
AN ETHICAL DIMENSION TO DISCIPLINE AND TEACHERS' USE OF POWER

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Abstract

Schools have rules and codes of conduct that students are expected to abide by and respect. But when students go against these, and break the rules, then discipline becomes imperative. The implication is that rules and codes of conduct have ethical implications, where ethics is concerned with how a moral person ought to behave. In this same vein, it is expected that in disciplining, teachers should take an ethical posture. This defines who the moral person is. In essence, a teacher who has to enforce discipline must firstly make ethical decisions on it. In this regard, ethical decision making requires more than a belief on the importance of ethics of discipline, it also requires ethical sensitivity.

Keywords: Discipline, Teacher's use of force, Ethical decisions.

Introduction

Actions are right or wrong when they are in accordance or at variance with the dictates of moral law. This also suggests that right and wrong actions are determined on moral grounds, irrespective of the context or setting. In the school just like every other facet of human society, the need to enforce, law and order is imperative. The expectation is that moral obligations and sense of duty prevail on the part of the students and even the school authority. This also means that duty is sacrosanct, and the very foundation of any rational society. In this same vein, when students disobey school moral codes, it means they not see any sense in being duty-bound, which ultimately makes them irrational. This is where discipline becomes crucial. But even in getting the students to be rational, caution is taken so that their rights are not trampled on, instead, a deterrent is encouraged.

One hard truth that every teacher must appreciate is that occasionally, he/she must contend with problems associated with learners' misbehaviour. The teacher's philosophy of discipline and attitude towards its enforcement could have influence on his response to disciplinary procedure. The foregoing is quite important especially coming from the background of the simplistic conception of discipline. Often times, the mere mention of discipline easily triggers negative vibrations. There is the tendency to allude to discipline as punishment control or measures to curb anti-social behaviours. This is where teachers must have a clear understanding of any such impeding misconceptions, rather seek for the underlying ethical values in discipline. In essence, if teachers have clearly defined philosophy of discipline, its essence would be geared towards creating a conducive environment for teaching and learning. Also, there would be an ultimate goal of establishing a connection between behavior and its consequences.

The importance of school discipline has its implicit outcome for the student. This is taking into cognizance that besides the transmission of knowledge and skills, the teacher also has a responsibility of leading students to develop right moral attitudes. This is in consonance with the roles of education and the school as producing recipients in character and in learning. Evidently, students are being prepared in school to play roles as responsible and contributing members of the larger society. In this regard, knowledge and skills cannot be separated from right moral disposition. This is where the place of school discipline cannot be underestimated. Specifically in this context, discipline ought to provide guidelines for what is considered acceptable behavior. It is that teaching designed to train to proper conduct or action. If this is the case, discipline does not mean punishment rather it is teaching. At this juncture, it becomes imperative.

The Ethics of School Discipline

Basically, formal education in school is systematic and organized. It is in this context that school authorities design specified rules and regulations that students are expected to abide by. In other words, school rules are moral codes that students are bound by duty to adhere to. Thus, whether students personally accept the rules or not, it is binding on them as a compulsion. In its philosophical explanation, school rules are ethical principles, where morality is the practical application or the rules of right actions and prohibition against wrong acts. Importantly too, in this context, there ought to be an enforcer of school moral codes. In a regular school system, this duty is left for teachers. Ordinarily, the teacher ought to impart knowledge in the students, while promoting in them positive moral dispositions. This is also hinged on the assumption that teachers have a specific responsibility for the appropriate moral development of their students, as well as an understanding of its essence.

The central argument in the foregoing stems from the premise that teachers can only engage in such a crucial task, if they have a knowledge of what right moral attitude entails. Also, the extent to which they possess a high degree of moral sensitivity. Essentially, conflicts of what is, and what is not and assertion of power and control are basic to guiding and managing students' behaviour.

Effective classroom discipline continues to be one of the most troubling problems faced by teachers. In this context, indiscipline may be described as a lack of self-control restraint and unwillingness on the part of the students to comply to laid down rules and regulations. These have manifested in students as truancy, use of profanity, lateness to school, stealing, assaulting, rioting, cultism and other sundry vices. All of these teachers deal with in their interactions with students. One hard truth that every teacher must learn to contend with is problems associated with students' misbehaviour. However, the teacher's philosophy of discipline, and his attitude towards its enforcement could have an influence on his response to disciplinary procedures. Even though developing the most effective means of maintaining acceptable students' behaviour tend to pose great difficulty for teachers, Jarret (1969) is quite optimistic. He begins from the premise of Amos Comenius assertion that even though the seeds of knowledge, virtue and of purify are naturally implanted in man, the actual knowledge, virtue and piety are not so given. All of these must be acquired by prayer, by education and by action. More importantly, since man is a "teachable animal, with proper education, he can become the educated man". The implication is

that schools should make a deliberate attempt to help curb unruliness as well as redirect students' behaviour to become socially acceptable individuals. But when students veer-off track, deviate from school moral rules and are found wanting for violating, how should sanctions be metted? Should it be a case where without discussions or warnings they are shown the way out of school? Or worse still led away in "handcuffs"? Is treading the paths of negotiation an option? In all of these, one cannot rule out the teacher's philosophy of discipline and his response to moral dilemmas that come with issues of indiscipline, this forms the crux in this paper.

As previously mentioned, one of the key responsibilities of the teachers is to promote desired behaviour in children and to handle misbehaviour when they occur. Teachers have many options for managing children's behaviour. This range from proactive guidance aimed at preventing misbehaviour in the first place to reactive methods that punish misbehaviour after it occurs. However, an effective philosophy of discipline in the classroom can make all the difference between great success and awful guidelines for what is considered acceptable behaviour. It is in this context that Arum (2003) and Glasser, (2001) have defined discipline as conformity to totality to laid down norms and, to complete obedience to orders. This also stems from the notion that discipline is teaching designed to train to proper conduct or action. In essence, discipline does not necessarily spell punishment, rather it is teaching to conform. As Bello (1981) puts it, discipline is a means of imparting knowledge and skills. While Boakye (2006) defines discipline as the obedience to rules and regulation and orders and manifestation of outward mark of respect in accordance with standing agreement. For Adesina (1990) discipline is the readiness or ability to respect constituted authority and observe conventional or established laws of the society or of any other organization. All of these are implicit of self-control, restraint, respect for self, and others, sacrifice, perseverance, tolerance and recognition of human dignity and integrity. Specifically in the school setting, students are taught to respect the school authority, observe the school rules and regulations to maintain an established standard behaviour. This also means that discipline comes with teaching. This is in consonance with Kochars (2001) assertion that discipline as coined from the Latin word "discipulus" means to learn, specifically with regards to submission of one's impulse and power to a regulation so as to prevent chaos, and bring efficiency to avoid ineffectiveness and waste.

What can be deduced from this is that teaching students to take responsibilities for their behaviour could be more effective than simply enforcing rules. This is against the background that discipline ought to be directed at teaching right and positive attitudes. The emphasis is that discipline should not be merely seen as a means to punish student so as to effect correct behaviour. Rather, it is a learning experience in and of itself, carried out with students' best interest in mind. In this vein, Yusuf (2015), affirms that discipline is the training that produces in student's self-restraint, orderliness, good conduct, co-operation, right habits as well as getting the best out of the students. There is no gain saying that discipline is crucial for learning. However, for discipline to be well implemented there should be mutual respect for the rights of the learners as well as respect for those placed in position of authority. It is important that students respect their teachers, the rights of one another, the school rules and regulations and even the school properly. This helps to create and maintain a positive classroom environment which is conducive for teaching and learning. On the other hand, when teachers operate from a more cordial relationship typical of Buber's 'I-

Thou' philosophy, they come to see students as the other self. This may also affect their disposition towards discipline. This way, discipline will come with a tinge of humanness where teachers would opt for dialogue as a path to discipline. In so doing, discipline is more of a system of positive reinforcement to check misbehaviour.

This brings to bear teachers' ethical posture in the enforcement of discipline. Also, taking into cognizance that ethics is about putting principles into action. Ordinarily, the expectation is that as teacher and in issue of discipline, he has the upper hand, advantage or control. Does this also mean that the teacher has the 'power' to assert himself as a "disciplinarian?" Is the teacher going to exert power at the expense of self-restraint? Would such 'power' be taken as corrective measures. Yet not a threat to teachers' authority? Does discipline of students necessarily translate to punishment and infliction of pain? How then does the teacher apply discipline without infringing on students' human nature or sensibility, while still maintaining his authority as teacher? This brings us to the teachers' use of power in discipline. Where is power in discipline, when is it misused and abused?

The Essence of Discipline

The school admits students from diverse backgrounds. These students come with varied behavioural patterns and different values. The situation is such that individual students acts in their own interest to the exclusion of others' interest. Often times such inclinations run in opposition to duty and commitment, and what one is morally bound to do. But as Bill (1969) asserts, "the child is not born with a built in moral conscience but with natural, biologically purposive capacities that make him potentially a moral being". Thus, for the school to regulate and unify these varied behavioural patterns a general school code of conduct becomes imperative. Even at that, it is not uncommon to find students interpret school rules and other moral concepts to suit their own whims and caprices. But it behoves on the school authorities to make students accept school codes of conduct. Basically, it is the business of the school to produce recipients in character and in learning. It is on this score that Doyle (1990) stated clearly that school rules and regulations ought to bring about discipline in schools. So that learning is achieved in a conducive environment. More importantly, where there is lack of discipline in schools, it could manifest in various negative ways that may impinge on teaching and learning.

As in every other part of the world, indiscipline is a major problem in the Nigerian school systems, especially in large urban schools. Teachers and school authorities are faced with the regular problem of students' misbehaviour. Oftentimes, this is contended with by applying disciplinary measures which ranges from simple to corporal punishment. But is discipline all about punishment and pain? That is why it is often argued that discipline can be viewed from its positive and negative perspectives. In the opinion of Ajayi and Adeniyi (2009) when discipline involves punishment, repression and sternness, inflicting of pain, restriction of freedom, threat and outright condemnation, then it may be said to have negative implication. While Mbiti (1974) asserts that discipline is positively perceived when it is seen as a way of guiding students to make rational decisions.

However, given the fact that the human nature ordinarily tends towards freedom and man's natural inclination which is geared towards pleasure seeking and pain

avoidance, there is the tendency for students to dare their teachers' discipline approach. They even see it as an infringement in their right and more still a purposeful act against their happiness. With such as posture on the part of students, an attempt to discipline them easily leads to dislike and unwillingness to cooperate. On the part of the teachers, students unwillingness to co-operate is quite unruly and the next option to caution is to exercise power and control. When this is done indiscriminately, it connotes negative discipline. What then is discipline? How can it be enforced in an appreciable manner to help students understand that an erring behaviour needs to be checked. On the other hand, how can responses to misbehaviour be made consistent and fair? Above all, in discipline how best can the teacher preserve the dignity of the students so that they learn to reason and make rational decisions.

Discipline is the complete obedience to orders in conformity to laid down norms. Following also from this, discipline is teaching designed to train proper conduct or action. There is the expectation that a teacher who uses consistent discipline strategies tends to exhibit effective management. This makes discipline a key component of effective classroom management. In this same vein, discipline aims more at teaching, than punishment. Thus, in classroom discipline, teachers have strategies that they employ to manage students' behaviours and attitudes. Often times, teachers develop their own styles of discipline. Generally, though most discipline strategies may be categorized into three main styles or approaches. These are the preventive discipline, the supportive and the connective discipline.

The preventive discipline provides the behaviours in clear terms to students. They are made to understand behaviours that are appropriate as against those that are not. In this way, students are expected to do what is positive and rational. The intent of preventive discipline is to provide interventions to potential disruptive behaviours. Also, a preventive discipline strategy establishes that types of consequences that necessarily follows a forbidden acts or behaviours. In the supportive discipline approach, the teacher offers a verbal warning or a suggestion for correcting behaviours. The support discipline approach is quite handy because even the best laid preventive discipline may sometimes fail. However, this does not make supportive discipline some form of punishment. It only provides erring students with options for correcting negative behaviour, before consequences becomes effected. It is in this context that one talks of corrective discipline. It refers to the set consequences students get following an infraction. In other words, when a student has failed to redirect her behaviour after repeated attempts at supportive discipline, a teacher may opt for a corrective discipline strategy. It is also important that in the use of corrective discipline, teachers should ensure that it is suitable to students' age.

The Dilemma between Discipline and Teacher's Use of Power in Discipline

So far, the attempt has been to explicate the essence and concept of school discipline. Ordinarily, discipline ought to be a moral act. That is, an act which can be morally evaluated in contrast to a mere physical event. All other times, the extent to which discipline is enforced may have its implicit unethical tendencies. This is the crux of the argument here.

Moral standards represent the most fundamental and general principles that underlie the ethics of school discipline. A moral standard as it pertains to school discipline provides the criteria that generate moral principles and moral judgements. Essentially, it specifies what characteristics all moral actions must possess. Looking at this from the utilitarian moral standard, it specifies that “actions are moral to the degree that their consequences produce the most happiness” (Harris, 1997). This principle represents neither a general moral principle nor a specific moral judgements, rather it determines what characteristics these principles and judgements must possess. To this extent therefore, in the school setting, even with the prevalence of misbehaviour among students, discipline does not emerge from the teacher’s assertion of power. Rather Brickford (2010) argues that discipline should come from a desire to teach students to self-assess and self-regulate their behaviour. As he further adds, discipline and classroom management are quite crucial to education, because these exist as additional learning experiences for students.

The imperative nature of indiscipline in school is not in doubt. The school has been confirmed as a vital tool for the transformation of behavior. It is in this context that Fowers (2008) has identified the formulation and enforcement of school rules and regulations as a major way of preventing indiscipline in schools. The consensus on the essence of discipline in school dates back to traditional philosophies, till contemporary and even more radical philosophy of education. The basic principles of essentialism hold that schools should transmit the traditional moral values and intellectual knowledge that make the students, moral citizens. The essentialist also believe that teachers should instill traditional virtues such as respect for authority, perseverance, fidelity to duty considerations for others and practicability sharing this same view, a foremost traditional philosopher, Plato, affirms that children’s character will be formed through discipline. But he was against such discipline that comes with undue savage repression. According to Plato, discipline of this nature drives children into subservinency and puts them at odds with the world. In other words, sensitivity cannot be awakened through compulsion, as this tends to breed antagonism and fear.

For more contemporary philosophies like pragmatism and existentialism, while the importance of discipline in school cannot be underestimated, the extent of its enforcement may have negative implications. The pragmatists are of the view that discipline cannot be maintained through force, rather through purposive and co-operative activities, teachers can enforce discipline. In the same vein, the philosophy of existentialism begin from the premise that teachers must relates to their students openly and honesty. In such an established relationship, there is the tendency that students will accept discipline prescribed by the teacher. Thus, even with students freedom which is a central theme in existentialism, discipline, and guidance of the teacher is encouraged to help students realize the “self”, and to effect the full development of the individuality.

Marxism is well known for introducing radical philosophies. In one of its moral principles which is prescribed for children right from an early age, is respect for the authority of the teacher and others in authority. Such fear should stem from the understanding and firm nature of teachers, and not out of fear or punishment. Essentially for the Marxists, discipline is a most important virtue and school must insist on it; more still, discipline is not only necessary for life, but it will remain a permanent possession of children.

What can be deduced in the foregoing is a consensus on the crucial role of discipline in school. However, it is often argued in some quarters that a teacher may find it difficult to enforce discipline if he does not assert his power (that may often times comes with force). The question herein is, would this not stem unethical practices? Randall (2012) has affirmed that one of the most difficult leadership challenges in all organization is to maintain ethical climate. This is sometimes the case of the teacher which he has to take disciplinary measures.

Cases of indiscipline in schools is not a new phenomenon. In more recent time, the nature and wave of indiscipline seem to have increased with attendant negations. Before now, teachers thought fighting, stealing and other minor forms of disrespect to school authorities were the most grievous forms of students' misbehaviour. But the new wave of indiscipline manifests in illicit behaviour like gang rape, cultism destruction of school properties, other forms of vandalism and even verbal and physical attacks on their teachers and those in authority. The situation is such that, Ozigi and Ocho (1981) look at the school as a place where only the fit and strong can survive. It is easy for teachers and school authorities to curb students' misbehaviour through force and coercion. Students with erring behaviours can be suspended, expelled etc. But does this sum up to moral act(ion)? Would the teachers have done ethical justice? In the opinion of Mayer, Kwenzi and Greenbaum (2009) there is a strong relationship between ethical climate and ethical behaviour. For Victor and Cullen (1987) ethical climate constitutes "the shared perception of what is correct behaviour and how ethical situations should be handled in an organization".

Following from the foregoing, French and Raven (1959) opine that leaders have access to five distinct sources of power. These are:

- i. legitimate source of power which comes from a belief that the leader has the authority to make demands and can expect compliance from others.
- ii. reward source of power which stems from a leadership ability to provide rewards of inducement to employee.
- iii. expert source of power which results from the knowledge and skills possessed by a leader.
- iv. referent source of power which results from the leader's perceived attractiveness, charisma and likeability.
- v. coercive source of power which is based on fear of the leader and the belief that the leader can punish others for non-compliance.

Looking at the above within the context of school discipline, the teacher by virtue of his position and status as one in charge has the authority to make demands on erring students. In essence, as teacher his power is legitimate. In the explanation of Smith and Hains (2012) legitimate power is derived from within a logical context. Just like the teacher has legitimate powers, he is also in a position to reward is good as well as the ability to punish wrong deeds.

Still on the teacher's source of power, the teacher as an expert, possesses expert power; a situation where that individual (the teacher) is able to establish subordination among people (students) because he possesses some sort of expertise of great importance (Smith & Hains, 2012). Ordinarily, the status of a teacher is accorded some form of respect that makes his profession different from some others. It is also

expected that the referent power of the teacher will endear his students to accept subordination and discipline. Finally, coercive power of the teacher is invoked when there is non-compliance on the part of the students. Basically, whether the power of the teacher appeals as a disciplinary approach, for power to influence behaviour, the student should be able to associate the requested behaviour with the power of the teacher. In other words, teacher power is based on students' perception. If power invoked by teacher is not perceived as commensurate to misbehaviour, even when students believe that teachers possess power, the attempt to redirect students' behaviour may be unsuccessful. This is always the dilemma that comes with power and morality. Perhaps articulating the relationship between teacher's power and his authority may explain this tension.

In this context, a teacher who has a major role to discipline students, is vested with power to do so. In other words, discipline inevitably involves the exercise of authority and power. As Buzzelli and Johnston (2001) have suggested, there is a "continual reflection" on how power and authority operate in the classroom and how teachers would do this is uncertain. Often times this is where the moral dilemma stems from. But Buzzelli and Johnston are also quick to affirm that teaching itself involves moral action and the teachers as moral agents. This makes education as a whole, and classroom interactions in particular as fundamentally and inevitably moral in nature.

Looking at the issue of discipline as one of such classroom interactions, one cannot rule out the role of the teacher in his exercise of power and authority. In their explication of authority, Buzzelli and Johnston (2001) looked at authority in two senses – being 'an' authority in the classroom and being 'in' authority. "While the former refers to the teacher's ability to direct actions within the classroom, the latter refers to the teacher's status as the possessor and transmitter of sanctioned forms of knowledge. Inevitably, the teacher uses his authority both for purposes of regulating power relations and for moral ends".

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying that teachers have access to a variety of sources of power. Indeed all these sources can be employed to enhance an ethical classroom climate. In the same vein, these sources of power have their limitations. It behoves on the teacher to harness the power at their disposition to the extent that he is careful not to infringe on students' rights and sensitivity. At the same time, creating a most conducive environment for teaching and learning.

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