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HIGH SCHOOL DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS AND READING DISABILITY

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In the past ten years vandalism, impertinence to teachers and general classroom disturbances have increased tremendously. These are only a few of the types of discipline problems that teachers and administrators are faced with daily. The secondary schools seem to be the most prominent area of trouble. If at all possible, it is up to these high school classroom teachers to handle the discipline problems they face. Sending students to the office, suspensions, and expulsions are often not the answer for chronic offenders. They simply meet these punishments with resentment and defiance. Too many times they just return to the classroom, only to repeat their disruptive actions. So it is in the classroom that the problem must be solved. In order to do this, the teacher must understand what discipline involves and how to use it most effectively. Correcting classroom environment and finding the cause of behavioral problems are also essential. Many studies have shown that reading problems in students often are the cause for discipline problems in those same students. Understanding discipline and coordinating it with correcting reading deficiencies would be a major step toward improving discipline problems.

In general, discipline problems stem from two sources: adolescent development and the atmosphere and effects of institutionalization.¹ Discipline problems that are considered "real" are those that cause the infringement on the freedoms of the teacher and the other members of the class. It is important that the teacher recognize the cause of these problems. Equally important is that the teacher does not perceive a discipline problem when there is none.² Sometimes the teacher can create challenges by imposing unnecessarily forceful and strict rules rather than an atmosphere of learning.³ "The fact is that force will be met with equal resisting force, and will generally result in disruptive behavior."⁴ The best action to take against misbehavior in the classroom is preventive discipline, not remedial discipline (action taken when confronted with a problem). "Positive steps should be taken to insure a good learning environment, free from challenges that might become problems, yet also giving freedom to students."⁵

"The common tendency among teachers is to accept students in terms of their successful behavior and to reject them in terms of their non-successful ones."⁶ Reading abilities play an important part in the successes or failures of a student. According to Jorgenson, "Reading material that is too difficult . . . leads to repeated failure over a period of time and causes frustration, confusion and discouragement."⁷ Duke reports that, ". . . students who become disciplinary problems in high school are distinguishable as a group

by the third grade.”⁸ It becomes more evident as they grow older. “. . . the student who completes elementary school with a history of failure and low achievement is a likely candidate for disciplinary action later on.”⁹ Thus, by the time the student has reached the secondary level, he has met much difficulty in reading and increasing failure. In a profile of a typical delinquent youth, his education status is listed as “. . . one or two years behind the class: difficulty with reading . . .”¹⁰

The relationship between reading disabilities and discipline problems is a positive one. In regard to this, instructional teaching strategies may be at fault. Students who are forced into reading instructional material at grade level and who can't, further reinforce negative feelings of failure; they become frustrated, angry, and discontented. According to Berman, “. . . delinquency results from a failure to detect significant skill deficits which predispose certain children to failure in school and life.”¹¹ Maynard reinforces the issue by stating that, “Often teachers build a pattern of failure, especially in minority children that can never be broken.”¹²

Perhaps, then, the greatest prevention of discipline problems lies in adjusting the material and climate in the classroom. Obviously, the first place to begin to improve behavior is in the elementary schools by correcting deficient academic skills and increasing the possibility for success. If this does not occur, then most likely the student will fall behind and become a discipline problem. Therefore, it becomes necessary for the secondary teacher to deal with the situation. One of the main techniques he can utilize is to adjust the difficulty of the material to the reading levels of the students. This procedure can easily be accomplished by utilizing a readability formula. By reducing the sentence length and simplifying the word difficulty level (substituting synonyms of one or two syllable words), the overall readability level will be lowered. Jorgenson found that behavior improved as material became easier and that poor student behavior resulted when material was too difficult.¹³ It appears evident that readability level of materials is indicative of classroom behavior.

Studies on students' behavior in school make it clear that reading, or a lack of reading ability, is related to discipline problems. It is necessary for classroom teachers to provide material equal to the reading ability of the students. An atmosphere of challenges rather than frustration or boredom is preventive disciplinary action and should alleviate most major problems. Teachers should make a real effort to reduce the threat of going to school. “Most disruptive students are convinced that they are failures and perceive school to be a threatening experience.”¹⁴ By providing a meaningful experience in the classroom, teachers can meet the needs of students, rather than their meeting the needs of the school.

While frustration in reading needs to be reduced, the classroom climate must also be attended to. The concept of teacher prevention of discipline problems extends itself to the teacher's relationship with the students themselves. The following suggestions attempt to clarify the essence of discipline problems and offer direction in their reduction.

1. *Expect and anticipate adult-like behavior.* If the teacher treats his students in a child-like manner, then it is reasonable to assume that

they will behave in the same manner. By increasing student responsibility and raising expectations of their academic and behavioral performance, the teacher not only raises student self-concepts but also elicits adult-like behavior.

2. *Re-examine what a discipline problem is.* In many instances, the discipline problem is a relative term. What constitutes a deviant act varies from classroom to classroom and from teacher to teacher. Thus, it is the teacher's perception—based upon his own values, attitudes, and beliefs—of what is or is not a discipline problem. Quite frequently, a teacher can create problems where none might exist by drawing attention to minor transgressions; many transgressions, if ignored, will eliminate themselves as some students are simply seeking attention. In essence, the teacher needs to question and analyze his present behavioral-classroom-standards and determine whether or not they are truly valid and worthy of attention.
3. *Be prepared and organized for instruction.* The rationale here is that if the teacher is lively, informed, and interesting in his instructional approach, students will not want to deviate; they will be more involved and interested in the learning process. Involving students in active rather than passive learning activities is additionally helpful. The structuring of routine tasks, particularly at the beginning of class, immediately involves students in an activity which they can anticipate and expect, and thereby eliminate the unoccupied time and tendency to misbehave.

With the proper materials and a positive climate, teachers can improve reading ability and at the same time avoid classroom discipline problems.

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