

## THE PSYCHOLOGIST AND SCHOOL DISCIPLINE: NEW CHALLENGES AND OLD ENCOUNTERS

Concepción Gotzens

Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona

*Today, generalized violence in educational centres (between peers, student-teacher, physical or psychological violence, etc.) is one of the problems which causes more concern in secondary schools. In this article, a detailed review of the concept "school of discipline" is given including its remedial and preventive perspective, and the extent to which the management of this "new phenomenon" requires teachers to be trained and assessed specifically in psychoeducation. Finally, the difference between school and classroom discipline is discussed.*

**Key Words:** Antisocial behaviour, values, intervention strategies.

*En la actualidad, uno de los problemas más preocupantes en la educación secundaria es la violencia generalizada en los centros educativos (entre iguales, alumnos-profesorado, de tipo físico, psicológico, etc.). En este artículo se realiza una revisión detallada sobre el concepto de "disciplina escolar", así como su perspectiva preventiva y remedial, y cómo la gestión de este "nuevo fenómeno" requiere del docente formación y asesoramiento psicoeducativo específico. Finalmente, se discuten la diferencia entre disciplina escolar y disciplina en el aula.*

**Palabras Clave:** Comportamiento antisocial, valores, estrategias de intervención.

**T**he coming into force of a new Spanish Act of Education opens horizons to new expectations among the members of the educational community who, finally, see some of their worries until now disregarded given visible form; but being more or less accustomed to the schemes of former legality, it also revives concerns which, with frequency, mean the reappearance of old fears.

Something like this seems to happen in reference to the question of school discipline and the recently approved *Ley Orgánica de Educación* (Spanish Act of Education 2/2006, 3rd May, BOE 4th May). The modifications introduced regarding student rights and obligations not only compel the adaptation of the decrees that regulated them until now, but bring to the front some of the most pressing concerns observed at present on this matter.

Questions such as the role of mediation (and the figure of the mediator) as an educational process in order to achieve peaceful resolution of conflicts, the collective decisions that students make about attending class so as to facilitate their right of assembly, or the clear reference to the problems of bullying in additional provision twenty-one, establish a far from negligible indication of such concerns and of some expectations which may be conceived in this respect.

---

Correspondence: Concepción Gotzens. Apartado 28. Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona. 08183-Bella Terra (Barcelona). España.  
E-mail: [Concepcio.Gotzens@uab.es](mailto:Concepcio.Gotzens@uab.es)

In complete tune with the educational priorities manifested in the text of the Law as much for the stage of primary education:

*"Know and appreciate the values and norms of student life, learn how to act in accordance with them, prepare for the exercise of citizenship and respect human rights, as well as the pluralism proper of a democratic society."* (Art. 17, a)

as for E.S.O. (Obligatory Secondary Education):

*"Assume your obligations responsibly, know and exercise your rights with respect to others, practise tolerance, cooperation and solidarity with people and groups, using dialogue, guaranteeing human rights as common values in a plural society prepared for the exercise of democratic citizenship."* (Art. 23, a)

and for bachillerato (post-compulsory secondary education):

*"Exercise democratic citizenship from a global perspective and acquire a responsible civic conscience inspired in the values of the Spanish Constitution as well as human rights which promote co-responsibility in the construction of a just and equitable society."* (Art. 33, a)

The current Act of Education recommends and encourages the use of peaceful means in the resolution of conflicts in the school environment, which in turn not only stimulates the defence of social values of a high standard

but it also awakens a number of fears and doubts about its implementation in day-to-day school life, since it is difficult to believe that if behaviour problems in schools have reached such high rates they could be remedied in such a civic and calm manner.

In our opinion, it is convenient at this point to clarify some matters, or we could find ourselves in a “blind alley” where the issue regarding school discipline seems to have come to a standstill, which would not allow us to advance in its comprehension or intervention.

### **SCHOOL DISCIPLINE: REMEDY OR PREVENTION?**

Historically, school discipline has been treated from the perspective of “being a remedy”, in the sense that people turned to it when behaviour problems in the classroom arose, which in principle was not supposed to happen. Since the sixties in the past century, many voices have emerged in favour of the so-called “positive” discipline (Dreikurs & Grey, 1970); however, we should not be confused as this was also an option directed at correcting an existing problem but which refused to use the punitive strategies that, up to that time, had been the most widely used practice (Sugai & Horner, 2002).

It was not until just a few decades ago when people started talking about “preventive” discipline as a way of guaranteeing the necessary conditions for the good functioning of the class. It was not just another innovation in this field but instead it was an authentic revolution of the concept of school discipline itself and, for this, a contribution that was proposed and justified basically from psychoeducational research.

We will discuss the affirmations made in the previous paragraph. The “preventive” perspective regarding school discipline (Gotzens, 1997) implies, on one hand, that the teacher, aside from planning the contents and activities for learning, has the possibility, or being more precise, the necessity of doing what is proper with respect to those aspects that will rule the behaviour of the group in class. It is about assuming that the preparation of the teaching-learning processes that will take place during the school year carries implicitly the consideration of the conditions that will make possible the development of such processes, and consequently, their planning and concretion in norms and strategies directed at guaranteeing their compliance.

On the other hand, the preventive character of discipline means that a considerable portion of behaviour problems that unflinchingly involve the alteration of class order with

all its added consequences (attention loss, disturbance, increase in perturbing conduct, etc.) is remediable and there is no reason for it to happen. This benefit has not gone unnoticed by any teacher: while the solution to a problem and the recovery of student attention is a costly endeavour, the maintenance of order when the conditions are favourable is attained with great ease, although always maintaining a certain level of “vigilance” by the teacher.

Finally, preventive discipline has the added advantage of being a reference for the teacher with respect to the conditions that have been established as indispensable for class functioning and with respect to the communication and intervention strategies that have been selected in order to achieve and maintain the set conditions; therefore, it becomes a facilitating element for the analysis of situations with alteration of order when these appear. Questions – not necessarily explicit - such as the following simplify the manner in which the teacher analyses and confronts the supposed misbehaviour: What is the disruption due to? Which norm has not been respected? What intervention – on the teacher’s part - has been missing?, etc.

### **SCHOOL DISCIPLINE AND LEARNING OF VALUES**

This brief exploration about the preventive character of discipline helps us conceptualize this as a subsidiary and diverse matter in the complex scheme of school learning for which it is used. However, distinguishing between both concepts, school discipline and school learning, and more specifically the learning of values, still seems to be confusing.

We have mentioned above that in past periods (and also in more recent ones) school discipline was considered a remedial activity, and preferably with a punitive character. In light of educational proposals in which the civic education of students acquires greater protagonism than its instruction using the “classical” curricular contents, it is comprehensible that a “penal” approach would be perceived as not very desirable or even as unacceptable; it was about fomenting in students habits compatible with the educational objectives (respect, tolerance, etc.) and it did not seem that using “negative” disciplinary procedures was the best option on the part of the educators.

This reasoning is impeccable and it would probably be difficult to find an educator who would manifest his disconformity with what has been said. Nevertheless, a

well-known but usually forgotten clarification which facilitates a clearer and unambiguous, therefore more gentle perspective on school discipline must be made.

School learning of any sort (declarative, procedural and attitudinal) requires great effort and a considerable investment of energy and resources from both those who must attain them and those whose mission it is to facilitate this process. Due to its very nature, it is a long process whose domain is not always attainable for everyone and less so in the periods planned for its acquisition. In the case of the learning of attitudes and values (tolerance, respect, democratic sense, etc.) the proposed exigency is even greater, not so much because of its high cognitive complexity but because it is mainly based on the modification and restructuring of emotions, beliefs, values and other affective material whose means of access are not easy to control in the core of the class (Castelló, 2001).

With respect to this, school discipline is nothing but a requisite with which we pretend to guarantee the necessary and most favourable conditions for the development of learning processes in all their complexity. School discipline is not in itself an educational objective, but it is an instrument for the achievement of the real objectives (Gotzens, 1997).

If one is not capable of taking this distinction into consideration, a world of confusion enters the teacher's decision-making process and with it, a chaotic class is guaranteed. With the risk of excessive simplification of what has been said, we conclude that learning needs time (previously planned), while discipline demands "immediacy" which is not free of previous planning.

### SCHOOL DISCIPLINE AND STUDENTS' RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS

The intention of establishing a list of "rights and obligations" that should be followed by students seems more reasonable. The obligatory nature of education reaches increasingly high age levels and with this in mind, the pretension of establishing which are the norms of the game (obligations) and which are the benefits that students can aspire to (rights) as well as the procedures established to guarantee both of these, seems not only sensible but also desirable.

The problem arises when we pretend to respond to two different demands with one single instrument: on one hand the regulation of school discipline and on the other hand the learning of values and the acquisition of habits for living together.

It is clear that these are not demands that are radically different in "content", but they do greatly differ in procedure. This way, while it is indispensable for the student to stop systematically interrupting the class session, which provokes attention loss in his classmates and multiplies the efforts of teachers to recover the course of the session, it seems equally obvious that it takes time, resources and collaboration for the student to acquire the skills that will permit him to turn this interruption into participation. Discipline is at the service of this last part of the example, but is "in essence" the expected intervention in the first part of it (Gotzens, 1997).

From this perspective, school discipline cannot be confused with the intervention of a "disciplinary" process (as contradictory as this play on words seems). This pretends to sanction an undesirable action (in instructional terms as well as in more social ones) carried out by some students. Here, the miniature "reproduction" of the current judicial framework that protects us and the purpose of guaranteeing the rights of all the affected parts, predicts a number of procedures that inevitably take a long time.

But school discipline refers to the "here and now"; in some sense, it is the most fervent defence of student rights: to create and maintain everyday conditions for the full enjoyment of their right to be educated.

This by no means implies distancing oneself from current educational principles, but it does imply granting greater flexibility to the teacher's decision making process as well as to intervention, always with the most scrupulous respect for the personal and social dignity of the students.

For example, that is why current regulations typify chatting or repeatedly disrupting in class as a minor offence. In terms of school discipline this carries with it an important problem that if it is not controlled may generate into a very detrimental situation for student learning (Seidman, 2005).

This way, we are at a crossroads where the coexistence commission in each centre (see, for example: Art. 6 of decree 279/2006, July 4<sup>th</sup>, DOGC number 4670 – 06/07/2006), as well as the school board in its function of supervising the disciplinary measures imposed in a certain case, are both authorities established by the education system that act as representatives and guarantors for the school rights and duties of citizens in those cases in which a duty or norm has been broken leading to a severe alteration of school order (from absenteeism to aggression towards others, to cite some examples).

Facing all this, the teacher is, in essence, a professional whose knowledge and competencies allow him to plan and develop the teaching-learning processes that he has been assigned, on which the consecution of the proposed educational objectives depend (Squires, 1999). Of their proper execution it is expected that students will learn the fair and appropriate treatment of others and interpersonal relationships, but the job of disciplining belongs to the day-to-day plane and it should not be decontextualized, nor should we ignore the numerous types of spontaneous learning that occur in the group, nor wait for time to go by.

In other words, the teacher cannot ignore – or in any case the psychologist should advise him - that what a student does in class is observed by the rest of his classmates who learn from it and from many other situations (Bandura & Walters, 1963). For example, if the behaviour of the student in question has negative repercussions on the course of the class, the teacher has to make “quick” decisions about how to respond in this respect; he cannot ask for a “time out” and “freeze” the session while he meditates thoroughly about the pros and cons of his possible reaction. This is one of the many cases where the teacher has to process “in parallel” the diverse types of information and the stimuli that he is receiving and, under these conditions, he has to make a good decision that will permit him to detain the problem in question, and at the same time, try to favour learning by observation which inevitably the rest of the students are experimenting (Genovard & Gotzens, 1997).

At the beginning of these pages we said that psychoeducational research has provided interesting sources of reference for reconsidering what we call school discipline; well then, one of the most significant contributions has been that of harmonizing the concept of school discipline with the aim which it serves, and this is none other than the attainment of student learning in the classroom, from which we gather another invaluable contribution: what students learn –even in the classroom- is not sequential nor does it keep to what was previously planned, but it functions “in parallel” and covers a great variety, much of which does not explicitly appear in the school curriculum.

Managing this situation calmly and on a daily basis requires that teachers undergo formation and counselling on these psychoeducational aspects we have mentioned and many others for which there is abundant bibliography (Chaplain, 2003; Corrie, 2001; Fontana, 2000). With these “mental” tools, problems endure but

their comprehension, their mental representation and the complex decision making that characterizes the job of teaching can become highly reinforced.

### SCHOOL DISCIPLINE AND DISCIPLINE IN THE CLASSROOM

On numerous occasions the references regarding school discipline and discipline in the classroom are used indiscriminately. However, it is convenient to delimit the boundaries and most significant characteristics of each one in order to avoid confusion, which does not benefit order and school life at all.

On one hand, the norms for the organization and functioning of education centres referred to in the Art. 124 of the *Ley Orgánica de Educación* (Spanish Act of Education), establish a framework for the general functioning of the whole centre. School discipline refers to the sensible decision about which should be the legally established norms and procedures that guarantee their compliance.

On the other hand, discipline in the classroom refers preferably to the order that a certain group must observe so as to successfully perform the planned task. In this case, contextual variables play a decisive role; thus, the time of day that a certain activity is performed (first hour in the morning vs. last hour in the afternoon), the sequencing between activities (activities that require high motor exigency followed by activities that require high concentration) and the physical characteristics of the classroom (highly populated spaces or well-distributed spaces with enough room for the diverse activities), to mention a few examples, are essential elements for the proper development of the teaching-learning process of each class group (Genovard & Gotzens, 1996).

But, still more important than the contextual variables is the interaction pattern established between teacher and students and between the students themselves in that particular classroom. There is no doubt that the responsibility (and at the same time, the right) of every teacher to establish –within the centre’s general normative framework-his particular way of interacting and consequently, the concretion of discipline in the classroom, is unavoidable and irreplaceable.

It is understandable that most of the publications on school discipline deal with discipline in the classroom, without underestimating the added value that an action from teachers in consonance with that of other colleagues in the school brings.

In other words: the maximum coexistence between teachers and students happens in the classroom when the teaching-learning process is taking place, therefore, the risk for problem behaviour and coexistence problems is greater. But this lively interaction is specific of each instructional group which is why there are no general guidelines for all of them, because this would mean that we would be denying the singularity of each teacher-student interaction. This way, it is justified that the preventive discipline, as well as the provision and action to guarantee its maintenance, constitutes a responsibility of every teacher who in no way can elude it.

This distinction between the types of discipline that concur in educational centres is usually very useful for teachers who, on occasion, see in the regulations of the centre the only tool for confronting discipline in the classroom, and here psychologists have another reason for guiding teachers regarding the diverse levels of interaction that occur in the classroom and the diversity of responses needed.

For this reason, the existence of works dealing with the characteristics and actions proper of schools with "good discipline", (PDK Commission on Discipline, 1982; Watkins & Wagner, 1991; White et al., 2001) does not at all get in the way or contradict knowledge in depth in this field, on which every teacher should reflect and decide upon. On the contrary, the more knowledge teachers have about the multiple levels of task performance (in this case: school level and classroom level of discipline), the greater the probabilities are of succeeding in their realization.

#### REFERENCIAS

- Bandura, A. & Walters, R.H. (1963) *Social learning and personality development*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. (traducción al castellano: *Aprendizaje social y desarrollo de la personalidad*. Madrid: Alianza, 2005)
- Castelló, A. (2001). Procesos cognitivos en el profesor (Cognitive processes in the teacher). In A. Sipán (Coord.), *Educación para la diversidad en el Siglo XXI* (Educating for diversity in the XXI century). Zaragoza: Mira Editores.
- Chaplain, R. (2003). *Teaching without Disruption: A Multilevel Model for Managing Pupil Behaviour in the Primary Schools*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Corrie, L. (2001). *Investigating Troublesome Classroom Behaviour: Practical Tools for Teachers*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Dreikurs & Grey, (1970) *A parents' guide to child discipline*. New York: Hawthorn Books.
- Fontana, D. (2000). *El control del comportamiento en el aula (Managing classroom behaviour)*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Genovard, C. & Gotzens, C. (1996). Interacción contextual (Contextual interaction). In J. Beltrán & C. Genovard (Eds.) *Psicología de la Instrucción II Estructuras y procesos (Psychology of instruction II. Structures and processes)*. Madrid: Síntesis.
- Genovard, C. & Gotzens, C. (1997). *Psicología de la instrucción (Psychology of instruction)*. Madrid: Santillana.
- Gotzens, C. (1997). *La disciplina escolar (School discipline)*. Barcelona: Horsori
- PDK Commission on Discipline (1982). *Handbook for developing schools with good discipline*. Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation
- Seidman, A. (2005). The Learning Killer: Disruptive student behavior in the Classroom. *Reading Improvement*, 42(1), 40-49.
- Squires, G. (1999). *Teaching as a Professional Discipline*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Sugai, G. & Horner, R. (2002). The Evolution of Discipline Practices: School-Wide Positive. *Child and Family Behavior Therapy*, 24 (1-2), 23-50.
- Watkins, CH. & Wagner, P. (1991). *La disciplina escolar. Propuesta de trabajo en el marco global del centro (School discipline. A whole-school practical approach)*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- White, R., Algozzine, B., Audette, R., Marr, M. B., & Ellis, E. D. (2001). Unified Discipline: A School-Wide Approach for Managing Problem Behavior. *Intervention in School & Clinic*, 37(1), 3-11.