

# **Breaking the Cycle of Office Referrals & Suspensions: A Strategy for Defensive Management**

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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on a strategy - Defensive Management - designed to assist teachers to better manage non-compliance and defiance in the classroom, with the ultimate goal of reducing disciplinary referrals and flow-on suspensions and exclusions from school. Non-compliance and defiance are behaviours that teachers find particularly challenging and, traditionally teachers have responded provocatively and often unsuccessfully when faced with instances of such behaviour. Drawing on an analogy with Defensive Driving, two groups of teachers (pre-service and primary) were introduced to a strategy developed to help them avoid unproductive conflict (collisions) with students and the harm that such encounters typically result in. The findings of an exploratory study on the use of Defensive Management are reported.

## **Introduction**

With the increased attention being given in recent years to whole-school responses to student behaviour problems (Lasley & Wayson, 1982; MacNaughton & Johns, 1991; Metzler, et al. 2001), the limits on what individual teachers can be expected to achieve in their disciplinary role are becoming clearer. These boundaries are further defined by the actions teachers themselves take in the classroom and, in particular, their use of disciplinary referrals.

## **Disciplinary Referrals**

Disciplinary referrals, sometimes called office referrals (Skiba, et al. 1997), signal the point at which teachers formally and most often publicly acknowledge that a behaviour problem is beyond their capacity to manage. In effect, disciplinary referrals are a cry for help from teachers, because they have reached the limits of their professional and personal capacity to control a student's behaviour. At this stage, the resources of the whole school are expected to be brought into play.

On the surface, the continuum of individual teacher responsibility and whole school responsibility for student behaviour problems seems logical and desirable. There are, however, several problems with such an approach. For this system to work teachers are expected to be reasonable and consistent in how they determine the behaviours that warrant

referral, and to follow school guidelines when deciding that a referral will be made. The general understanding is that teachers will deal with mild problems themselves and reserve referral for cases of serious and chronic misbehaviour. However, what we find from available research on disciplinary referrals is that students are sent from class for what would appear to be relatively mild and indeed common forms of classroom misbehaviour.

Studies that have focused on disciplinary referrals confirm that behaviours such as disrespect, disobedience, inappropriate language, defiance, excessive noise and general disruption are the most frequent reasons for referral (Imich, 1994; McFadden, et al. 1992). Evidence of just how 'typical' such behaviours are of primary and secondary classrooms resides in statistics for the frequency of office referrals.

While both data for and estimates of office referrals vary widely, it is not unusual to find that as many as four out of every ten students have had at least one disciplinary referral in their school career (Skiba & Peterson, 1997). Of concern here is that students can be and often are referred for relatively trivial matters such as being late for class, failing to complete homework, cheating, not bringing books and equipment to class and breaches of the school uniform or dress code. Teachers, too, vary greatly in their tolerance of misbehaviour (Landon & Messinger, 1989; Safran

& Safran, 1984), so that students are frequently faced with inconsistent expectations for conduct as they move from class to class.

While there is considerable variation in the type and severity of behaviours teachers refer students for, two forms of inappropriate behaviour are prominent in the reasons for disciplinary referrals. These behaviours are non-compliance and defiance. The remainder of the paper will focus on these forms of disobedience.

### **How Disobedience is Managed in the Classroom**

Non-compliance and defiance are not trivial matters. These behaviours represent a major professional and personal challenge to teachers (Vinson, 2002). They are perceived as a threat to teacher authority and control in the classroom. Teacher efficacy, teacher stress, and job satisfaction are often determined by a teacher's level of success in managing such behaviour (Kyriacou, 2001; Wiley, 2000). Sadly, teachers have traditionally responded neither professionally nor competently when confronted with student disobedience and defiance.

Disobedience and defiance is most often met with rapidly escalating controlling behaviour, with demands for compliance, threats of punishment and ultimatums. These episodes are emotionally charged confrontations that can lead to hastily conceived, ill-conceived and

irrational teacher responses (Richmond, 2002). Students may in turn feel that the teacher is being unreasonable and even hostile in his or her actions. This may harden their resolve to stand firm and to resist what is being asked of them. The teacher and student become locked in a power struggle with neither party willing to give in. Inevitably the conflict is 'resolved', albeit temporarily, with the removal of the student from the classroom. Long-term damage to the relationship between the teacher and the offending student may result. More importantly, there is little in this approach to behaviour management that would suggest the situation would be any different if a similar incident were encountered in the future.

### **When Students are Sent to the Office**

Of concern too is what happens to students when they are referred. Many schools routinely report the referral to parents and often parents are required to attend a parent-teacher conference. Some students are referred for counselling, others have developed for them and are required to commit to a behaviour improvement plan or contract (Morrison, et al. 2001). But the most frequently reported disciplinary actions are detention and suspension (Morrison & Skiba, 2001; Townsend, 2000). In effect, suspensions act as a pressure valve for schools where discipline is a major problem. Individual teachers reach for that valve when they send students to the 'office' for misbehaviour.

Similarly, school administrators seek relief when their efforts to correct misbehaviour fail. They do this by removing troublesome students from school altogether (Gonczi, 2002).

### **Towards A Better Response to Student Misbehaviour**

Disciplinary referrals do not always result in suspension, but most behaviours resulting in suspension have their origins in the classroom and in one or more office referrals. The dramatic increase in the use of suspensions in countries such as Australia (Elliott, 2001; Gonczi, 2002) and in the United Kingdom (Vulliamy, 2000) strongly suggests that there exists for many students a cycle of disciplinary events, both at the classroom and broader school level which place them on a seemingly inevitable road to short-term suspension and in some cases permanent exclusion from school. At the heart of the problem here is the apparent inability of teachers and the school as a whole to divert the trajectory of many students towards the education system's ultimate sanction for misbehaviour.

Improvements at both the whole school and individual teacher level are needed if the goal of better behaviour management is to be achieved (Gottfredson, et al. 1993; Watkins & Wagner, 2000). This is not an idealistic or unattainable goal as is evidenced in the achievements of individual schools. The Vinson Inquiry into Public Education in New

South Wales, Australia found numerous schools where both office referrals and suspensions were reduced through strong principal leadership and concerted efforts to introduce multi-level, proactive behaviour management strategies (Vinson, 2002).

This paper focuses specifically on what individual teachers can do to more appropriately manage student behaviour in the classroom. Of particular interest are those student behaviours that are perceived as confronting by teachers, namely non-compliance and defiance, behaviours that are viewed as a personal affront and which challenge teachers' sense of authority and control in the classroom. It is these behaviours that often result in an office referral. A strategy to assist teachers faced with these situations is described and initial data on its effectiveness is reported.

## **Defensive Management**

### *Target Behaviours*

The Defensive Management strategy focuses on those behaviours, with the exception of physical aggression, which teachers find most troublesome in the classroom. These behaviours include disrespect in its various forms and disobedience, likewise in its various forms, ranging from mild forms of non-compliance through to open defiance. Students who exhibit these characteristics as a pattern of behaviour can be

described as angry, annoying, argumentative, impudent, disobedient, defiant, deceitful or vindictive. They can exhibit threatening behaviour, most often of a verbal nature, they regularly infringe classroom and school rules and they can destroy or deface school property (Brophy, 1996).

### *Underlying Principles*

Underlying the intervention described in this paper is the belief that teachers need to approach these types of problems in a very different way to what is their usual practice. The 'power struggle' scenario depicted earlier in this paper is riddled with self-defeating and unproductive forms of communication and aggressive managerial responses. These include a view of management that sees control and coercion as legitimate devices and where confrontation is an inevitable part of the management process. It also includes an assessment of the problem more from the heart than from the head, where challenging student behaviour is seen as personally insulting and where one's emotions dictate how one responds.

Defensive management is about avoiding coercive, aggressive, emotional and irrational responses to challenging behaviour. It is about avoiding situations where teacher-student confrontation and power struggles occur as a result of interpersonal conflict.

### *Analogy with Defensive Driving*

In many ways Defensive Management is akin to the concept and skill of ‘defensive driving’, hence the name. This analogy is used to help define, explain and situate the strategy for teachers in much the same way as analogies are used in teaching science concepts and developmental psychology (Mayo, 2001; Hulshof & Verloop, 2002).

In defensive driving the object is to teach drivers how to avoid accidents and consequences such as serious injury and death. To achieve this goal defensive driving classes emphasise (1) preplanning (e.g. taking an alternative route to avoid hazardous road conditions), (2) observation techniques (e.g. becoming more alert to potential problems), (3) driver attitudes (e.g. controlling anger when confronted with discourteous and/or careless drivers; assessing risks and making appropriate decisions), (4) driving skills (e.g. what to do in an emergency) and (5) avoiding accidents (e.g. maintaining space between vehicles; negotiating hazards) (Australian Academy of Sciences, 2002; Learn 2.com, Inc., 2001).

There are many parallels between defensive driving and behaviour management. Teachers also have an important goal to achieve, the goal of avoiding potentially unproductive and harmful clashes with students.

Teachers too, must pre-plan by assessing their teaching and managerial behaviour in order to identify and to avoid conditions that may trigger student misbehaviour. Pre-planning is aided by careful observation of classroom events and situations that have the potential to cause disruption. Teachers too must take charge of their emotions when confronted with the behaviour of students that might irritate them and cause them to act aggressively and recklessly. As with driving, behaviour management is very much a practical skill – responding quickly and automatically to a multitude of events both ordinary and extraordinary. Finally, defensive behaviour management is all about avoiding ‘collisions’ with students when such clashes can only result in damage and harm.

It is important to point out that avoidance here is a carefully considered strategy aimed at sidetracking interactions that can harm relations and undermine teaching and learning in the classroom. The teacher is not abdicating his or her responsibilities in the process and is not encouraged to be unassertive. Challenging behaviour is dealt with, the goal of redirecting student behaviour to more appropriate behaviour is still in place, but what is missing is coercion and rejection, typical responses to problem behaviour that have little history of success. Defensive drivers are confident in their skills and assertive in their approach to achieving their objective – getting from A to B safely. Teachers too, need to

acquire a similar level of confidence and assertiveness in the classroom if they too are to achieve their teaching and behaviour management objectives.

### *The Strategy*

Described in detail elsewhere (Fields, 2003) the strategy consists of six overlapping sets of teacher behaviours designed to detect, deflect and defuse non-compliance and defiance in its early stages, with the ultimate objective of avoiding power struggles with students and, where possible, referral to the office. The six stages are outlined below:

**1. Preparation .** The teacher observes and records when behavioural ‘incidents’ occur and their related instructional components e.g. group work, movement, transitions. These are replaced or modified to minimise the likely future occurrence of inappropriate behaviour.

**2. Positive Contact.** The teacher makes a planned pre-emptive positive contact with the problem behaviour student early in the lesson. The teacher seeks further opportunities for positive interactions during the course of the lesson and at all times responds politely and respectfully to the student.

**3. *Warning Signs.*** The teacher is alert to signs of disengagement or agitation that are known to be precursors to non-compliance or defiance e.g. complaints about the work, out of seat, interrupting other students and irritation at making errors or being corrected.

**4. *Emotional Control.*** The teacher becomes aware of and acts to control muscular tension (e.g. tightness), negative emotions (e.g. anger) and physiological symptoms (e.g. increase in heart rate) associated with challenging student behaviour.

**5. *Defuse.*** The teacher responds in a way designed to de-escalate exchanges involving disobedience, arguing, limit testing, the use of abusive language, threats, etc. Here the teacher draws on a repertoire of strategies such as hearing the student out, acknowledging feelings, partial agreement, keeping his/her distance, speaking calmly and politely, and not giving ultimatums to help defuse the situation and to avoid power struggles.

**6. *Re-connect.*** The teacher initiates a positive exchange with the student shortly after a behavioural incident and when the student has calmed down. The teacher encourages the student to engage in the formulation of a plan to limit the occurrence of similar incidents in the future.

### *Origins of Defensive Management*

The strategy owes its 'defensive' characteristic to earlier research on acting out and antisocial student behaviour by Walker, et al. (1995).

Walker and his colleagues showed teachers how it was possible to recognise behaviours and events that 'triggered' and sustained inappropriate behaviour and how it was possible to prevent the problem from escalating into a crisis. Their emphasis was on limiting provocative teacher prompts, using respectful language and remaining calm and in control.

Two key behaviour management concepts incorporated into the Defensive Management strategy were derived from Levin & Nolan's Hierarchy of Basic Corrective Management (Levin & Nolan, 2000). These researchers designed a sequence of strategies for dealing with mild to increasingly more severe forms of misbehaviour that ranged from the least intrusive to the most intrusive, and from the least to the most confronting. Teachers were taught to use, where appropriate, only those procedures that were minimally disruptive to the flow of the lesson and which involved as little teacher-student confrontation as possible. Teachers who adhered to these principles, it was argued, would be able to employ more strategies that gave students the opportunity to exercise

greater responsibility for and control over their own behaviour, a fundamental goal of discipline in schools and indeed education.

Missing from the ideas of Levin & Nolan and also Walker and his colleagues was a focus on teacher-student relationships and their role in developing positive and effective discipline in the classroom. Both school administrators and classroom teachers are becoming more aware of and in tune with educators such as William Glasser and Bill Rogers who see relations as central to teaching and behaviour management (Glasser, 1998; Rogers, 1998). Glasser reported that by the end of primary school more than fifty percent of students believe that teachers and principals are their adversaries (Glasser, 1998). Jones & Jones (2001) note that most student resistance to teacher directions occurs in classrooms where students report disliking their teacher. Going further Aspy & Roebuck (1977) state that students simply don't learn from teachers they don't like. The implication here is not that teachers should be striving to get students to like them, although this would be the ideal, but to foster and to maintain relationships that are generally positive and respectful. The challenge for teachers here is to 'like' students whom they find offensive. But this is exactly what is needed if teachers want to create a classroom environment where respect and cooperation is fostered.

To achieve the objective of establishing positive teacher-student interaction in the classroom, the Defensive Management strategy asks teachers to do three things. First, teachers must focus on the behaviour of concern, not the student, and not on annoying secondary behaviours that the student may exhibit as a defensive or face-saving device (Rogers, 1998). Second, teachers need to plan and systematically initiate a positive interaction with problem students early in their lessons in an effort to get their lessons started on a positive note. Subsequent positive initiatives by the teacher are designed to counterbalance the effect of negative exchanges that tend to characterise interactions with problem behaviour students. Finally, teachers need to carefully monitor the language they use with students and to choose words that convey politeness and respect for them.

Defensive Management is also about teachers taking charge of and controlling their emotions. Students who are rude, disrespectful and insolent naturally evoke strong emotions in their teachers. It is difficult for teachers not to take these affronts personally. While they may be considered natural, even normal responses, teachers need to be aware that their decision-making capacity and ability to respond rationally and appropriately at these times is impaired when their emotional reactions override or dominate rational thought and action (Richmond, 2002).

Wisniewski & Gargiulo (1997) found that teachers who were overly distressed by their encounters with behaviour problem students were less task-oriented, delivered less positive reinforcement and were erratic in their ability to focus on instructional tasks. These teachers were viewed by students as being less sensitive to the social, physical, and emotional needs of students. The findings of Wisniewski & Gargiulo (1997) were supported by Blasé (1986) who reported that when teachers experienced stress as a result of student misbehaviour, they react in a highly defensive, confrontational and authoritarian manner. The teachers in this study used strategies such as punishers, scolding, threats, active ignoring and, when these fail - office referral.

The Defensive Management approach to behaviour problems takes the view that knowledge of the potential negative effects of emotions on an individual's capacity to respond rationally and appropriately is itself a powerful motivator to get emotions under control. Emotional control is further facilitated by collegial support and the knowledge that other teachers face similar dilemmas. Collegial support is empowering when the focus is on ways of staying calm and in control. It is less productive though when it fixates on the problem student and the denigration of that student. Teachers can control their emotions and maximise their chances of making sound decisions by controlled breathing and muscle relaxation, by pausing before acting, by keeping verbal exchanges with

students brief, giving ‘cool off time’ and by postponing the exchange (“We’ll talk about this after the lesson”).

### **Strategy Effectiveness**

The Defensive Management strategy was first trialled with 30 final year secondary student teachers at a regional Australian university. A further trial was undertaken with 30 primary teachers who were completing postgraduate in-service studies at the same university. The primary teachers were drawn from a larger pool of teachers completing a course in Behaviour Management. The 30 selected teachers registered the highest number of reported disciplinary referrals in their previous five weeks of teaching.

In both trials two initial measures were taken. The first was an assessment of the subjects’ efficacy in classroom management using the Teacher Efficacy Scale (TES) (Emmer & Hickman, 1991). Based on Gibson & Dembo’s (1984) widely used scale for the measurement of teacher efficacy, the TES was designed as a measure of efficacy as it relates specifically to behaviour management. The TES consists of 36 items with a 6-point Likert-type response format ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Three distinct factors are measured by the scale: (1) Classroom Management/Discipline, (2) External Influences, and (3) Personal Teaching Efficacy.

The second measure involved asking the student teachers and primary teachers for the number of disciplinary referrals they had previously made. For the teachers this was capped for the previous five weeks. Disciplinary referrals for the student teachers were counted as office referrals to the head of department, year level coordinator or deputy principal and referral to the teacher of the class they were student teaching. In reporting the number of referrals the student teachers focused exclusively on their previous five-week practicum.

The Defensive Management strategy was introduced over a two-week period for the student teachers as one component of a thirteen-week course on behaviour management. The focus of that course was on introducing teacher trainees to a range of teacher directed, leadership and non-directive models of discipline using the Edwards (2000) text. The primary teachers received a print-based package of materials explaining the rationale for Defensive Management and how to implement it. Both groups were asked to use the strategy over a period of five weeks.

At the conclusion of each trial the participants were once again asked to complete the TES and to indicate the number of disciplinary referrals they made over their respective five-week periods. Both groups were

also asked to complete a questionnaire on their use of Defensive Management.

## **Results**

The results of both trials are summarised in Table I. The pre and post intervention behaviour management efficacy scores of the student teachers showed a marginal but non-significant improvement. The number of disciplinary referrals for this group dropped from a pre intervention mean of 1.57 to 1.20 for the practicum during which Defensive Management was implemented. This decrease was likewise not statistically significant. The results for the primary school teachers were more dramatic. Improvements in efficacy (4.07 to 4.31) and reductions in disciplinary referrals (3.97 to 3.00) were found for this group. Both results were statistically significant.

The student teachers registered lower overall ratings for ease of implementation of Defensive Management compared with the primary teachers. They found the Preparation, Warning Signs and Emotional Control stages particularly difficult. The primary teachers rated all the stages, with the exception of Emotional Control relatively easy to implement.

**TABLE I**

**Pre & post intervention efficacy & office referral results  
for student teachers & primary teachers**

Group	Mean Teacher Efficacy					Mean Office Referrals				
	Pre	S.D.	Post	S.D.	t	Pre	S.D.	Post	S.D.	t
Student Teachers (n = 30)	4.15	1.03	4.23	.54	1.176	1.57	1.14	1.20	1.18	1.249
Primary Teachers (n = 30)	4.07	.72	4.31	.52	2.791*	3.97	1.52	3.00	1.89	3.155*

\* Significance level = .01

**Discussion**

Student teachers are a particularly vulnerable group when it comes to discipline in the classroom. Student teachers are often not afforded teacher status by children, they are still learning how to teach and to manage students, and they are assigned classes where discipline patterns, good and bad, are well established and often difficult for them to influence in the short time they are at the school. Continuing the ‘driving’ analogy, these students are ‘driving’ (teaching) using a borrowed ‘vehicle’ (class). As student teachers they have, in essence, the same status as ‘learner drivers’.

Small improvements in efficacy from practicum to practicum can be considered a good result given the above difficulties. Interestingly, these

students did not need to resort to disciplinary referrals to any great extent during their pre intervention (initial) or intervention (second) experience of student teaching. This seems to indicate that during student teaching they are afforded some protection from episodes of non-compliance and defiance by the frequent presence of the class teacher in the room. The drop in the number of disciplinary referrals is nevertheless a positive result and is indicative of the students developing confidence and skill in managing discipline problems. It needs to be acknowledged though that the improvements made cannot solely be attributable to Defensive Management, as other learning is occurring during pre-service training as is, one would hope, an ever expanding knowledge and understanding of the teaching process.

The findings for the primary teachers were pleasing and indicative of a positive impact from exposure to Defensive Management. Interpreting the improvements is however, a major challenge. From other studies on the difficulties experienced by teachers in working with problem behaviour students, several reasons can be offered for the reductions in disciplinary referrals and the improvements in teacher efficacy. Firstly, Defensive Management provides an explanation to teachers for why non-compliance and defiance generate so much angst and why responding to such behaviour with punitive and controlling measures seems only to exacerbate the problem. Further, Defensive Management

seems to provide the right balance between a focus on student behaviour and on teacher behaviour and how both need to change. It is possible, probably likely, that Defensive Management expands teacher options when confronted with difficult managerial situations. A feature of many teachers who have poor behaviour management skills is that they seem to have fewer choices of strategies available to them when faced with non-compliance and defiance and more often than not those choices are coercive in nature. An expanded behaviour management repertoire increases the likelihood that a more appropriate option will be employed. It also adds immeasurably to a teacher's sense of confidence that they have the 'techniques' to can handle behavioural incidents when they occur. Finally, mention needs to be made of the use of analogy in describing and justifying Defensive Management. Too often programs that are promoted solely on the basis of compelling research evidence of their effectiveness fail to 'click' with teachers because such evidence does not provide a ready connection with the 'real world' either of the classroom or beyond. Analogies are a mechanism that can help teachers relate proposed developments in curriculum, pedagogy and discipline to their personal construct of the world around them as well as to the workings of the classroom and their interactions with students.

While the study reported here is small scale and exploratory, the finding that one group of teachers have shown the capacity to manage difficult

student behaviours without resorting to excessive use of office referrals, suggests that teachers have as yet untapped resources to address behaviour problems in the context in which they occur. This capacity is one critical element in the process of managing behaviour problems more constructively in schools and breaking the cycle of suspensions and exclusions.

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