SEL Essentials: Reimagining Our Discipline Practices

By Peter Brunn | Categories: SEL, Relationships, Classroom Community, Caring School Community, Thought Leadership, Remote Learning

A teacher I work with recently related the following story to me. Over the last few weeks of teaching virtually, she became frustrated with the behavior of one of her third-grade students.

On a few occasions, he simply logged off early, disappearing from the class and never returning. Other times, he would turn off his camera and mute himself during a time when the class had decided they would all be present with cameras on. At other times, he disrupted other students, muting and unmuting his voice and talking over them, or turning his camera on and off incessantly as other students were trying to share.

The teacher was frustrated, and she could see other students were frustrated, so one day she decided to make a breakout room and have a one-on-one conversation with the student.

Once they were in the room, she laid out the issues. She said it was not fair to the other students, and she herself felt upset when he would leave without explaining the reasons why. She said he could not remain in the class if this kind of behavior continued.

He defensively said fine, he did not want to be there anyway and was happy not to have to come to school.

They were now at a standoff. Both were quiet.

She eventually broke the silence, saying that they needed to meet with the principal and the student’s parents to discuss this. He said, “Fine.”

Silence again.

“You know”, she said finally, “we will miss you. I want you here, but this behavior can’t continue.”

More silence.

“Where are your parents right now?” she asked.

“My mom’s in Florida and my dad is on a run to the junkyard,” he replied. “It’s just me and my [sixth-grade] brother here now.”

She said nothing and just watched him.

He suddenly started crying. “I’m just so mad,” he said. “I hate this. I just want to go back to school like it used to be.”

She listened as he continued talking.

“I understand,” she finally replied when he seemed done. “I’ll bet you are feeling more than just upset. You also sound frustrated,
anxious, and sad.

“You know, you are not alone,” she continued. “Many of your classmates, myself included, are feeling that way. Online school sucks, but we are all trying to make the best of it. Can we start over again? Maybe when you start feeling those things you can let me know. You can take a break and we can talk. Can we try that instead of what has been going on? Maybe we can go back to the others and give it a shot?”

He smiled.

The two of them left the breakout room and rejoined the class. Since then, she has noticed most of his disruptive behaviors have subsided. He participates more and is clearly more engaged. They check in regularly.

The teacher told me this interaction was a powerful learning moment for her. It taught her that she can’t have a simple one-size-fits-all discipline plan for her students. She realized that she needs to be more flexible, listen better, and recognize that sometimes students’ behavior responses to classroom situations are not as straightforward as they seem. Students are experiencing many of the same feelings that adults are, but they don’t always have the language or confidence to share them.

**Discipline Is Not a New Challenge**

I relate this story because, while heartbreaking, it illuminates the significant challenge teachers have supporting students with their learning and development during this difficult time. Nothing is straightforward or simple, and many teachers are struggling with teaching, learning, and student behavior. As a recent op-ed in the *New York Times* (“The Inanity of Zoom School Suspensions,” September 4, 2020) and reporting in the *Washington Post* (“School discipline enters new realm with online learning,” September 15, 2020) illustrate, this teacher is not alone in her struggles. Discipline at a distance is a significant challenge for educators.

While my colleague’s story (and the experiences described in the referenced articles) occur in our current virtual context, it is critical to recognize that discipline is not a new issue. Schools are simply adapting the discipline practices and policies that were in place before the pandemic and applying them to the new virtual environment.

This decision is understandable in light of the time and pressure districts have been under to pivot to virtual learning, but we must do better. We must disrupt the status quo. Traditional discipline practices and policies are not working and have not been working for a long time.

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The truth is that our discipline practices have always been grossly inequitable, full of bias, and can actually be the cause of trauma in our students. By replicating exclusionary, punitive and inequitable practices, we continue the harmful caste system in our schools where our most underserved students are getting punished and excluded from teaching and learning, while our more privileged students continue to get rewarded.

**Why Discipline Is an SEL Essential**

In the first three blogs of our SEL Essentials series, we established that building deep and meaningful relationships with students is an SEL essential. Developing relationships lays the foundation for students to heal and reconnect while also being a key part of helping kids engage in meaningful learning. Knowing this, many schools have prioritized students’ social and emotional wellness at the beginning of the year.
Unfortunately, even as schools work hard to infuse SEL and relationship building into the school day, many have kept in place discipline policies and practices that undermine their efforts to connect with and support students. Many of the practices still in place often wind up eroding trust, damaging the relationship between student and teacher, and creating inequitable outcomes.

We have found that most writing about social-emotional learning tends to ignore or skirt the issue of discipline. However, given our belief that how we respond to student behavior is inherently connected to students' social and academic development, we believe it essential that we keep discipline connected to any conversation about social and emotional learning.

Another reason we want to dive into discipline is because many of the practices schools have in place are designed to ensure that adults manage student behavior, rather than helping kids learn to manage their own behavior. Most discipline systems are developed with an eye toward compliance. In practice, this manifests itself in the rewards students receive for following rules or in the stiff consequences or punishments administered for not following them.

Such a system of rewards and punishments is problematic for a couple of reasons, particularly for schools and districts that seek alignment between their SEL efforts and their discipline protocols.

First, in this scenario, the system, rather than the students themselves, manages behavior. In systems like this students are robbed of the opportunity to develop self-discipline, which we define as the building of self-control, conscience, and a sense of personal
responsibility. Second, as was referenced earlier, these rewards and punishments are often doled out in highly inequitable ways. They are neither fair nor just.

So while we recognize that right now might not be the easiest time to overhaul your discipline practices and that sometimes these decisions are not in teachers’ hands, we thought that a blog series on SEL essentials must include a practical look at our discipline practices. While certainly not exhaustive, this blog post provides a way teachers might rethink their practices in order to stop replicating the unjust and inequitable policies in place in many classrooms.

Three Steps for Reimagining Our Discipline Practices

Step One – Reflect on your teaching.

When I work with teachers, I explain that when I encounter issues with student behavior, the first place I look is in the mirror. Discipline is very often an instructional issue, not a behavior issue. While this may seem counterintuitive, I can tell you from my own experience that when a student struggled with their behavior in my class, I often found the solution for addressing it embedded in my own practice. More often than not, I was causing the problem, not the student.

To illustrate my point, I remember teaching first grade and noticing students were playing more than writing during independent writing time. When I took a step back and, instead of conferring with individual students, just watched them, I saw two things. First, when they were done with a piece of writing, they did not know that they could start a new piece. They were just waiting for me to come by or for the period to end. I also noticed that the paper they needed was not readily available. Finally, I noticed that when their pencil lead broke, they strolled to the pencil sharpener, taking way too much time to get there and then way too much time to get back to their seat.

After seeing this, I made three simple changes. First, I made a writing paper station right in the middle of the room that was easily accessible to everyone. Second, I made sure that each table had sharpened pencils in a cup so they could simply pull out a new pencil and put the dull or broken one in an empty cup. I then taught two lessons. One of them demonstrated how to go get paper when they were done with one piece of writing as well as how to take care of pencils when they needed one. The other lesson I taught was on what to do when they were done. We made a chart of options and over the next few days we practiced and talked about how it was going.

In a week, the class was humming, and the playing during writing time was greatly diminished. By asking questions of my own teaching, I illuminated issues in my lessons and classroom organization that, when addressed, eliminated many of the behavior mistakes students were making.

Identifying issues in our own teaching practices and pedagogy that may cause students to make behavior mistakes, and then setting an intention to make daily improvements in our teaching, is a proactive approach to discipline. It reduces stress and helps us craft better learning experiences for students.

When encountering issues with student behavior in your classroom, consider asking questions such as:

- How long was I talking? Was I asking the students to be passive for too long?
- Was the lesson itself too long?
- How much time were students on the carpet? Was that too long?
- Was my language and were my directions clear?
- Were materials organized and ready?
Reflecting on the lesson in this way helps me consider the learner’s perspective, which in turn alerts me to issues I might have missed when planning the lesson.

In our virtual classrooms, the mistakes students make with their behavior might look different from what they did when they were in the classroom (e.g. turning on and off the camera, leaving the lesson, muting or not muting, using chat inappropriately). But by reflecting on our lessons, we might discover that the root cause of the behavior lies in our lesson and teaching.

**Step Two – Eschew rewards and punishments. Instead take a teaching-and-learning approach to discipline.**

We all know that when we are trying to learn something challenging, we will make lots of mistakes. The learning happens when we make errors and then adjust our approach based on what we learned from making the errors.

Sometimes we only have to make a mistake once, and then we never make it again, but other times we need to make repeated mistakes in order to eventually master what we are struggling with. The number of mistakes often depends on how hard the task is for us and the type and amount of corrective feedback we receive and assimilate. This is true for musicians, athletes, students—for all of us. Mistakes are a fundamental necessity for learning.

When it comes to discipline, however, we rarely take this perspective. *We often see behavior mistakes as character flaws or as confirmation that some children are good while others are bad.* We tend to internalize student behavior mistakes as attacks on our good work and intentions.

It is critical to note, however, that teachers seldom approach mistakes students make with academic content this way. We don't yell at, reward, or punish students who get a math problem wrong. Instead, we start by analyzing their work and what they did. We ask questions to understand their thinking; we try to help them see where they made their mistake and how that led to their incorrect solution.

As a result of this work with a student, we might learn that we need to adjust our teaching and reteach the concept, or it might simply mean the student needs more practice. Either way, we take a teaching-and-learning approach to supporting the academic development of students. 

*We encourage you to adopt the same teaching-and-learning approach to students' social development.* Shifting to this stance empowers students to take responsibility for their behavior, fostering agency and autonomy.

You might try the following to shift your discipline stance:

- Reflect on the lesson to see the context of a behavior mistake (by asking the questions in Step One).
- Ask questions of students to inform your understanding of the reasons for the behavior mistake. Listen just like you would if they were explaining their solution to a math problem. (How were you feeling? Why were you feeling that? How do you think other students feel? What might have been a better solution? How might we go about repairing
By taking a teaching-and-learning approach to discipline, we can provide students with opportunities to learn from their behavior. Such a process fosters trust and allows us to contextualize the mistakes kids make as a part of learning rather than taking it as a personal attack or affront to us or our teaching. Depersonalizing mistakes allows both our students and us to learn and grow from them.

It is important to note that taking such an approach does not send the message that inappropriate behavior is acceptable. It simply shifts the person responsible for addressing the mistake. In a traditional discipline system, when students make behavior mistakes, the teacher is responsible for punishing them or administering consequences. In a teaching-and-learning model, the teacher guides students to address the issues themselves.

Step Three – Plan to be flexible.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for students who make mistakes with their behavior. Sometimes a gentle reminder is all one student needs and they rarely do it again. For other students, gentle reminders don't have the same effect, and they need other supports. In other instances, we learn that simple shifts in our teaching reduce the unwanted behavior to a tolerable level.

*Taking a teaching-and-learning approach to discipline requires flexibility and patience in how we respond to the mistakes students make.*

What is essential to note here is that *some students will simply make more mistakes than others.* Just like in academic content areas, some things come easier for some students than others. Sometimes addressing the behavior may require a shift in our teaching approach; other times it will just mean the students need more practice. Taking a teaching-and-learning approach to discipline requires flexibility and patience in how we respond to the mistakes students make.

Remember we all make mistakes—even adults. We have all been in faculty meetings where one teacher says something inappropriate to another. We have seen people leave meetings early, arrive late, and talk over one another. When this happens, our principals do not make us stay after school or write “I am sorry” 100 times. Our principal does not mute us during a video conference call or forbid us from attending future meetings. Likewise, when we treat each other kindly or do our work correctly, the principal doesn't throw a pizza party.

When we encounter problems, we talk to each other, we make amends, we try to be different. It is important that kids learn to do this as well. We want them to learn that mistakes happen. It is what you do *after* the mistake that ultimately matters.

In Conclusion

We know that many of you are struggling with all that you have on your plates right now. Teaching virtually seems to double the amount of work and stress we must manage. We hope, however, that this SEL Essentials blog series has given you some concrete ideas to think about as you tackle the enormous challenges you are facing.

Whether we are teaching in person or remotely, let’s remain open to new ways of delivering these essentials by building relationships,
listening closely, and being responsive to our students. Such insights will be invaluable as we navigate the weeks and months ahead.

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*In case you missed it, read the Introduction to this four-part blog series, SEL Essentials: Reimagining Our Social and Emotional Learning Priorities.*