

Suspension - A failure of discipline

Introduction - Two perspectives

When a student is suspended from school there is always a failure of discipline and not always only by the student. When a student's actions seriously breach the school's discipline policy redress by the school is required. However, the circumstances leading to a suspension often involve teachers who are ill equipped to handle students with behavioural disabilities. The school, its discipline code, the way sanctions are applied, authoritarian teachers and inexperienced teachers can be contributors to suspension.

Recently, the NSW Department of Education has been reviewing its policies and procedures for suspension and circulated a consultation document *A new student behaviour strategy*. Before commenting on this document some discussion of the basics around suspensions.

Purpose of schooling

Schools are places of learning and not welfare institutions. The extent of the focus on learning within the school is a key to overall discipline. In schools where classes are participating day by day in meaningful, well-prepared and engaging lessons, a climate for learning carries its own discipline. When students are not engaged in learning, then trouble awaits the teacher when problems in students' home and social environments surface and overwhelm the learning context. Even in ideal learning contexts, prepared and experienced teachers can occasionally be caught in these situations when some behaviours burst through.

While meeting the social, emotional and physical needs of students are not prime purposes of schooling, schools provide a range of personal support programs to support student learning. Such programs are support and not the main purpose of schooling.

Discipline in general

As outlined in the booklet *A practical guide to classroom discipline*, (Gore 2018) discipline is always about self-discipline, about students restricting their behaviour and doing what is right because it is what is best for them while working with others. If discipline prevails in a school and its classrooms, there should be little call on discipline policies and their sanctions, including suspension.

For the teacher, achieving classroom discipline requires an inner search about their own beliefs including whether they actually like all their students and, for Christian teachers, whether they love them and how that love is expressed. It also involves beliefs about student centred learning and democratic practices. Student self-discipline requires teacher discipline in how they set up their learning environment, their lesson preparation,

their classroom routines, their supervision of students' work and how they relate to each student.

In this context, any lack of student self-discipline should be dealt with appropriately, i.e. simply addressed, not ignored. Most breeches will require only a verbal reminder of the task at hand or a reprimand on the side and, if possible, not in front of the whole class. Talking with students individually after class and expressing the problem that their behaviours are causing, with the teacher sharing their feelings will help to focus on the behaviours and not the students' worth. If first actions are ineffective and the problem escalates a different strategy is needed. Using the school's resources for difficult cases, rather than the teacher taking all responsibility introduces other strategies. The school also has personnel and resources beyond the school that can be engaged to support both the teacher and the student. These resources should be accessed.

Promoting self-discipline is a key to avoiding suspension resulting from classroom misbehaviour.

The clash of school, home and society.

Increasingly, the problems of our society have encroached on schools and students who are the products of abuse - physical, sexual and emotional - have little experience of trusting adults (teachers), resulting in fragile relationships between students and teachers. Yet, these students seek an authentic adult that can be relied on and communicated with. Although students are not friends and are not usually seeking friendship, they seek an adult who they can relate to.

A teacher can be sympathetic, but still able to encourage students and to use the school's resources to address issues that are beyond the capacity of the individual teacher to respond to. The teacher needs to have boundaries which allow others to assist.

Teachers will comment that in some schools, they can have a majority of students within a class carrying these problems. For some students, their experiences of abuse can influence the way they treat others, especially when they are placed in defensive situations. Like poking a snake with a stick, some teachers demand more than the student has capacity to give and get bitten. Being the significant adult for these students is tough, but only with careful mentoring can the needs of the students and, in particular their learning needs, be addressed.

There is much debate about school discipline policies. The four principles that should inform a policy are relationships, rules, rewards and sanctions. The focus of self-discipline is relationships carried out in the context of a set of school rules that everyone accepts and has been involved in forming. Within this system students who have contributed to student, class and school success should be acknowledged and where there is indiscipline appropriate sanctions taken of which the end of the line is suspension.

What to do with difficult students

I can hear many of the teachers reading this saying *you've lost touch, the students at my school don't want to work and we are overwhelmed by the problems they bring to school*. Some of these students are just so difficult, verbally they are abusive when challenged, violent when upset or pressured and non-communicative with staff.

While there is no simple solution other than following the principles set out above here are a few practical suggestions that Christians in particular might find useful.

1. Be friendly to the lonely and unlikable

In every school, there are students who do not fit in and are lonely. Then there are some students who are so unpopular with teachers, mostly with good reason, that they feel no-one on staff likes them or is interested in them. These students usually do not relate to any staff member and the larger the school the more likely they are to slip under the radar. Getting to know these students can be very useful to them and to the teacher. I remember as a head teacher in one school walking through the playground of a morning and taking the time to say hello to a few of these students. Slowly they responded and we communicated a few sentences. They would look for me in the morning to say hello and if absent on other school business, would give me the third degree about where I had been the day before. Having this relationship was helpful because I knew as a head teacher that these were the students who were likely to be sent to me at some stage by one of my teachers for discipline. Because we had a relationship already, it was possible to talk through the issues and have them accept a plan for a way forward that might include sanctions.

2. Love the unlovely

In every class there are some students who are hard to like, let alone love. But Christians are called to love their students just as God loves them. The most important point here is that showing love to these students establishes relationship. Without relationship, the student believes that the teacher does not like them, then if the teacher attempts to correct or admonish these students confrontation occurs, followed by escalation and abuse. When a student believes that they are not liked by their teacher, then they don't accept discipline and don't care about their behaviour or its consequences.

Suspension an extension of time out.

Both schools and parents practice time out to help students manage their own behaviours. While extended time out might be seen as a punishment by students, removing a student from a potential situation of indiscipline is a smart move by teachers and popular action amongst primary teachers. Whether that is putting the attention seeker at a desk at the back of the room to take away their audience, or removing a student temporarily from a class altogether, the benefits are a de-escalation of tension, frustration and confrontation and an opportunity to discuss the issues with the student at another time.

Suspension is the end product of other school sanctions on students or because a particular act is so serious that it demands immediate time out from school not only class, and discussion with parents, for instance in cases of severe gang-like bullying, physical assault or sexual harassment. Time out suspensions are similar to other time-out sanctions, they provide an opportunity for the school, the student and usually the parents to address the reasons for, and the issues that led to the suspension.

Schools don't have a lot of available sanctions when serious or protracted indiscipline occurs. They tend to suspend for as long as both the policy allows or to use the length as a punishment. However, the longer the suspension the more difficult the return to school. Ideally, the discussion with the student and the parent should address the reasons for the

suspension and try and get to a position where the student really wants to return to school. If the student's anger is so great then they may not want to return to school then this poses another set of issues for the school once the student is made to return.

Coming back

The negotiations around a student returning to school can be very difficult for all parties. Where the student acknowledges their indiscipline and seeks to apologise to anyone hurt by their actions in return for acceptance back into class, then the matter can usually be resolved. However, for some students the inappropriate actions by a teacher can be a factor in the student's indiscipline. Difficult students need to be managed carefully and authoritative teachers can be very assertive at inappropriate times turning situations into a power struggle and provoking students to actions they might otherwise not consider. This leads to a focus on whether there are things that must change at the school level for a student to be integrated successfully back into the classroom as well as the student.

Some years ago, I had a responsibility for student welfare in a region and there were a considerable number of suspensions where the school basically didn't want the student to return and at best sought another school for placement. I found that in some cases, students can be the subject of overzealous teachers who make unreasonable demands when students are upset or angry with other people and situations in their life. Pushing the right buttons leads to an outburst towards a teacher which was really a response to other matters going on in the student's life. In these situations, schools have a lot of work to do when students are suspended to ensure that students are really wanted back and that the circumstances that led to their suspension have been addressed by both school and the student. To address this problem, a procedural document was produced called *Coming back* which sought to outline the process for both the student and the school including the adjustments that both might need to make for a successful return.

Special students

Aboriginal students

Suspension is probably the worse type of sanction for Aboriginal students, especially those living outside metropolitan areas. There is so much effort put into getting Aboriginal students consistently to attend school that any disruption through suspension only confirms a message in the minds of some Aboriginal communities - you are not wanted. Schools that have successful attendance rates for Aboriginal students are those that have developed good communication with community representatives, Aboriginal elders and parents. Understanding the background of Aboriginal students should lead to a pedagogy that empowers and enhances their learning. It is not alright to lose these students in the broader community.

Students with disabilities

Students who are emotionally disturbed or have behavioural disorders pose particular problems for teachers and are often allocated placement in special small class units to assist their learning. In one sense, this is like suspension from the mainstream of schooling to address particular needs. The aim should always be to integrate these students back into the mainstream classes but successfully not prematurely so that the problem behaviours don't continue risking the learning of other students as well as this student.

A new student behaviour strategy, NSW Department of Education

The “new” strategy allows for most of the features that have been discussed above but it is hard to find something new other than promises to do it better. Increase services to support schools, improved teacher professional learning and better liaison with communities and other government departments have been strategies for many years. What is new, is the concrete changes to suspension policy. Unfortunately, many teachers and school administrators will see these changes as an erosion of existing power and less options to deal with difficult student behaviour problems. Unless the department (NSW government) can make good its plan for increased services and professional learning for staff, then it is difficult to see how schools can devote their limited resources to making the improvements outlined.

A separate area of concern is that of the commissioned evidence review of what works to address student behaviours by the *Telethon Kids Institute*, a medical centre incorporating medical professionals, but there is no evidence on their website of any educational expertise. The results of their engagement appear to provide nothing new to the policy except some changes to suspension practice. Looking at their report would be of interest to assess where the department is looking to head with new approaches.

At a time when the state government is under financial pressure from the loss of income and other priorities during the covid crises, it is difficult to see how any new money can be allocated to this strategy when all existing areas and programs are under pressure to economise, meaning that any reallocation of funds is unlikely. This means that the strategy is a nice sounding document to appease stakeholders, without the specifics of anything being done other than a change to suspension rules. It’s all a bit too political and bureaucratic to suggest any significant change.

John Gore

Three practical tips for teaching (Part 2)

by Dr Jenn Phillips.

My SRE teaching career began rather inauspiciously. I was 21 years old, with no formal training apart from two lessons shadowing a primary school SRE teacher (this is before the now mandatory 10 hours of training for all Christian SRE teachers!). Then, with very little pomp and ceremony, I was rewarded with a class of 20 Year 1 students to share the Bible with for 30 minutes a week.

With very little confidence in my teaching skills, I clung to the SRE teaching manual like it was my lifeline - reading it verbatim to my students.

I’ll still never forget the day a young girl’s hand shot up in class. She was desperate to tell me something, I could tell from the speed at which her hand flung forth to the sky, and her wide open eyes bursting with revelation. I couldn’t wait to hear what she’d discovered, what connection she had just made:

“Mrs Phillips,” she said (as I wasn’t a Dr. yet at that point), “you’re boring!”.

So my first year of teaching indeed wasn’t my best! Thankfully, I’ve been on the improve ever since!

In my last article, I wrote about the **why** of improving as teachers. In this article, I’m going to share some of the **what** - some practical tips I have picked up along the way.

But first, a caveat: In my role as High School SRE advisor for the Sydney Anglican Diocese, I tend to train people with little to no formal teaching training. I know these tips are obvious to any seasoned veteran teacher - but I still find myself coming back to them time and time again, as there's always ways I can be growing in these areas. I've found them helpful in my teaching practice, and in training others, and I hope they can help you, too.

Step 1: Lesson expectations and classroom routines.

What do these scenarios have in common?

It's a mufti day and the students had a cake stall at recess before coming back to class. Or, you're a casual teacher and it's your first time in a new school with students you've never met before and the teacher you're relieving hasn't left you a lesson plan. Or, the students have been out at a cross-country run for most of the day before returning to school half an hour before the end of the day and suddenly you find yourself with 30 minutes to fill.

Do these sound like your personal nightmare? Mine too. These are all recipes for classroom chaos. The situation isn't the cause though, it's the lack of the familiar, the break from routine which creates such havoc.

It's funny that we see the importance of classroom routine when we don't have one!

We're about to enter term 4 - perhaps some of your routines have lapsed, or have been forgotten by this stage in the year. What area of classroom routine can you be working on to make your life just that little bit easier next term? For me, it's always reminding students to put their hands up and not call out - and holding them to a 100% compliance (even if that means having students "replay" giving the right answer in the right way when they've called out).

Step 2: Clear learning outcomes

I'm sure you've heard so much about John Hattie's research that you can quote his "high impact strategies" in your sleep! And in my role, I've visited so many schools that have taken on board the concept of Learning Intentions and Success Criteria - with posters plastered around and prompters written on white boards to remind the students (and the teachers) to use them.

But just like classroom routines, have you fallen out of the habit of articulating them to your students every lesson?

In SRE, instead of using a Learning intention (a "we will" statement) and Success criteria (an "I can now" statement), I've been encouraging teachers to use a Big Question and Answer. In some ways, it becomes like a mini catechism! We start the lesson with a question that cannot immediately be answered, will engage the students' interest and will be answered by the end of the lesson.

For example, in a lesson about Jesus on the road to Emmaus, the question is "Who is the Bible all about?" I really like this one because the students will be intrigued and sometimes even ask "Don't you think the question should be **what?**". By the end of the lesson, they understand - the Bible is about a who and that who is Jesus.

One reason you may choose to formulate a "Big Question" for a lesson, is that it makes it easy to perform quick checks on learning from lesson to lesson. For example (to switch to my other teaching area for a moment), in a lesson on Hamlet, we might have looked at his famous "to be or not to be" speech one lesson. The big question was "What poetic techniques did Shakespeare use to communicate Hamlet's inner-turmoil" - in the next

lesson, you can remind the students of the question, and hope that it triggers some recollection of what you have covered (personification of “fortune”, repetition of “do die, to sleep”, the snake-like assonance in “insolence of office” etc).

Step 3: Transformative Learning

I would suggest that transformative learning is one that we as Christian educators would be aiming for with all that we do in the classroom. Whether we are able to do it overtly or not, as followers of Jesus, we long to see our students making wise decisions for their futures, or, as Proverbs 22:6 says: “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.”

Transformative learning is about encouraging students to apply the knowledge and skills from your lesson into action in their heads (knowledge), hearts (will) and hands (actions).

For the English teacher, any text can lend itself to transformative learning through the power of empathy. There are many studies that show that reading about people with lives different to ourselves increases empathy and compassion - think of stories like Nam Le’s “The Boat” (and its accompanying visual adaptation at <http://www.sbs.com.au/theboat/>) as a prime example of connecting with the refugee experience, transforming students’ heads (misconceptions), hearts (compassion) and hands (perhaps taking up practical support for those in similar situations).

For a Maths and Science teacher, demonstrating the real-world, practical application of the theorem or chemical reaction will have demonstrated transform learning from the conceptual to the practical (I’ll still never forget the time my science teacher told me of his misspent youth performing experiments in his garage with sodium - it certainly cemented in my brain how explosive it is!).

As I mentioned in my first article, we are all on a journey of improvement as teachers. These are three tips that have helped me and the SRE teachers I train. I hope they are helpful for you as well as you seek to teach well and shine as lights for Christ in your schools.

Missionary Update

Suzanne Rowe

Although I missed the anticipation of (intended) mid-year travel, the stimulation of weekly classes (learning Tibetan and teaching English for Bible and Theology) and more, I have appreciated the chance to stop and reflect. Mind you, the mixed blessing of the internet means that my days are often still quite full.

Pray for her ongoing study through the Melbourne School of Theology.

Colin and Cathy McKay

We are still in Australia even though their school year started in early September. We have started the process of gaining permission to return to Laos, despite there still being a closed border policy in place, no flights and restrictions on leaving Australia. In the mean time, Colin will be doing all lessons via the internet for the foreseeable future. We have been encouraged by stories of God at work in Laos, we have also been praying for those still experiencing persecution for their faith in Jesus.

Pray for Colin trying to prepare work for “the unknown” and for the school community to stay free of the Coronavirus.

Prayer Points:

- Continue praying for the repercussions COVID has had and is having on teachers, students and families, especially those doing Year 12 exams.
- Give thanks for those SRE classes that have been able to recommence and pray for those touched by the gospel in earlier lessons but no longer being taught.
- Pray for Harley Mills as he recovers from a broken bone in his foot.
- Continue to pray for those in government that they will make wise decisions.
- Pray for the future of Scripture Union Famil Mission teams.
- AND pray for yourselves for strength, and perseverance and growth in your Christian walk.

News and pray points from members

John C:

- Covid anxiety and safety for everyone at school.
- The fragile mental health of teenagers, especially if they are without faith because they can have no hope for a positive outcome for the future.
- School staff especially for those with injuries and caring difficulties at home.

Ian:

- Ian and Jill are self-isolating three weeks in Foster and 1 week in their Sydney place, due to Ian being at high risk to the Coronavirus.
- He asks for prayer for his eldest grandson, Tom, doing Year 12 at Knox Grammar. There have been copy-cat suicides there and also at PLC who Tom knew.

Peter W:

- The effect of the Covid Virus on staff in the pastoral roles.
- The need for older students to take the virus seriously.

Gwenda:

- At the age of 90, Gwenda enjoys meeting for prayer with an ex-student who is now in the same residential care home! Gwenda sends her greetings to TCF members.

Brett:

- Pray for him as he deals with the stress of teaching.
- Give thanks that the principal is supportive of the Christian lunch time group. Pray that the students in this small group will grow in their faith.

Helen:

- Is thankful to be on leave during this difficult time in schools and is now enjoying the occasional coffee.
- Pray for her as she cares for her husband.

Barbara:

- Enjoying working in the garden and catching up with her sister.

Karen:

- Enjoyed reading *12 Women of the Bible*.
- Pray for strength and patience for each day as she cares for her elderly parents.

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