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Behaviour Problems and Their Treatment at School

Abstract: In recent years, practising teachers have had to face very serious problems. It is often impossible to implement educational tasks effectively, because of the inadequate behaviour of students in the classroom. Several coarse examples can be seen for indiscipline in the classroom, moreover the toolbox of the teachers is less and less fit for the solution of these problems. The author examined the behaviour problems which usually occur in the classroom, and the way teachers manage them. He proposes recommendations on how to solve the occurring behaviour problems in a new and effective way.

Keywords: teacher, consistency, inadequate behaviour, adequate response modes, Carpenter-effect.

Coarse, neglected behaviour problems of students occur more and more often at school. It is more difficult, occasionally even impossible to implement educational tasks effectively, because of the inadequate behaviour in the classroom. Society, and mainly teachers tend to lay the blame on families for this misbehaviour. It is not advisable to reduce parents' responsibility – parents do have responsibilities and obligations concerning their children's performance at school, however, it is not wise either to expect more from families than their actual capabilities. In other words, on commenting these problems one could say that some parents do not do their best, but problems occurring at school cannot be solved by parents from the home. So, instead of looking for the responsible ones, it is advisable to find adequate solutions to problems, solutions that are acceptable for everyone.

The examination of the problem is topical for several reasons. While evaluating the situation, four factors must be mentioned: the number of behaviour problems is rising dramatically; these problems are insoluble or seemingly insoluble ones; there are more and more complaining, helpless, unaided teachers;

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and finally, there are apparently few really effective, adequate solutions. It does not make the situation easier either, that school misbehaviours get more and more emphasis in the media, and thus call the attention of the public to these problems.

The success of school education depends on several factors. It is difficult to measure if education reached its aim; it is unclear how to define the success; one cannot point out the deficiencies and mistakes of the work clearly, because the result can be evaluated only later, indirectly; and it is common that teachers blame the child and the family for the failure.

Many varieties of school behaviour problems are known. On the following list the order shows the seriousness of the cases, starting from the least serious ones:

- chewing gum, eating, drinking
- drawing, scribbling (in the exercise-book, book, on paper and desk)
- talking to mates, „correspondence”
- hairdressing and make-up activities
- telephoning, sending text messages, listening to music
- reading under the desk, doing homework in another subject
- using spitballs, slingshots
- being noisy, disturbing the lesson with loud remarks
- cheeky, rude language, talking back
- activities of sexual nature (alone, with a partner)
- leaving the classroom without permission
- physical abuse, fights etc.

When some of the above mentioned – and condemned – activities occur in the class, the teachers overlook them in the case of some students, mainly to keep them quiet, while the majority of students usually get punishment for the same behaviour. Among these misbehaviours are drawing and scribbling, hairdressing and make-up activities, reading material not connected to the lesson, listening to music and occasionally writing the homework in other subjects. Nowadays it is natural that we do not „standardize” in a class and respect individuals, but it is extremely dangerous to occasionally reinforce any behaviour which is otherwise prohibited.

Among the above mentioned behaviour patterns which cannot be tolerated by teachers, there are two common points, and if we are aware of them, we can get closer to the solution of the problems. The first one is that the indicated problems do not occur in every class and with every teacher. The second is that parents are not able to solve any of these problems at home. These behaviour

problems happen in the classroom, and not at home, so it is the classroom where they should be managed. Everybody knows the anecdotes concerning spinach or savoy sauce – the first one is related to Ranschburg, the second one is to Popper – when the teacher sends a message to the parent, because the child misbehaves in class, asking the parent to punish his/her child. In both stories the parent sends a message back, asking the teacher to punish the child, too, because he did not eat his lunch at home. The message is clear: everybody should do their job where they are, so let us not „send home” the problems occurring in the classroom, because they should be managed in the classroom, where they pop up. It is quite common nowadays that parents write back to the teacher, which is naturally not easily tolerated by him.

It is difficult to manage behaviour problems, mainly because with the emergence of emotions the role of the intellect and inhibitions decreases. During disorder the structure (hierarchy, roles) and normative order are broken and the class usually identifies itself with the disturber, that is, „becomes a mass”. The class’s becoming a mass can happen because of emotional states (indignation – outburst of hilarity) and the decomposition of the structure.

In this mass the members become anonymous and individual responsibility is reduced. Children are attracted to mass, because they are suggestible and sensitive to emotional infection, and they have a great inclination to imitation. In technical terms we call it the Carpenter-effect (an inclination to follow the act of others, and to act with them). The more emotions an activity involves, the more the role of the intellect is reduced, and the students are no longer able to activate their emotional check. With the decrease of inhibitions impulses break loose. These are mainly not positive impulses, although the spreading of positive ones can ruin lessons as well, but in this case it is usually „easier” to calm the class and get back to the right direction.

The decomposition of the structure is also dangerous. If the student does not know what to do and how and when to do it, or what is expected of him, and what tasks he has in a certain situation, then probably he will behave in an inadequate way. On the contrary, if we try to stop a lesson being unstructured, then probably we will be able to eliminate these unwanted activities. If a school lesson’s structure means that there is a ring at the beginning of the lesson and another one at the end, a lot of things can happen in between, during 45 minutes. When one builds up the lesson, he has to construct these 45 minutes.

When classroom misbehaviour happens, the class usually identifies itself with the misbehaving student. We are often surprised at this fact, although we should not be. Parents are not really, but all teachers should be aware of the development-psychological law, that after a certain age peer influence and peer

pressure are much more important than the influence of adults. That is why students like – even if they condemn it – what the misbehaving child does.

The above mentioned inadequate classroom behaviour types are followed by some common reactions of the majority of teachers:

- warnings written in the message book – assessment (?)
- warnings written in the class register
- „punishment grades”
- verbal punishment
- sending the child to the form-teacher or the headmaster
- sending the child out of the classroom
- a grade „one” (unsatisfactory = F mark) in the given subject
- psychological and/or physical punishment

In some cases we can meet „bizarre solutions” as well:

- making the child kneel (in the corner, in front of the blackboard, with arms folded on the back of the head)
- making the child walk around the sports field in „crouching walk” (during the lesson)
- tying the child to a chair with the cord of the cassette-player
- modern stocks – punishment chair (in kindergarten)

I collected the above mentioned reactions of teachers while visiting classes in schools (and kindergartens). In my opinion none of the methods observed in the last ten years are suitable for treating misbehaviour adequately and for stopping them from further occurrence. On the one hand, in the case of the above mentioned reactions, „revenge” or punishment makes cooperation impossible between the teacher and the student. On the other hand, due to the frequency of messages sent home, the support from most families will be out of the question. Such treatments of misbehaviour presume that students respect the teacher, they accept his controlling-leading role and submit themselves to the consequences of misbehaviour. However, these methods disregard the altered social environment, in which the relationship of students and teachers will only be effective if it is based on mutual acceptance, respect and cooperation.

Some observations based on experience concerning disciplinary procedures in schools:

- *Warnings written in the message book* – They can backfire easily. The teacher would like to inform the parents about the behaviour of the

child, and he hopes to get some help from them. If it is used too often (there are schools where two remarks are written in the book every single day, a morning and an afternoon feedback), the parents get fed up, and after the umpteenth message they can become immune or even hostile.

- *Warnings written in the class register* – The class register should be used mainly for other purposes, and not for registering the students' misbehaviour. The space in the register meant to use for warnings is not suitable for long and frequent comments, either. However, teachers' creativity is endless: when they use up all the space available by November, they stick in some sheets, and go on writing their warnings. The situation is similar to the case of message books: after a certain time and a certain quantity of messages neither the student nor the parents take the teacher's remarks seriously, so the teacher becomes powerless
- *Punishment grades* – These are essential, because they are important means of keeping rules, regulations and daily routine. The problem here is also that they lose their importance if we overuse them. If we punish minor mischiefs with teacher's or formteacher's, and later headmaster's written warnings, after some time there will be nothing left. So it is not advisable to punish misbehaviour on an impulse, because thus we reduce the importance of discipline grades.
- *Sending the child to the form-teacher or headmaster* – It is dangerous to send students to the form-teacher or the headmaster, even if the teacher is unable to handle the given situation. Sending the child to a person "possessing some authority", the teacher admits that he cannot cope with that situation. Seemingly, the problem is solved by the form-teacher or the headmaster, but in fact the real conflict still exists, and the authority of the sending teacher does not increase at all, quite to the contrary...
- *Sending the child out of the classroom* – This is forbidden and in many cases the students provoke it themselves so as not to have to participate in the lesson. In the future nothing will motivate them to behave as the teacher wants them to.
- *A grade „one“ (unsatisfactory) in the given subject* - This is a very important feedback but not if it is given to the student when he misbehaves. It causes the degradation of the subject, too.

- *Psychological and/or physical punishment* – There was a time when it was widely used, but nowadays it is an unacceptable, ineffective and forbidden educational method in society, despite the fact that the public still talks about it and even supports it. The only thing we can achieve with it is that the conflict becomes deeper between teacher and student. Using verbal punishment it is important to be careful with our words and how we say them. If the teacher makes an insulting remark concerning the child, or the child finds it insulting, the teacher should not be surprised (in the world of electronic gadgets, in the 21st century) that at the end of the lesson the parent is standing at the door, waiting for him, because the child informed him in a text message about the happenings of the lesson. Feedback is important, teachers should react on students' misbehaviour, but they must do it in accordance with the spirit of the age.

According to my observations the majority of teachers' methods is inadequate for the treatment of classroom misbehaviour. What can we do? It is not advisable to wait for the change of laws and regulations, which can solve the problem. The problem should be solved in the classroom, by the teacher. So firstly, it is important to create a partnership between the teachers and the students and their families, according to the functions of a „service-school”. It does not mean equality, but cooperation based on the control and dominance of the teacher. Secondly, the majority of teachers need to change their attitude towards their students, and to adopt an attitude seeking cooperation with the students. Thirdly, new educational methods must be used at last – classes must be made interesting, which make students interested, then absorbed and motivated.

A very powerful method of teachers is the new approach to class-teacher's lessons. They had a certain function before, too, but usually these classes were degraded to be substitute lessons in history, Hungarian language or mathematics, to make up for cancelled classes. Class-teacher's lessons are the occasion when the teacher-student cooperation can be different. It is here that the development of students' personality can be the most effective, here there is a chance to talk, which are missed by students so badly, and here the teacher can solve problems involving the peer group.

Modern teachers must keep to the principle of „discipline – without disciplinary procedures”. The main disciplinary means of teachers are:

- Authority
- The formulation of expectations. The rules of rule formulation

- The effective organization of classroom work
- The prevention of unwanted classroom behaviour with motivating feedback

Authority is not granted nowadays, one has to acquire it, in the teacher-student relationship, in the communicational space. The next element is *expectations*. It is essential to formulate *expectations*, preferably together, in the classroom, but one must not overdo it. When we create rules, we should formulate simple rules that can be followed easily, and we should provide a great number of positive feedback for everybody. I have mentioned before the *effective organization of classroom work*. It is very important to try to prevent *unwanted behaviour*. We live there, we see everything, we know the mischiefs and can describe them thoroughly, so we should try to prevent classroom misbehaviour. A simple example: if I know that there is a loud, problematic student who tends to use a cheatsheet, than I should not enter the classroom saying: You, So and So, come here in front, because you are always cheating; instead I should do my job quietly, walk to the back of the classroom and stand behind him. This way I will not give him the chance to say – using dirty words – that „ you are always ***-ing with me ... Teachers often say that there is no time for these methods and means. But they should find the time! At the beginning it requires more time, and then, after a while, things will go on more smoothly.

To keep up the discipline of the class is very important in order to implement effective teaching and education, and first of all to prevent the class from becoming a mass. To achieve this, one must try to reach two goals: firstly, to prevent outbursts of emotions and impulses, and to calm down positive impulses very quickly; and secondly, to maintain the structure by all means and not let it fall apart. One of the prerequisites of success is to make students accept that in the classroom the teacher is the leader. A democratic atmosphere means that we accept each other mutually, and we consider each other as partners, but the teacher is the leader, the one who controls events, he respects students and expects and gets the same respect from them.

The steps to prevent the class from becoming a mass:

- the prevention of unleashed impulses and emotions
- monitoring the ones who are making trouble
- the maintenance of the teacher's leading and organizing role
- the prevention of the accumulation of students' movement – and emotional needs
- reference to individual responsibility – (peer influence)

- a noise or other device against clamour, its meaning should be explained
- the teacher should prevent the decomposition of structure – everybody should have their space, timing is essential and students should know it – everybody should know when, where and what to do – there should be no empty phases – frames and sections prevent the class from becoming a mass.

The aim of this lecture is calling attention. One can often hear opinions that due to changes in society teachers are left alone with their problems, missing new and effective methods to solve problems. It is not completely true. The relevant special literature provides a great number of suitable methods, we only need courage to apply them. It is true that school and all its participants have changed. Altered students need a new teacher, too. It means that teachers have to change as well, they have to establish a partnership with students and their families, they have to change their attitude at last, and find and use new educational methods. However hard the way is, we must not give up, but have to learn from the mistakes occasionally made, and from the experiences we get getting in deadlocks. The short writing *Autobiography in Five Short Chapters* of Portia Nelson² is very instructive, it demonstrates the process of learning in an excellent way.

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Problemi u ponašanju i njihovo rešavanje u školi

Apstrakt: U poslednjih nekoliko godina nastavnici su morali da se suoče sa veoma ozbiljnim problemima. Često je nemoguće efikasno sprovođenje obrazovnih zadataka, zbog neadekvatnog ponašanja učenika u učionici. Primećuju su grubi primeri nediscipline u učionici, štaviše sredstva kojima raspolažu nastavnici sve su manje i manje podesna za rešavanje ovih problema. Autor ispituje probleme u ponašanju koji se obično javljaju u učionici, kao i načine na koji ih nastavnici rešavaju, i daje preporuke za rešavanje nastalih problema ponašanja na nov i efikasan način.

Ključne reči: nastavnik, doslednost, neadekvatno ponašanje, adekvatni načini reagovanja, „Carpenter efekat“.

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