The Ripple Effect in Discipline

Discipline is a serious concern to many teachers, especially beginners. The teacher who seeks help in discipline is likely to get advice that draws heavily on lore. The counsel may carry the name of a respected authority or the prestige of a widely accepted educational philosophy.

But how much advice on classroom discipline, even advice offered under such auspices, meets the test of experimentation? How many widely accepted beliefs and practices have been upheld by careful research?

In Detroit, we are studying classroom management (1). In one phase of our study, we are paying special attention to the “ripple effect,” or the influence that control techniques have—not on the children who are being disciplined—but on the other children who are watching and listening.

Briefly, the problem may be put in this way: While the teacher is correcting Sally, what effect is the disciplinary measure having on Ruth, who is sitting nearby, taking in what is happening?

Answers were sought in the kindergartens of twenty-six representative Detroit schools. In the study reported here, fifty-one undergraduates served as observers. The students began their observations on the first days of the new school year.

The observers were carefully instructed on their assignment. They were to note any incident in which a kindergartner watched the teacher correct another child for misbehavior. They were to report in detail on three phases of each incident: the behavior of the watching child immediately before the incident, the behavior of the teacher and the child who was being corrected during the incident, and the behavior of the watching child for two minutes after the incident.

Four hundred and six such incidents were analyzed. In our analysis, we classified the control technique itself, the behavior of the watching child immediately before the incident, the behavior of the teacher and the child who was being corrected during the incident, and the behavior of the watching child after the incident.

The control technique

Three dimensions of the control techniques used by the teachers were
measured: clarity, firmness, and roughness.

Clarity involved the teacher's directions to the children. How clearly did the directions define the misbehavior the teacher wanted to bring to an end?

A teacher might say: "Tommy, stop it!" Or "Tommy, you can't do that!" Or "Tommy, that will do!" However emphatically uttered, these directions did not make it clear what Tommy was to stop doing.

A teacher who wanted to make sure that a pupil understood what was expected of him might use one of several approaches. The teacher might give directions that defined the pupil's misbehavior: "Tommy, don't take the blocks away from Johnny while he's using them." Or the teacher might give the child an acceptable standard of behavior: "Tommy, in kindergarten we ask for things. We don't grab." Or the teacher might tell Tommy how to stop the misbehavior: "Tommy put those blocks down and look at the picture books."

Firmness involved how much "I-mean-it" the teacher packed into the disciplinary technique. How did the teachers say "I mean it"?

By touching or guiding the child. By speaking emphatically. By walking close to the child. Or by following through, that is, by focusing steadily on the misbehaving child until he conformed. If the teacher brushed over the trouble lightly, the correction conveyed little firmness.

Roughness described techniques in which the teacher expressed hostility or exasperation. If the teacher touched the child, the touch had more pressure than was necessary. If the teacher gave the child a warning look, the look was angry rather than serious. The samples in the study showed no extremely harsh techniques. No child, for example, was shaken or spanked.

The children's reactions

The children who watched while a classmate was being corrected responded in various ways, which we classified in five categories. Sometimes boys and girls showed no reaction. They simply went about their business, making no observable response to the episode. If the children happened to be drawing when a classmate was admonished, they simply continued with their drawing.

At other times, children reacted sharply to the correction of a classmate. They lost interest in what they had been doing and became worried, confused, and restless. This type of reaction was classified under "behavior disruption."

At still other times, children responded with a special effort to be good. They stopped a misbehavior of their own, sat up taller, paid closer attention to the lesson, or tried in some other way to show that they were not misbehaving. These reactions were grouped under "conformance."

Sometimes the correction had no deterrent effect whatsoever. Even though a child had just seen a classmate cor-
rected for misbehaving, he launched some mischief of his own. This response was classified as "non-conformance."

At times, children in the audience vacillated between conformance and non-conformance. During the two minutes after the teacher had corrected a classmate, they both conformed and misbehaved.

We related the children’s reactions to the teachers' control techniques (2). When the teachers made it very clear what they expected of a child, the children in the audience responded with increased conformance and decreased non-conformance. When the teachers did not make it clear what they expected of the child they were correcting, the effect on the young observers was reversed, that is, they responded with less conformance and more non-conformance. The probability level (3) for this difference, by the chi-square test, was .01.

The clarity of the teachers' directions was plainly related to the responses of the children in the audience, but the firmness of the teachers' technique, the researchers found, only tended to be related to the reactions of these children. In other words, the knowledge that a control technique was firm or lacking in firmness did not enable us to predict how a watching child would react.

Finally, we found a relation between the roughness of the control technique and the response of the watching child. Roughness did not lead to increased conformance and decreased non-conformance. Instead, rough techniques were followed by an increase in behavior disruption. Severe techniques did not make for "better" behavior in the watching child. Severe techniques simply upset him.

Our study recognized that control techniques alone do not determine how a watching child reacts. Other influences are also at work.

**The impact of the setting**

We investigated three possibilities. First of all, we asked: "What was the watching child doing just before the incident?" Our next concern: Was the watching child psychologically close to the child who was being corrected? Was the child in the audience watching his misbehaving classmate with considerable interest? Finally, how long had the watching child been in kindergarten?

Children who were themselves misbehaving—or even innocently related to misbehavior—were much more responsive as they watched the teachers' efforts to control than were the children who were free of any connection with misbehavior. Children who at the moment were free of misbehavior were quite likely to show no reaction. Children who were misbehaving showed more conformance, more non-conformance, and markedly more vacillation between conformance and non-conformance (probability level .001).

It was instructive to compare the effects of clarity and firmness on the various groups. The effects already noted for clarity were obtained regardless of whether or not the watching child was associated with mis-
behavior. However, firmness affected only groups that had some connection with misbehavior. In these groups, high firmness increased conformance and decreased non-conformance (probability level .05).

The length of time the children had been in kindergarten, we found, affected their reactions. On the first day the children were highly sensitive to control techniques. They showed some outward reaction to 55 per cent of all control incidents. On the next three days they reacted outwardly to only 34 per cent of the incidents (probability level .001).

Among our findings

To the extent that we can generalize on cause and effect, the study indicates that the reaction of watching children to a teacher’s control of a misbehaving child is related to at least three factors.

First, the newness of the situation. On the first day in kindergarten, watching children showed the strongest responses.

Second, the behavior of the watching children. Pupils who were themselves misbehaving or interested in children who were misbehaving were more likely to show the strongest reactions; the particular response was most likely to be vacillation.

Third, the disciplinary technique itself, that is, the clarity, the firmness, and the roughness of the technique.

When the teacher made it clear what behavior she objected to or what behavior she expected, the watching children responded with increased conformance and decreased non-conformance.

If the teacher’s behavior conveyed firmness, the watching children sometimes responded with increased conformance and decreased non-conformance. This reaction occurred if the watching children had been misbehaving or interested in a child who was misbehaving.

If the teacher used rough techniques, the children showed behavior disruption but not conformance or non-conformance.

It should be kept in mind that clarity in the teacher’s directions led to greater conformance and less non-conformance in a new and unstructured situation. When children are new to kindergarten or to the teacher, they may be especially sensitive to his directions and desires. As the child feels more at home in kindergarten and more at ease with the teacher, we would expect clarity to be less important. Several studies are now in progress to check this expectation.

Fact and lore

What meaning does the study have for teachers of children who are just beginning kindergarten? It is clear that a ripple effect does exist. What a teacher does to control children’s behavior affects the children who watch as well as the children who are corrected.

The teacher who is interested in controlling ripple effects can generally do so best by giving clear instructions to the child rather than by exerting pressure on him. However, some in-
tensity or firmness is effective if the children who are watching are themselves inclined to "deviancy."

The study does not support the notion that the teacher must "bear down" on the first day or "make an example" of a child. Such steps are not necessary to induce conformity in children who are entering kindergarten. Nor does the study support the contention that roughness and anger are simply firmness intensified. Firmness and roughness are different qualities. Witness the different effects they have on watching children.

NOTES

1. The research is sponsored by the Department of Educational Psychology, College of Education, Wayne State University. Financial support has been provided by the National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, Public Health Service, Grant 1066.

2. The inter-coder reliability on a 24-item control technique code was 78 per cent agreement; on a 34-item audience reaction code, 83 per cent. Since the former was collapsed to three dimensions and the latter to five categories, the functional reliability would be even higher. To avoid possible bias, different teams coded the control techniques used by teachers and the reactions of the watching children.

3. Probability levels refer to the probability that the differences obtained could be due to chance. For example, a probability level of .01 means that the difference obtained would occur by chance less than one time in a hundred.