth” (Miller, 2006, p. 3). Now that one can almost instantaneously find facts about anything from ants to the big bang, schools do not need to be responsible for passing knowledge from one generation to the next. Instead, they need to be creating spaces for children to construct their own understandings of ethics and morality. It seems to me that we need to go back to the real basics – learning how to get along with one another.

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