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### **Care and Control: the group management perspective**

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## FEATURE ARTICLES

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EDITOR: PETER LANG

### Care and Control: the group management perspective.\*

CHRIS WATKINS AND PATSY WAGNER

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How can care and control be integrated in the best interests of the child? The first step is to recognise that the causes of indiscipline cannot simply be located within the individual pupil, we also have to consider the way the classroom and school are organised. Chris Watkins and Patsy Wagner stress the importance of effective group management and of understanding classroom situations as they actually are, developing on this they suggest that among other things, Pastoral Care is concerned with changing classroom practice.

#### Introduction

The theme of Care and Control is crucial to NAPCE and to us as teachers. In many schools considerable amounts of time and emotional energy are spent in an ill-advised way on "discipline" issues, and the pastoral systems end up severely distorted. Within this theme, our title is group management, which is of course a massive area. We have selected some of the ideas and practices we've been working on, in our present roles as Educational Psychologist and Pastoral Care course tutor, and as teachers who have worked with pupils whose effect on school has been disruptive. Most of these ideas may be found in a more developed form in our recently completed book whose title is one which neither of us imagined ourselves ever writing - 'School Discipline', subtitle; 'a whole-school practical approach'.

We would like to share with you some thoughts and practices in three main sections:

*First* some issues and problems in thinking about 'discipline' in schools, as ahead-in to the

*Second* section on Group management, of pupils in the classroom context and the important role for pastoral care and

*Third* on Group management, of teachers in the context of discussing an individual pupil and how this can be creatively handled.

Briefly, before moving into the first section, we want to say something about the title of this conference - '*Care or control: an educational dilemma*':

To polarise care *or* control and then to imply that we have a choice between them is an educational nonsense, indeed a cop-out. It's all too easy to say 'I care - they control'. Its part of the self image of some people in pastoral care to say this, and to portray themselves as the 'goodies' whose job it is to have nice chats with kids to make up for the nastiness elsewhere.

But it's false in many ways and can be insidious, since it is one ingredient amongst a number which may lead to polarising staff in school and perhaps to the marginalising of pastoral care (in a parallel fashion to how school counsellors can get themselves marginalised).

And for us it's got some other disturbing echoes of the stereotypes which exist in this society of females and males, of mothering and fathering. To *split* care and control has echoes of the split between mothering as care and fathering as control.

Whereas we would like to pose that the issue, for schools as well as for families, is *care and control*, and how to achieve an integration of these in the best interests of the developing child. Young people grow up with higher self esteem in an atmosphere which has both personal care and personal control. What's more, this is more likely to be achieved in a situation where care *and* control are shared, talked about, and balanced (whether it is a family or a school).

\* Based on a paper delivered to the NAPCE Annual Conference on Care and Control, Coventry, Easter 1987.

For us it is *care and control*, and integrating these which is the real educational challenge.

That said, we can now move on to the first main section, some thoughts about the notion of 'discipline' in schools and how it is understood, and this will serve as preparatory to the later sections.

## I

If you examine the way that discipline and indiscipline is talked about in British secondary schools, a number of things might strike you.

1. First that so little talking and thinking about it in concrete practical terms is done, given the apparent concern that is felt by teachers and others. Here we are not referring to staff-room talk at break-time, when the function served is that of letting off steam. Rather we are meaning organised occasions which bring about structured discussions of the patterns of problems which we feel in our schools.

This to us is perhaps a part of the wider phenomenon of little organised time being devoted to detailed talk about classroom processes and their success or otherwise.

2. A second thing which might strike you about the sort of talk you might hear, is how much it is characterised by a *locating of the cause of indiscipline inside the pupil*, and often generally outside of the school (for example in the over-used notion of pupils' home background).

On many occasions this serves to *dis-empower* teachers in terms of what they may subsequently do. If the cause of indiscipline is *the pupil* then you need some remedy which deals with that person (whether it is counselling, therapy, another school, whatever) and therefore you need to engage some other professional or agency who claims expertise in such things. Perhaps it will be the Educational Psychologist (most of whom are still going around with a view of discipline problems which over-individualises the matter) or someone else who works in some setting other than your school. The remedy is elsewhere.

When this is the major state of affairs, we think it is not only politically naive but also ethically highly dubious:

- it's politically naive to blame pupils all the time and thereby to regard school as an unquestionable good thing for everyone in its present form
- and it's ethically dubious to shovel the pupils off to have their personhood processed by counsellors

or whoever, if there is no equivalent attention given to other factors.

And, what is more, it is a shame, because all those other factors are what makes school discipline such a fascinating phenomenon - it encapsulates and highlights all the large and small issues to do with schooling.

But it doesn't do this on the occasions when a blinkered and perhaps defensive focus on individual pupils obscures the fact that *patterns* exist in pupils' behaviour in schools, and that patterns in indiscipline are no exception.

We suggest that these patterns are potentially our allies because they can be informative and illuminating about the aspects our schools aren't getting right. But what do we mean by patterns of this sort? Let us give a general outline:

'Indiscipline' in our schools tells us something about some interrelated features which are present: the cultural, the organisational, and the personal.

(a) *Cultural issues*, including the pupils' culture and especially the similarities and differences between this and the culture of the school. We must ask 'why is it that much disaffection and disruption in British secondary schools is associated with older adolescent working class boys?' The culture which they are in the process of producing for themselves is one which is seldom recognised in our organisation of schooling and learning. Therefore they end up seeing school as irrelevant to their purposes, and being seen as unable to achieve.

And where we work, why is it that some (not all) black Afro-Caribbean pupils are seen as disruptive and disinterested by schools who seem stuck with the notion that the *style* these pupils are elaborating implies that they are not interested in school success and what it might bring. In such schools these pupils' approach to their public image and public performance tends to be viewed as somehow 'anti-school'.

One could give further examples, but the general point is that the culture of school is sometimes too narrow or too rigid to accommodate some expressions of pupil culture without viewing them as indiscipline and signs of disinterest.

(b) *Organisational issues* of the school, large medium and small. Here we mean that everybody knows that some schools produce more disruption than others, which is not a feature of the pupil intake or neighbourhood, but of the school's organisation and climate. Schools with a hostile climate, a polarising ethos which values a few at the expense of many,

schools with an inflexible culture of rules, all generate more difficulty.

And of course the social messages of valuing or otherwise in the way the place is organised have similar effects – curriculum, teaching methods, grouping policies, management climate, and so on. But we won't say more here as it would no doubt be stepping on the area that others are addressing at this conference. Other than to add that a school which successfully communicates its coherence and purposefulness to diverse pupils is likely to minimise disruption. (We'll say more about organisational issues in the classroom in a minute.)

(c) *Personal issues* (mainly of pupils but sometimes of teachers) are shown up in school indiscipline.

Yes, the pupil who's being abused at home sometimes does attract our attention through the vehicle of being disruptive (sometimes). Yes the pupil who's anxious about their underachievement can mask it by being noisy and diversionary.

But examples such as these are not the bulk of the picture. And our interest in helping individual pupils such as these should not lead us into a general search for causes within individual pupils and their circumstances.

So let us reiterate that we shall become *more empowered* to change these patterns in our schools if we:

- (a) learn to recognise them, and
- (b) don't focus too much on individuals

To do this will not necessarily be simple or straightforward, as there are many processes which keep us focussing on individuals:

- our language
- the processes of blame which operate in schools
- the sort of individualised psychology which is prevalent in some quarters, most of which has clear roots either in turn-of-the-century Freudian notions, or individualistic behaviourist views of human beings.

But to become more empowered we need to *recognise* and *gather data* on patterns underlying indiscipline.

Pastoral Care has in our view under-emphasised the organisational level of analysis and so when it comes to the phenomenon of discipline, it has not had enough to say about teaching methods, curriculum organisation, and so on. These are the ingredients out of which pastoral care's contribution to minimising unnecessary disruption is made in the medium and long term. And if they are not there, pastoral

care slips back into the short-term fire-fighting style with too much of a focus on highly visible individuals.

So we need to develop simple mechanisms for *monitoring* and talking about the patterns, for example, in disruptive episodes throughout the school or in referrals to Heads of Year, to on-site units if you have them, to welfare network agencies, Special Schools if you have them and so on. These need open discussion as do the patterns in disruption across years, sexes, subjects, so-called 'ability groups', and so on. Their explanation should start with features of the school.

And a further major plank in our strategy for which we can develop simple practices, is *gathering data across different situations*.

This is important because it gets us away from simple views of individuals, and collects powerful information. We recognize that everybody's behaviour varies in a patterned way across the situations they find themselves in. It is true for you – look at you now: your behaviour in this situation is different to that in a workshop or in a bar (but not the same difference for all of you). It is true for us – we promise not to talk this much again. It is true for pupils in school – their behaviour varies in a patterned way across situations, and in particular across the lessons they find themselves in. And that's equally true for pupils who disrupt some situations. *There's no pupil who's disruptive in all situations* and finding out more about these patterns is something we will refer to again later.

So before moving on to the next section, do you agree? Can you describe any of the patterns of indiscipline which you've noted in your school? Either cultural or organisational patterns. Or patterns across situations. What is your pastoral system doing to examine such patterns?

## II

Our second chunk is about *group management*. The group management of pupils in classrooms. And here we aim to argue three things:

1. why a focus on groups is so important in classrooms
2. how we think of teachers' skills in this area
3. what pastoral care can do to effect change

It is very important when understanding pupils' behaviour in classrooms to start off from an understanding of the *context* we are talking about – the classroom. Because the understandings we have of groupwork will be different in this context from our understandings of groupwork in other contexts

such as group counselling, or work with other groups. Understanding the classroom *situation* is too seldom addressed – people focus rather too quickly on teacher or pupils.

We would like to offer five simple statements to characterise some important things about classrooms. There are not meant to be contentious but they do lead to important implications for the teacher's role. Classrooms are a unique and very complex environment for these sorts of reasons.

1. *Classrooms are busy places.* Teachers can be engaged in 1,000 interactions a day. It is very difficult to name a comparable job on this dimension. One result of this for the teacher can, of course, be tiredness, especially for the beginner teacher, or even stress. This feature also draws to our attention the fact that because events happen fast teachers learn to act fast: their appraisal and decision-making in classrooms is rapid. Even so, every event cannot be reflected on in depth, so the development of *routines* is another feature of classroom life which helps cope with the busy-ness of the situation. From a pure 'education' viewpoint some routines may embody poor practice for the sake of pupil learning, but the classroom situation makes such demands. If teachers do not typically reflect in significant depth on the pupil's perspective in classrooms, we should expect their professional reflections to take place at less busy times outside the classroom, unless special strategies can be devised to create time for this purpose in class.

For the pupils in this busy environment it is apparent (and confirmed by numerous classroom interaction studies) that the amount of individual attention they receive with the teacher in a day is likely to be only a few minutes and probably highly interrupted. The way in which we make sense of learning in classrooms must take this into account by not implying that pupils learn when interacting with teachers. Pupils have to get used to being one of many, especially when it comes to adult attention, and this can demand extra skills of being able to wait.

2. *Classrooms are public places.* This statement is meant in two ways. First, classrooms are public in the general sense that many people have a view or opinion on classrooms and how they ought to operate. Second, classrooms are public in that a teacher's and a pupil's behaviour is generally highly visible to all the other members in the event.

The implication of the first for the teacher is that s/he can be thought of as at the centre of a number of people's expectations – parents, colleagues, head, local authority, central government and, of course,

pupils. In the unlikely event that these various expectations are in broad agreement with each other the teacher will probably feel strongly supported in her/his job. It is more likely that disagreements exist and the teacher feels in a state of role strain. Resolving role strain can be accomplished in a number of ways, each with its own costs and benefits – a classic has been the strategy of isolating role performance from view by the conflicting parties: the classroom as a castle, with paper over the windows to the corridor.

The implication of the second sense of publicness are various: teachers may feel that they are on stage to some degree, teachers may act toward one pupil with the intention of affecting others in the audience, but mainly teachers adopt a focus toward groups of pupils (whole class or less). This group focus grows out of the imbalance in numbers in the classroom and also serves to cope with the busy-ness of the situation.

The publicness of classrooms means that pupils experience much public evaluation of their work and behaviour and they adopt a variety of strategies in the face of this (strategies to work out what answer teacher wants, strategies to assess whether teacher is being fair in her/his evaluations, and so on). Some studies suggest that teachers give public evaluations of pupils every few minutes. A final feature of this publicness of classrooms is that pupils experience being treated as a member of a group which is not always of their choosing and in turn may adopt a group approach toward affecting others (including on occasion their teacher).

3. *Classroom events are multidimensional.* This statement reminds us that there are a wide variety of different purposes, interests and goals represented by the different personnel in a classroom. Teaching and learning are but one dimension, the appointed aspect, of the events and processes. The social and personal aspects of pupils, the livelihood and personal aspects of teachers set off multiple reverberations with each other and with the appointed task. Even when we focus on the learning dimension alone, the statement still applies. The classroom contains a multiplicity of information sources (books, worksheets, displays, other visuals, as well as all the verbal and non-verbal behaviour of teachers and pupils), and these sources generally do not all refer to the same thing. Indeed, as well as being incompatible, the information in a classroom is also not consistent, even when it comes to deciding what learning task is required. A problematic environment!

For the teacher an implication is that they need to manage events on a multiplicity of dimensions: knowing subject, appraising students, managing

classroom groups, coping with emotional responses to events, establishing procedures, distributing resources, keeping records and so on. With these tasks all affecting each other the result may feel overwhelming on occasion (most likely if they are seen as 'interfering' with a superordinate interest in managing subject matter).

For pupils this multidimensional environment means that on the occasion when they intend to engage in academic work they need to display considerable skills in selecting what is salient information and what is not, especially when attempting to identify the demands of a task. (These are not usually the skills which are referred to when identifying academic achievement).

4. *Classroom events are simultaneous.* The multiple tasks and dimensions in the classroom do not occur in a step-by-step fashion but simultaneously, especially from the teacher's point of view. While one pupil is immersed in activity, another is just finishing, a third requires some help. Teachers attend to numerous aspects at the same time: the pace of work, the sequencing of pupil contributions, the distribution of pupils attended to, the accuracy of pupil contributions, the development of the argument, and so on, while at the same time monitoring work involvement levels, other pupil behaviours and external events.

This has at least two implications for teachers. First, it is important to exercise the skill (at least apparently) of being able to monitor more than one aspect at once. This is sometimes characterised as the 'eyes in the back of the head' phenomenon. Second, it follows that teachers may exercise a choice as to which aspect to respond to and which to ignore. The style of operation of this choice can have critical effects and can make the difference between a 'smooth' teaching performance which gives rise to a purposeful climate, and a 'lumpy' performance where the teacher seems controlled by events and appears to be 'chopping and changing'.

For the pupils the simultaneity of classroom events is not such a salient phenomenon since they may not intend to have a perspective on the whole situation and its events. However, the fact that it is salient for teachers can be exploited very effectively by those waiting for teacher's back to turn.

5. *Classroom events are unpredictable.* This statement draws attention to the fact that in such a busy multidimensional environment it is not possible to be in a position of predicting the course of events with a fine degree of accuracy. It reminds us of two sorts of phenomena in classrooms. The first is the considerable disruptive effect of interruptions, either external (the window cleaner, the snowstorm) or

internal (the projector breakdown, the Tannoy announcement). The second is the importance which teachers give to being able to predict, for example, pupils' responses to work, pacing of work, other aspects of pupil behaviour. Further, the importance of establishing routines in classroom life can be seen as one attempt to bring predictability to the situation and to reduce the ambiguity.

This statement has power for the pupil's perspective too. It is possible to note a variety of strategies which pupils may adopt to reduce the ambiguity of some academic tasks, for example, asking the teacher to be very specific in what is expected, using strategies for divining what answer the teacher wants to the question, and opting for low-risk predictable tasks when choice is given.

Finally, it is possible to see both teachers and pupils attempting to make each other more predictable through the process of categorising, labelling and stereotyping. This becomes understandable in some ways when we see it in the context of a busy, multidimensional, unpredictable situation – the classroom. In that context it is perhaps less than surprising that people adopt partial and limited views of each other. But it does not follow that these views will necessarily maintain elsewhere, for example, on the part of teachers discussing their pupils during a meeting. And it will be even less likely that the stereotypes generated in the classroom will maintain if pupils and teachers meet and get to know each other in a wider range of contexts (in school, on residential experiences, in the community, at home).

Now the main point we're making from this is that of how we view the teacher in all this.

1. We can see what a complex job teaching is
2. We can see that the task of the teacher is to manage a unique and complex environment in the service of learning. So that rather than fall into simple typifications of various teacher types and teacher styles, the challenge for each one of us is how to manage the classroom situation and the demands it generates.

If we take this one step further it is possible to talk about the skills of the teacher in this way.

**SKILLS OF THE TEACHER are those of:**

- managing the physical setting (layout, seating, resources, etc)
- managing the social structure (groupings, working patterns, etc)

(cont. overleaf)

### SKILLS OF THE TEACHER (cont.)

- managing activities, and the psychological setting of the classroom
  - handling the timing and pacing, developing effective routines
  - giving a personal and a public performance with a focus on group participation
  - having an awareness of the multiple dimensions of classroom life
  - managing more than one event at the same time, ignoring as appropriate
  - recognising and tolerating the unpredictable nature of classroom life

Now we would like to suggest that a number of important implications follow from this approach:

1. The central skill of the teacher is *planning group activities*, including the social structure, the timing, and more. This is the case for *all* teachers even though research suggests that many teachers only plan one activity per lesson.
2. These skills can be enumerated rather than mystified. You may not exactly agree with this particular list, but we are in favour of it as an antidote to those who seem to suggest that it is some mystical set of indefinable quantities which characterises the good teacher or the person who manages groups in classrooms.
3. The most effective element in reducing general classroom disruption is the teacher's skill in planning activities. Research has demonstrated this for decades, for example the work of Kounin 20 years ago. So we remember that it is not what a teacher does *after* a difficulty arises that is important in minimising disruption, it is what the teacher does *beforehand*, in the activities planned, and so on. It follows from this that we do not need to get into all this response-led talk about 'what do you do if a pupil does this?' (and even though it may be topical, we don't need to spend our time on speculating what happens if you get rid of the cane). Similarly, we don't need to spend hours on over-formalised systems of rewards and sanctions (which incidentally are rarely adhered to). What we do need is good classroom activity.

#### *What Does This Mean for Pastoral Care?*

First it means we have to be good at understanding classrooms and understanding methods of teaching and learning. Perhaps pastoral care has under-emphasised these in the past.

Second it means we don't write off colleagues as ineffective types or whatever negative label is

around, such as the 'inappropriate personality'. Rather, we have a more detailed and practical analysis to offer and we try to find ways of offering it.

So third we have to be involved in changing classroom practice and this is no simple task.

It takes time (colleagues who have been teaching for the average amount of time in the profession today have had millions of rehearsals with the teaching methods they currently employ)

It takes sensitivity

It needs to be done gradually

It is not achieved through a process of some enthusiasts crusading around with funny groupwork methods

It focusses on the teachers' planning and their indirect control of the classroom environment

This way we envisage pastoral care being involved in supportive work with teachers. It may perhaps involve joining them in classrooms. It will be needing to support good observation of classroom processes. And certainly it will involve pressing for the resources needed to run useful in-school workshops on classroom management/group management. These will be voluntary, sensitive to the climate of evaluation, and cumulative over time, with a focus on skills and practices, sharing what is successful and building on strengths. Obviously a negotiated agenda with an atmosphere of active investigation and valuing of a variety of perspectives is what we would encourage.

In this way we might contribute toward getting away from over-personalised views of the teacher in their classroom. (By the way, have you noticed that what we are advocating bears considerable similarity to the process we advocate in groupwork with pupils? We are sure you have).

In concluding this second section, we wonder if you agree with us that this might be some part of a way for pastoral care to support teachers' planning of group activities in their classroom? And we wonder whether your pastoral system takes on this task.

### III

Our third chunk is perhaps one you weren't expecting but is very important if the approach of pastoral care is to change, and it is an area where we find some colleagues in pastoral care are hesitant.

It is group management again, but this time of *groups of teachers*. And here we will apparently go outside of our brief for a moment to set the context. In a school that *has* got mechanisms for looking at patterns of indiscipline, that *has* got supportive

arrangements for the development of classroom practices, you may well quite rightly find the pastoral team considering an individual pupil.

On these occasions we want to argue that:

1. It is important to have a structure for getting some detail on what is going on
2. It is *most important* to gather such data *across the range of situations* which that pupil meets, i.e. across the lessons with their respective teachers
3. Organising group meetings of those teachers with the aim of finding new strategies is an important part of the pastoral task which demands some particular group management thoughts.

From the outset, the sort of structure you use for collecting information from the group of subject teachers is important, as it embodies your assumptions about pupils and their behaviour.

A set like this can often be useful (as you all see in our book Patsy manages to get away with calling these 'diagnostic behaviour questions').

**A. WHAT does s/he do that causes concern?**

This question encourages people to be specific and to get away from simple labelling. It can set off the process of investigation (and sometimes even change).

**B. What precipitates this behaviour apparently? (and what does NOT?)**

This question may identify a 'trigger' on some but not all occasions. The most crucial differences can be those which exist across situations, and which may also be identified by considering the question:

**C. Which other pupils are involved, and what are their apparent expectations?**

Peers are often but not always important: they may encourage, discourage, ignore, but the different grouping of pupils across the different situations of the secondary school is often important

**D. What does s/he seem to gain by behaving this way?**

Perhaps a reputation? perhaps some security? perhaps rejection by peers and subsequent connection to an adult?

**E. What strategies do you find effective?**

This information is important to gather from colleagues, and to feed in to joint problem-solving in the group

**F. What else do you think may be relevant in reaching some understanding of this pupil's behaviour?**

Now with a structure like this, getting colleagues to fill in their information, their perspective and collecting it together on a single summary sheet is an important precursor to a group meeting of teachers.

If we now turn to consider that sort of meeting it is important to have a clear view that the aim is:

**to explore**

- variability in the pattern of behaviour across situations
- possible understandings of the pupil's behaviour
- strategies for change

(and to have set up some experiments by the end). It is also important to remember that an important and creative process in such meetings is achieved by maintaining the sorts of questions you asked of colleagues in the first place.

**key areas are:**

- the events/pupils/interactions which seem to set off the behaviour which causes concern
- the involvement and expectations of other pupils, and possible reputation effects
- the view of self that the pupil is presenting
- the apparent function of the behaviour
- the apparent gain for the pupil from this behaviour

Now we sometimes find that colleagues in pastoral systems in school are hesitant about running such meetings. They might say, 'Oh if we get all Nigel's teachers together they would spend the time moaning'. So we can anticipate a few issues where the leader of the meeting is important, and which that leader could well anticipate before such meetings:

**Managing a Group Meeting of Teachers**

- explicitly set a positive and constructive purpose to the meeting
- keep to the key areas
- don't expect everyone to express themselves positively
- expect to encourage some colleagues to participate and contribute

(cont. overleaf)



### Managing a Group Meeting of Teachers (cont.)

- keep to (and reiterate) the stated purpose of the meeting
- don't expect or look for complete consensus
- develop minimum intervention strategies
- set a review date

### So, to Conclude

We believe that pastoral care does have a positive role to play in school discipline. It is a long-term and medium-term role rather than a short term 'working on pupils'. It involves curriculum and classroom. And fundamentally it requires that pastoral care gets its management act together (monitoring, reviewing, problem-solving).

We believe that pastoral care needs to do this FAST. Because we are continually hearing people who say, 'Oh pastoral care's a bit tacked on for discipline' and, in a climate where people are looking for

savings, when we hear local authority people saying this we get worried.

Because it is *plain to see* that the Head of Year with a line of supposedly naughty kids outside his/her office is a distortion and a waste of money. A big part of us wouldn't mind seeing it go.

But we want those roles there for something more creative. We think it really is an educational challenge worth tackling.

We hope you do too.

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