Clarity, neutrality, consistency

How can behaviour policy be fixed when circumstances change every time? Geoff Moss and John Bayley's series on discipline continues with a look at issues surrounding consistency

"We need more consistency among staff in their approach to behaviour!" is the typical complaint of senior managers when we talk to them about how their discipline policies are working in the school. "We need a clear system for discipline enforced by SMT!" is the typical complaint of teachers when we ask them about how well they are managing behaviour in their lessons.

In this article we want to consider what we mean by 'consistency' in the context of discipline policy and practice and also to consider the limits of policy in prescribing practice. We will be arguing that when faced with behavioural diversity in the classroom, a 'one size fits all' approach will not be sufficient. At the same time we recognise that the goal of 'consistency' is a proper one within a context that recognises a range of professional responses for a range of situations.

In our training programmes for teachers we often begin the day by describing a scenario like this:
■   You are starting a lesson. Most of the class have taken off their coats, put away their bags and started to copy out the lesson objectives. One boy is staring out the window, whistling to himself.

■ You say: "Jamie, Jamie - did you hear what I said?" He doesn't answer. You go closer. "Jamie, what do you think you're doing?"

■ He turns to look at you and says in a loud and clear voice: "Oh, why don't you just shut up!"

■ What do you do next?"

Well, of course, there is no one right answer. The scenario is deliberately ambiguous. If Jamie had used stronger language I might be more certain of my response. There may well be a clear school discipline procedure to follow when the 'F-word' is used. But in the case we describe it is rare for us to find teachers whose school's discipline policy has delineated a procedure that would automatically be employed here.

The response to our question is therefore "It all depends". It all depends on who Jamie is, on how well I am managing the rest of the class, and it will – school discipline policy notwithstanding – depend on what sort of teacher I am, my personality, my experience, my skills and what mood I'm in right now.

So there is no single correct response, but what are some possible responses that teachers might make to this albeit ambiguous situation? Here are some common replies:

■ "I'd tell him that his behaviour wasn't acceptable and send him to the head of year for punishment."

■ "I'd ask him to step outside and talk to him about his behaviour. Then I'd return him to his place to get on with his work with a warning that if he misbehaved again he would receive a sanction."

■ "I'd make a joke of it – I'd say something like 'Sorry Jamie, teachers just never shut up, so live with it and settle down now.' I wouldn't make a big deal of it."

■ "I'd be worried what was happening for Jamie to behave like that. I'd probably ask him to come outside and have a quiet chat – ask him if there was something wrong, was he upset about something?"

What we hear from the same group of teachers within the same school setting presented with the same scenario is a variety of interpretations. It tells us a lot about the diversity of behaviour management styles that may be occasioned by differences among teachers or by differences among pupils. Let's look first at differences among teachers.

There is the teacher who wants a system – a set of discipline procedures that are prescribed, that are clear and predictable. No matter what the situation, no matter who Jamie is, what his problems may be, if a pupil behaves in a certain manner there should be a specific course of action taken. This teacher is *systems-orientated*. On the other hand, there is the teacher who is uncomfortable with a prescriptive approach, who is more concerned with relationships than with rules. For them, each situation is different, needing different responses. This teacher is more

person-orientated. Such a teacher may feel that systems get in the way more than help.

What about pupil differences? There is the pupil who does not readily accept the authority of the teacher, and is often testing the limits. With this sort of Jamie as our pupil, if the teacher were to ask him what was wrong the answer may be something even more unacceptable. The situation would then become yet more challenging. On the other hand, there is the pupil who is generally very co-operative, who enjoys a good relationship with teachers, let's say who has internalised the school's code of conduct. With this sort of Jamie as our pupil the behaviour described in our scenario will be very unusual, indicating something is very wrong. The teacher who now sticks to a uniform system, and hands out a sanction no matter what, may yet further inflame emotions, and damage any sort of teacher-pupil relationship.

The move towards a more informal way of working may be a good thing. But how can we tell when it is and is not appropriate?

When pupils test the boundaries they need clear redirection, they need control, some limits set on their behaviour. When pupils are under some emotional stress they need listening to, understanding, some damage limitation. Different situations need different approaches.

So, given this need for flexibility, does this mean that consistency is an impossible dream? No. We see many schools where there is a high level of consistency. But in order to understand how that happens, we need to look more closely at what really takes place in classrooms.

Most teachers recognise the idea that when we start out with a new class, or start a new year, we have to 'play it by the book'. We teach our rules and routines, make a point of conspicuously rewarding the behaviour that we want and provide students with negative consequences for behaviour that we do not want. This approach is usually labelled 'positive behaviour management'. It is 'behaviourist' in method, stressing as it does the social contingencies that influence a person's actions.

In its original format Assertive Discipline typified such an approach applied to classroom management. However it also introduced the central idea of 'assertiveness'. This refers not only to a particular way of communication, but also within the classroom to a set of values and attitudes adopted by the teacher. Teachers recognise that they are the principal factor controlling behaviour in the room and that they have a duty to coach children in appropriate behaviour. Their own personal feelings of anger or hurt must be managed to avoid aggressive or passive responses and allow the teacher to employ appropriately assertive behaviour.

Adults using this method must learn how to use assertive language. Instructions are brief and the adult always checks for understanding. Instructional sentences start with phrases such as "I need you to…" or "I want you to…" in order to ensure uncluttered language. After teachers have given instructions, they ask students to repeat them to check their understanding. Once students are on task the adult is quick to reinforce the behaviour with praise or acknowledgement that is personal and focused: "Good, Hamid – you got straight to work and I like the careful way you are taking notes".

High praise

When routine commands are given out, adults are recommended immediately to find a group of students to conspicuously reinforce in order to maintain a high praise-to-limit-setting ratio. Students are continually reminded that they have choices to make between desirable and undesirable outcomes. In the event of disputes between the adult and student, students are reminded that they have choices to make against the background of the rewards and sanctions contained in the behaviour plan. Adults are encouraged to deal with such confrontations in a low-key and private fashion.

This way of working in the classroom is still very powerful, as recent research continues to show.[1] Our shorthand way of explaining it to teachers is that this is how Supernanny would behave if she were in the classroom: clear expectations, bags of reinforcement and light but certain sanctions, all managed by a calm and caring adult. We know this way of working is effective from thousands of classroom observations we have undertaken. Whenever the teacher and teaching assistant behave in this way there is a settled and orderly classroom. Positive behaviour management has been at the heart of Assertive Discipline for 30 years and with good reason: it works. It is also dear to the heart of all school managers everywhere. Whenever we hear the cry for consistency what it usually means is: "Why won't staff stand by the door, greet students as they enter, make sure they are rewarding and also make proper use of the sanction system, just as they do when there is an inspection?"

However, teachers do not use this approach all the time and neither is it always desirable that they do. Let's look at how teachers in fact behave most of the time.

In most classrooms we see a different and more informal way of working. Teachers do not always deal with trouble by using a discipline hierarchy, which they may find burdensome. They are much more likely to use humour, deflection, a 'quiet word' – "Let's not go there, Lucy" – or some direct challenge, as in "Boys, you're letting yourself down" or "What should you be doing right now?" The method is marked by informality: the teacher is still in charge but seems to be a different character from our positive behaviour management teacher.

One of the courses we offer is called 'What To Do When Students Act Out',[2] which makes use of the work of Charles Wolfgang,[3] and in particular the 'Three Faces' model, to help us understand what is going on. We talk about the basic positive behaviour management approach as the 'rules and consequences' face and the more casual approach as the 'confront and contract' face. When using the term 'confront and contract' we mean that the adult is still in charge, still confronting misbehaviour, but they have a formal or informal contract with the students. This implied contract states that the teacher will treat children in a more adult way if they are prepared to respond accordingly.

He turns to look at you and says in a loud and clear voice: "Oh, why don't you just shut up!" What do you do next?
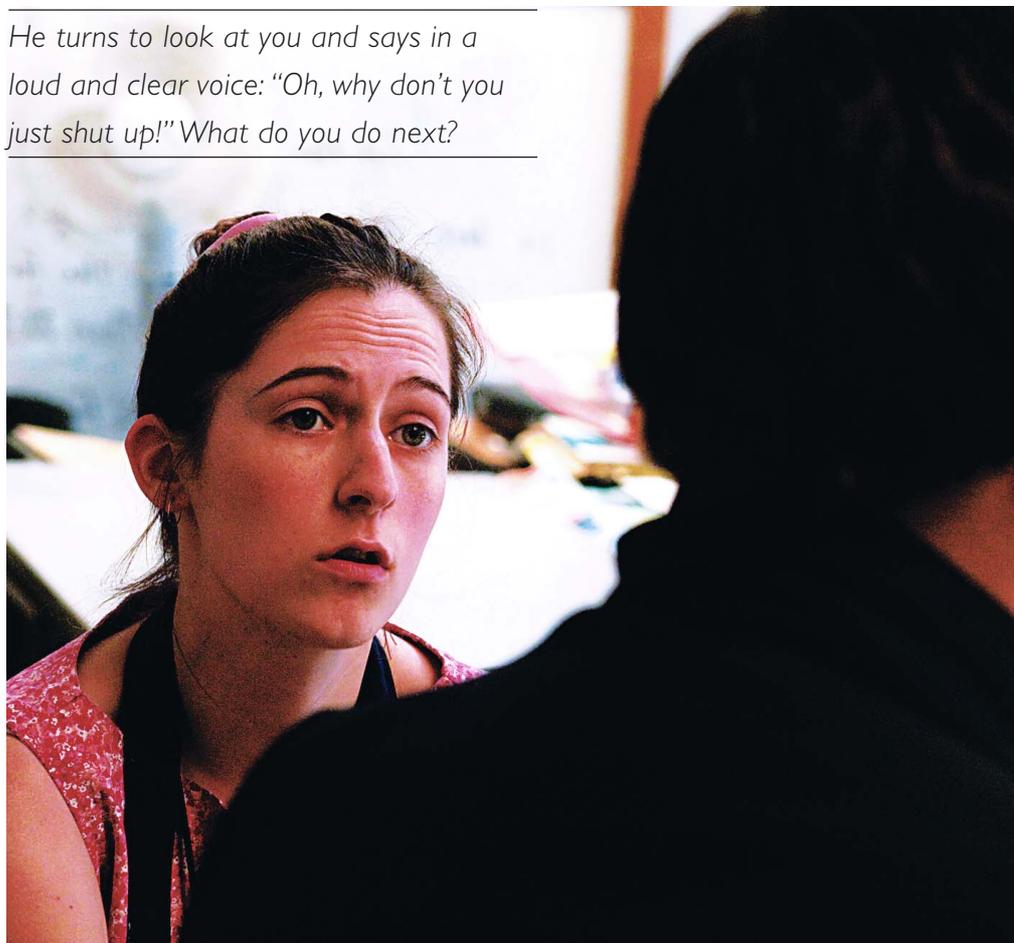
This can be manifest in both informal and formal ways of working. If we see a child texting at the back of the room, we may simply say to them: "Shane, let's not go there." If the child shrugs, smiles ruefully and puts the phone away, most teachers would think: "Job done." They would not expect the positive behaviour police to jump in the through the window and demand to know why the rule about mobile phones had not been formally restated!

We can apply confront and contract in a more formal way. Many teachers will be familiar with the '4 Ws' approach. After a child has done something disruptive to learning, they are invited to consider What happened, Which rule was broken, Who was affected by it and What can be done to put things right. When we are working in this style we are moving away from simple behavioural approaches and using cognitive techniques as well, inviting the student to assess a situation and to modify their own behaviour. The locus of control shifts away from being mainly with the adult; the student is offered more control in the situation. Assertive Discipline has always recommended building up dialogue with students; using a term such as 'confront and contract' helps us to see more clearly what is happening. The question is whether or not it is always a good thing to move in this direction.

In some cases the move towards a more informal style signifies a setback for the teacher. We will see classrooms where there is constant low-level talk, which the teacher tries to 'teach over'. This may happen because the teacher doesn't trust the discipline system or because they fear the consequences of imposing a rule. It may be the teacher doesn't want to get marked down by the silent audience in the staffroom and on the management team as 'not able to hack it'. On the other hand, the move towards a more informal way of working can represent a significant gain for the teacher. The students are being treated in a more adult way and the potentially cumbersome apparatus of behaviour management (stars, stickers, charts, detentions) can be dispensed with. Seen in this light, we are moving away from imposed behaviour management towards more self-regulated behaviour.

So the move towards a more informal way of working may be a good thing. How can we tell when it is and is not appropriate? Before we answer that question we must look at one more mode of working. If the rules and consequences face is behaviourist in essence and if the confront-contract face is based in cognitive psychology, then the third face, that of 'relationships and listening', is rooted in person-centred approaches. The essence of this third face is that behaviour is symptomatic of underlying emotional states. If a child is angry or upset, the job of the teacher is to allow the child to understand the feeling and then make different decisions about their behaviour. Most of us have at one time or another dealt with an angry child in the classroom by taking them to one side or by allowing a little time to pass and then asking them gently what the problem is.

Gentle teaching

This way of working will be familiar to readers who have worked with the 'gentle teaching' approach. Again the approach can be more or less formal. For example, in Gordon's Teacher Effectiveness Training[4] we come across the '3 Is'. We describe the behaviour we see, then the effect it creates and then the feeling it gives us: "When I am trying to teach and I hear constant low-level chatter at the back of the room (behaviour) it distracts me and other students in the room (effect) and I feel frustrated and angry" (feeling).

Notice the use of 'I' language, which avoids challenging the student and gives them space to examine their own feelings. (Many teachers will have come across this use of 'I' language in training courses on working with difficult and challenging behaviours). Used in a less formal way in the classroom, the relationship–listening face involves distraction, low-level voices, inquiring looks from the teacher and subtle changes of activity and student grouping, which avoid singling out an individual student.

We therefore have three models or 'faces' we present to our students. How can we use this to help in our search for consistency and effective policy? Here are three ideas that we are finding useful.[5]

First of all, the rules–consequences model is critically important at foundation periods throughout the year, the most important of which are the beginning of each half term. We suggest that at those times all the staff in the school need to reaffirm basic rules and routines – the bottom-line behaviours needed for us to function effectively. All the staff need to review the efficacy of their reward and sanction systems – the bottom-line methods for promoting positive behaviour. The vitally important rationale for this is that those of our students whom we find most difficult and challenging often do not even listen to adults speaking, as a result of either distrust or indifference. However, they are social learners and keenly observe how other students get respect and adult attention in the classroom. In this sense we are enlisting our students in the cause of social mediation with our most challenging students.

Context

We have to keep in mind the context for all of this. Firstly, where students are needier, we may maintain the rules–consequences framework as a constant backdrop. In other situations it may not need to be so prominent.

Second, we need to recognise that different adults are comfortable with different styles. Some of us are natural supernannies and others are natural confront-and-contractors. Other colleagues naturally adopt a gentler more counselling mode – more relationships–listening. By emphasising the importance of foundation periods we are sending the message to school staff that at particular times it is important to reteach basic expectations and that their different styles of management are appreciated. In this individual context, using a 'three faces' approach

also brings other benefits. As individuals we can assess our own strengths and areas for development and we can also be subtler and more appreciative of colleagues' strengths when we are doing classroom observations.

Third, the three faces approach helps us to clarify our thinking about non-intrusive approaches to behaviour management. In Assertive Discipline we have always spoken about redirecting behaviour (in fact in one our videos we refer to it as the art of behaviour management). This is the area where we head off trouble before it ever starts. It is easier to understand this approach if we think of moving from relationships–listening (signs, signals, reflecting back, the '3 Is', listening) through confront–contract (questioning, the '4 Ws', informal contracting) through to rules–consequences (restating rules, offering choice, using positive and negative reinforcement). In subsequent articles in this series and in our forthcoming book[6] we show how to apply this approach in practice.

Designing and managing behaviour policies in schools can be frustrating. Managers know how they want teachers to behave. But teachers don't always do as managers want and they sometimes have criticisms of the way senior and middle managers behave. Written into our policy we need an approach that, as well as describing some givens, also allows for and confirms the different styles that teachers will use in the classroom as well as recognising the complexity of the situations they have to handle.

In the next article in this series we will look at the starting point for all this: establishing rules, routines and relationships – the '3 Rs' of behaviour management.

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References

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