

Teacher Perceptions of the Essential Skills of Classroom Management and Discipline

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This paper reports on a study that identified and investigated, the most important skills that teachers perceive they ought to have to be effective in classroom management and discipline, and the levels of difficulty they perceived are associated with development of these skills.

Behaviourally-Anchored Rating Scale procedures were used to design a survey instrument that consisted of 56 individual skills categorised into eight broad competency areas. Responses were measured on two 5-point rating scales, as to the perceived level of importance and difficulty associated with development of each of the individual skills. From an original stratified random sample of 237 teachers, there were 101 respondents. Whilst respondents were not equally representative of primary and secondary teachers, nor male and female teachers, sufficient responses were received to identify a number of significant differences between groups, as well as identify those specific skills that respondents in general considered to be the most important, and the most difficult to acquire.

The results showed that effective skills in classroom management and discipline were perceived to be multi-dimensional, and fall into a number of broad areas. Generally, skills relating to developing a personal philosophy, using effective communication, and having positive interpersonal relations, were perceived to be relatively high in importance, and relatively low in difficulty for teachers to acquire. Skills involved in teaching the curriculum and individualising it, and in dealing with and resolving behavioural problems were also perceived to be amongst the most important, and were perceived to be the most difficult for teachers to develop. Skills associated with professional development in the area of classroom management and discipline were also considered relatively difficult to acquire, but were not considered as important to develop as

skills in other areas.

A Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scale is an instrument designed specifically to identify and measure, in behavioural terms, the critical components that constitute effective performance in an occupation. This kind of instrument has been used in the past to identify performance competencies for such occupational groups as nurses (Smith and Kendall, 1963), store managers (Campbell, 1973), college professors (Harrai and Zedeck, 1973) and for identifying the professional and career development activities needed by teachers (Erffmeyer and Martray, 1988). It allows for researchers to "capture performance in multidimensional, behaviour-specific terms" (Anshel and Webb, 1989).

A rating scale is constructed through the development of a series of critical anchors or competencies that are perceived to represent effective performance in an occupation. They are defined as a series of specified behaviours which can be observed, rather than inferred. Each set of these behaviours is designed to represent the specific skills associated with effective performance in the competency area. As Smith and Kendall (1963) proclaim, the instrument is "rooted in and referable to actual behaviours".

To ensure content validity of the instrument a representative sample of the targeted population or occupation is used to construct an initial ratings instrument based on competency areas and related behavioural indicators (Erffmeyer and Martray, 1988). Generally, this procedure involves selecting individuals because of their recognised expertise in the area of investigation. Individuals are allocated to a group, known as an "expert group". The task of each expert group is to complete independently identical tasks and develop a set of tentative competencies and behavioural indicators. These then are constructed by representatives of the expert panels into an instrument for further validation. These procedures Smith and Kendall (1963) maintain, allow for an instrument to be developed in the language of the occupation that is being investigated, therefore increasing its face validity.

Once constructed, the rating scale is administered to a wider sample of the targeted population. Respondents are asked to indicate on a five point scale their perception as to how important (or in colloquial terms how essential) each competency area or individual indicator is to effective performance (Campbell et al , 1973). Erffmeyer and Martray (1988) included another dimension to this step by asking respondents also to indicate, on a five point scale, the level of difficulty they experienced in developing each indicator.

After the scale has been administered it is evaluated according to the relative importance of each of the designated competencies or indicators. The usual criterion for inclusion of an indicator or competency in the final instrument format is a mean rating of at least 3.5 with a standard deviation of less than 1.2, where 5 represents a rating of highest importance (Smith and Kendall, 1963).

Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scales (BARS) utilise research procedures to overcome a number of established weaknesses typically associated with traditional rating scales.

Gay (1981: 128) suggests that rating scales often have problems with "halo effect" and "generosity error". "Halo effect" refers to the situation where ratings are influenced by a raters' positive feeling towards the person they are rating. "Generosity error" refers to the situation in which a rater gives higher ratings than they otherwise might, generally because a rater does not have enough information to make an objective judgement on the issue at question. Another problem often associated with trait type

rating scales is that the dimensions or traits are ambiguous. This results in threats to the internal validity of the instrument.

Smith and Kendall (1963) and Campbell et al (1973) argue that these problems can be overcome through the use of Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scales. The strength of these scales is in the level of precision and specificity that occurs in the procedure for design and construction. Firstly, all items for rating are defined in specific behavioural terms. In addition, the scales measure performance rather than behaviour or effectiveness the former being defined by Campbell et al (1973) as behaviour that occurs in a specific context. The reason that effectiveness is not measured with the scale is that it is influenced by too many variables out of the control of an individual. As Campbell et al (1973: 15) maintain,

The crucial distinction between performance and effectiveness is that the latter does not refer to behaviour directly but rather it is a function of additional factors not under the control of the individual.

In summary, the following procedures need to be adopted when developing Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scales.

1. Generation of expert panels. Two (or more) panels of "Subject Matter Experts" who due to their knowledge and experience in the area of study, are able to design an instrument to assess quality performance.
2. Designing an instrument based on a 5 point scale of "competencies" required to measure performance.
3. Validating the instrument by distributing it to a wide sample.
4. Analysing results using non parametric statistical procedures.

Using Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scales in Educational Research - A Case Study of Competencies in Classroom Management and Discipline.

Order and control are essential components to the effective operation of a school and it is through discipline and classroom management policies and practices that schools establish and maintain the levels of order and control necessary for teaching and learning to occur.

"Classroom management" and "discipline" are terms often used synonymously to describe a diverse and extensive range of teacher behaviours and strategies. However, a distinction is made between the two, with classroom management referring to the strategies that teachers use to prevent misbehaviour whilst managing the class as a whole group, and discipline referring to the strategies that teachers use to deal with the misbehaviour of individual students (Doyle, 1986).

The debate as to how schools and teachers can best manage misbehaviour and develop a sense of order and control has matured, particularly over the last twenty to thirty years. Prior to this teachers were expected to adopt what are presently seen to be authoritarian strategies that were punishment focused as a means to maintain control (Balson, 1988). However, since 1970 other approaches such as the preventative classroom management models of Kounin (1970) and Evertson and Emmer (1982), or the relationship based models of Canter and Canter (1976), Glasser (1985), Dinkmeyer et al. (1980) and Gordon (1974) have been available for teachers to use. These later models focused on providing teachers with a range of different strategies to use to correct misbehaviour, depending on the type of student/teacher relationship.

Other key factors have been identified that influence the behaviour of students in schools. These include:

- clarity of expectations within a school;
- an atmosphere conducive to effective learning with pupils adhering to a

sensible and fully understood code of behaviour as a matter of course;

- a successful combination of firmness and kindness together with the expectation of courtesy;
- warmth and humour in relationships;
- support which helped to combat the problems of a difficult environment, where such existed; and
- a general demonstration of sensitivity.

(Tattum, 1989:73)

These findings and the studies of Rutter et al. (1979) suggest that order and control in schools also develops through a number of whole school variables. These include consistency amongst all staff in a school, the use of praise and rewards for good behaviour, the modelling of appropriate behaviour by teachers, and an ethos of fairness that pervades school life (Maughan and Ouston, 1980).

To identify, from the perspective of teachers what skills they considered to be most important in classroom management and discipline, the Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scale technique was selected to answer the following research questions.

1. What are the most important skills and understandings that teachers consider are required by teachers to establish effective classroom management and discipline?
2. What skills and understandings in classroom management and discipline do teachers consider to be the most difficult to acquire?
3. Do similarities and differences exist between high school and primary school teachers in the skills considered most important to acquire and in the difficulty of developing them?
4. What are the main background factors which influence teachers' perceptions of the relative importance of particular management skills and the difficulties of developing them?
5. Do identified skills and understandings differ from those suggested in the literature?

The initial step in constructing the rating scale was to obtain approval from the Director of Schools for the region selected for the study. Fourteen teachers were identified by representatives of the Diocese office as being exceptional managers in the classroom or in the school, thus constituting an "expert panel" to devise the initial rating scale. For the purpose of the study, exceptional managers were defined as those teachers or administrators who were not only outstanding in their teaching skills, but were also able to:

- demonstrate a sensitivity to the problems of classroom management;
- reflect on their own experiences;
- break down tasks; and
- articulate their experiences and knowledge.

The fourteen teachers selected consisted of two consultants from the regional office, two school principals (one secondary and one primary), two assistant principals (one secondary and one primary), two special education teachers and six classroom teachers (two high school, two primary and two infant school). These teachers were invited to spend a full day at the

Diocese Office to construct the survey.

Of the fourteen invited participants, eleven were able to attend. Participants were welcomed and allocated to two matched groups, each group containing a similar mix of teachers and administrators (with one group

having an additional classroom teacher). Each group was also allocated one of the consultants from the regional office to act as a group leader.

Over the day the two groups worked independently. The first task allocated was to identify and list a range of action words that would demonstrate competency in classroom management and discipline. For this task competency was defined as "the skills a teacher must have to become effective classroom managers and disciplinarians". To identify the full list of action words (verbs that describe specific teacher behaviour), each individual was encouraged to write down all the behaviours they thought teachers must use to be competent in classroom management and discipline, then a composite list of responses was constructed for each group.

The next phase involved each individual teacher working independently to organise the action words into what they perceived as related or homogeneous categories. Once the information was categorised, the teachers returned to their groups to redefine each category as competency goals that could explain the constituent set of verbs as a dimension of classroom management or discipline.

The third phase of the program involved teachers writing behavioural indicators for each of the competency goals that their group had devised. This was done by transforming each of the relevant verbs into a statement of specific and observable behaviour.

Once each group had devised a list of competency goals and their respective behavioural indicators, representatives of each group met to develop a draft instrument that combined the competency goals and indicators from each group. As a result of this process eight competency goals were defined, as follows:

- to utilise a repertoire of behaviour management strategies to initiate, experiment with and maintain effective classroom management;
- to function as a team member in designing, implementing and evaluating school wide discipline and pastoral care policies;
- to develop and exhibit a personal philosophy and behaviour which recognises the dignity and needs of children and adults in the school community;
- to demonstrate a growing understanding and knowledge of designing, implementing and evaluating, curriculum, and teaching and learning styles;

- to demonstrate an ever increasing understanding and knowledge of human growth and development, and learning theory and processes;
- to develop and exhibit effective communication skills in the full range of educational settings;
- to respond effectively and with sensitivity to inappropriate behaviour through developing and utilising strategies in negotiation and collaboration; and
- to demonstrate an ability to develop a repertoire of appropriate skills and strategies to resolve behavioural conflicts in a just and constructive manner.

After this meeting the draft competency goals and their suggested indicators were organised, by the investigator, in the form of a rating scale and returned to the two consultants for verification. They agreed to a number of minor editorial changes and once these were made the final

instrument was produced.

A sample of 250 teachers was selected for the survey from the total population in the Diocese using a stratified random selection technique (Gay, 1981: 91). This allowed the identified sub-groups to be represented in the sample in the same proportion as in the total teacher population, and for inferences to be made about particular aggregated sub-groups which would otherwise be unreliable because of small numbers.

The instrument was distributed to the selected individuals by post. Respondents were asked to complete the survey instrument, which included certain background information, and the final rating scale, consisting of the eight defined competency areas and their respective behavioural indicators. For each indicator the respondents were asked to give a rating on a 5 point scale as follows:

- 1) how essential to classroom management and discipline they perceived the identified skill to be, ranging from
1- is not essential, ... to 5 - is essential, and
- 2) how difficult they perceived it was for teachers to develop the specified skill, ranging from
1- low level of difficulty, ... to 5 - high level of difficulty.

The background information sought on respondents was designed to identify particular categories of teachers who might be expected to have different perceptions about the relative importance and difficulty of achieving the various classroom management and discipline skills. This allowed for selected comparisons to be made in the profile of responses between, for example, primary and secondary teachers, and male and female teachers.

With respect to the overall group of respondents, ratings on individual indicators were screened for their possible use in subsequent instruments designed from the survey instrument and for use by teachers and or administrators as rating scales of performance. The criterion for this longer term inclusion was a mean importance rating on the essential/not essential scale of at least 3.5, and a standard deviation less than 1.2 (Smith and Kendall, 1963, Erffmeyer and Martray, 1988). The rationale for using this criterion was, as Erffmeyer and Martray (1988) explain, that the relatively low standard deviation indicates a high level of agreement by the raters about the relative importance of the indicator, and the relatively high mean rating score indicates a general agreement that the indicator is critical for effective performance in the relevant competency area.

A number of statistical procedures were used to compare the profile of rating responses between the different categories of teachers specified in the sample. As the data collected from the 5 point scales was essentially ordinal, non parametric statistical procedures were used for these comparisons. Where two independent groups of different size were compared to determine whether there were systematic differences in the relative importance of each indicator, the Mann Whitney U test was used as the basis for establishing level of statistical significance (Ferguson, 1981; Siegel and Castellan, 1988) with a confidence level of $p \leq .05$ (Tuckman, 1988).

Where data were to be compared across three or more groups of teachers, the test used was the Kruskal-Wallis One Way Analysis of Variance by Ranks (Ferguson, 1981).

To answer questions that sought to determine the pattern of association between ratings of importance and those of difficulty, the Spearman Rank-Order Correlation Coefficient was used. This was to establish whether particular skills or competencies that were rated as relatively important

tended also to be regarded as relatively difficult to achieve, or whether a negative relationship, or none at all, existed between the ratings of importance and difficulty across the whole survey instrument.

Of the 101 respondents, 17% were male and 81% female (2% no response) with 67% teaching in primary schools and 33% high schools. The average age of respondents was 38.3 years, and they had been teaching an average of 11.5 years. Classroom teachers comprised 58% of the sample, co-ordinators comprised 20%, executive staff members 16% and 2% of the sample were special education teachers. With respect to previous teaching experience, 32% of the respondents had taught in one previous school, 19% in two and 14% in three. Ten percent had taught in four previous schools and 25% had taught in more than four schools.

The level of initial teacher training was varied, with 28% of the

respondents indicating 2 years, 40% indicating 3 years and 29%, 4 years. When asked to state whether they had received training in classroom management and discipline as part of their initial training 70% of the respondents indicated yes and 27% no. Of those who had received relevant training, 37% perceived it was adequate and 59% suggested it was not. Overall, 28% of the respondents indicated that this component of their initial training was adequate and 63% indicated that it was not. Clearly there is some variability in the perceived adequacy of initial pre-service teacher training in classroom management, and while these results cannot necessarily be generalised to all teachers they do suggest cause for concern about the nature and level of pre-service preparation in this area.

Results indicated that of the eight broad competency areas surveyed, the most important was developing a personal philosophy that treats others with dignity and respect. Five other competency areas were ranked approximately equal and second in importance. These areas were effective communication, implementing and individualising the curriculum, dealing with misbehaviour and being a team member. Rankings and mean aggregate scores for all competency areas are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Mean ratings of importance for the eight defined competency areas.

The same eight competency areas were also rated according to their perceived level of difficulty in skill acquisition. Two competency areas were identified as the most difficult to develop, namely implementing the curriculum and resolving behavioural conflicts. The least difficult skill was developing a personal philosophy that treats others with mutual respect.

Even though two of the most important competencies were also rated relatively high in difficulty (curriculum implementation and resolving behavioural conflicts), there was no overall relationship between ratings of importance and difficulty across the competency areas. The competency area ranked highest in importance, developing a personal philosophy, was also ranked the least difficult to develop.

The study also sought to identify those individual skills ranked most important and most difficult to acquire. The results showed that these skills can be classified into four broad categories: implementation and individualisation of the curriculum; management of behaviour and misbehaviour; professional development; and the use of effective personal and interpersonal communication skills. The first three areas contain skills particular to the profession of teaching whilst the fourth contains skills that relate to general relationships.

When comparisons were made of the relative level of importance and difficulty between these skills, the skills of curriculum implementation

and individualisation and the skills of effective personal and interpersonal relationships were perceived to be most important for teachers to acquire. However, the skills of curriculum implementation and individualisation were perceived to be more difficult to develop. Skills in the management of behaviour and misbehaviour were perceived to be less important than curriculum implementation and individualisation, and effective personal and interpersonal communication skills, but were regarded as almost as difficult to develop as the skills of curriculum implementation and individualisation. In comparison, skills in professional development were the least important and difficult of the highest ranked skills to develop. See Figure 2 for full details of this comparison.

These results indicate that teachers perceive effectiveness in classroom management to be contingent upon the development of a broad range of skills that not only relate to the tasks of managing and preventing misbehaviour, but also to the more general responsibilities of teaching and implementing the curriculum, and effectively interacting with others in the school community. It appears that not only must teachers be able to develop the students they teach, they themselves must develop a personal philosophy that engenders mutual respect and effective communication.

In addition, there is little evidence to suggest that the teachers in this investigation perceive the skills of effective classroom management and discipline to be separate and discrete from the tasks of teaching. Rather, the results suggest that effective classroom management and discipline is based on the use of a set of skills that are, in the main, integrated into the principal tasks and responsibilities of teaching, and relating to others, in the total school setting.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY TEACHERS

It is evident from the results that primary and high school teachers perceive that there are certain skills equally high in importance. Generally, these skills are concerned with teachers being able to develop students through appropriate and responsive teaching programs, provided in a context of effective, and supportive, student/teacher relationships. Specifically, the skills identified as most important for both settings, are ones where teachers: develop rapport with and respect their students, recognise effort, develop appropriate academic programs, and clearly communicate expectations about behaviour.

Figure 2. Relationship between indicators ranked most important and most difficult to acquire.

However, there were other skills identified as high in importance for primary teachers, but not for high school teachers and other high in importance for high school teachers, but not for primary school teachers. Primary teachers considered it more important than high school teachers to establish and utilise routines for individual children who need extension or independent work, to be flexible in using skills to suit the needs of

different children and to provide opportunities for success for all students. It was also more important for them to follow up effectively, be approachable over problems, provide feedback to peers and parents about progress of individual children, and model appropriate behaviour across the school setting.

The skills considered most important by high school teachers and not primary teachers were: maximising learning for children, using questioning skills to clarify and check understanding, discussing children's needs with respect and confidentiality, acting consistently in implementing school

policy, consistently following agreed policies, and clearly and assertively directing students when needed. A list of all these skills is shown in Table 1.

The groups tend to differ also in the value they place on being able to apply their professional expertise to individual students. In effect, the two groups displayed different teaching agendas. Primary teachers aim to ensure that they organise their resources and teaching strategies for learning and success for all students, whereas high school teachers aim to establish if learning outcomes have occurred with their students. Effective classroom management, in primary schools, is linked to the use of specific teacher skills that ensure that the learning needs of all children are met. Classroom order is viewed as being related to the ability of a teacher to individualise the curriculum successfully.

Table 1. The skills considered most important by primary and high school teachers.

Common
Skills Primary
Teachers High School
Teachers
Personal

- Active listening
- Maintaining rapport
- Mutual respect
- Helping children to value their own efforts
- Using praise and rewards to recognise effort

Professional

- Utilise responsive programs
- Use questioning skills to stimulate thinking
- Select learning experiences to suit the stage of development of children
- Clearly communicate expectations about behaviour

Personal

- To be approachable over problems

Professional

- Utilise routines for children who need independent/ extension activities
 - Provide opportunities for learning and success for all
 - Flexible use skills to suit the needs of different children
 - Provide feedback to peers and parents about progress of children
 - Model appropriate behaviour across the school setting Personal
-
- Affirm the value of individual children

Professional

- Utilise experiences that maximise learning for children
- Act consistently in applying consequences
- Follow consistently agreed policy
- Use questioning skills to clarify and check learning
- Clearly and assertively direct students when needed
- Discuss children's needs with respect and confidentiality

Secondary teachers, in comparison, valued a more class- centred approach

that provided experiences to maximise learning, and to assess whether it had occurred, in addition to the use of specific behaviour management skills that assisted them to consistently guide and direct students and follow agreed school policy.

Overall, the results suggest that there are specific interpersonal and professional skills found to be generic to both primary and secondary teachers and that there are other skills found to be specific in one situation and not the other. Both groups value highly the importance of relating to children as individuals but differ in the extent to which they build on these skills to implement and individualise the curriculum and manage student behaviour.

In addition to comparing the responses of primary and secondary teachers, this investigation also sought to compare the responses of male and female teachers. Whilst the number of males was relatively low when compared with the number of female teachers, the statistical procedures used to analyse the data accommodated these differences in group size.

In all eight competency areas, male teachers rated each competency area less important and more difficult to develop than their female colleagues. Both male and female teachers ranked the same seven individual skills as the most important to develop. The majority of these skills were from the broad area of effective personal and interpersonal communication skills and

were similar to the most important skills identified as the most important to develop by primary and secondary teachers.

Males and females differed, however, in how they ranked the relative importance of a number of specific professional teaching skills. One of these related to ensuring that learning and success occur for all students, and another related to the use of a variety of skills in behaviour management. The skills that female teachers ranked higher in importance were modelling appropriate behaviour, ensuring that there were opportunities for learning and success for all students, communicating clear expectations about behaviour and following up effectively.

The skills ranked high in importance by male teachers reflected a similar preference towards developing effective relationships, but a different preference towards the importance of providing feedback and reporting to parents and peers, and communicating with and providing experiences appropriate to a student's level of development. Table 2 details the most important skills rated by male and female teachers.

These results indicate that male and female teachers have different perceptions of the value and importance of a number of specific skills in classroom management and discipline and that some of these differences are significant.

Table 2. The skills considered most important by male and female teachers.

Common
Skills Male
Teachers Female
Teachers
Personal

- To be approachable over problems
- Maintain rapport with children
- Mutual respect
- Help children to value their own efforts
- Use praise and encouragement to recognise effort

Professional

- Utilise responsive programs
- Use questioning skills to stimulate thinking Personal
- Active listening

Professional

- Provide feedback to peers and parents about the progress of individual children

- Discuss children's needs with respect and confidentiality
- Utilise experiences appropriate to the stage of development of children
- Use language appropriate at levels appropriate to children

Personal

- Affirm the value of individual children

Professional

- Provide opportunities for learning and success for all students
- Model appropriate behaviour
- Clearly communicate expectations about behaviour
- Follow up effectively

CONCLUSION:

The BARS methodology that was utilised in the case study presented allowed for a number of assumptions in the field of classroom management and discipline to be questioned. A range of skills were identified and rated by teachers to be critically important to the processes of classroom management and discipline. Many of these are supported in the literature in the field.

However, the relatively importance and difficulty in developing these skills have not addressed in the literature, especially with differences between high school and primary school teaching and the apparent different needs of male and female teachers.

The teachers in this study appear to prefer a more eclectic approach that focuses on a global view of skills development. What is clearly identified in the study is the importance of developing a personal philosophy that underpins this.

The Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scale methodology used in the case study allowed for an alternative framework to be developed that not only identified the most important and difficult teacher rated skills in classroom management and discipline, it allowed for the relationships between these skills to be explored and the identification of new perspectives on the field. In this sense it remains a valuable tool to be used in research, particularly in the education field.

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