

The Rise & Fall of a Machiavellian Teacher

Emergence of a “Machiavellian Teacher”

When I began my teaching career eleven years ago, my first position was in a rural school and came only four weeks after graduating from the teacher education program. I was placed in a multigrade classroom known by many substitutes as “the class no one wants to sub in.” I found myself focusing a great portion of the first two months on establishing clear expectations in behaviour and work habits, with little professional training in classroom management and discipline.

While my own teacher education experience recalls a considerable amount of concentration placed on what to teach and how to teach it, there was a lack of emphasis on teaching how to create the proper conditions in order to teach. Examples of “how do you deal with...?” or “what do you do when...?” were brought up during practicum experiences, but these hypothetical scenarios were merely introduced in the context of making sure lessons were completed according to lesson plans. Little attention was given to the nature of misbehaviours or strategies to use to help students make meaningful changes to their behaviour.

Moreover, little direction was given to behaviours teachers should exhibit when confronted with severe behavioural incidents. Garrahy, Cothran, and Kulinna’s (2005) article, *Voices from the trenches: An exploration of teachers’ management knowledge*, examined 20 elementary teachers’ perspectives on their knowledge of classroom management and determined that “learning to manage one’s classroom is an ongoing, developmental process influenced by personal and contextual forces” (p. 60). Does this mean that new teachers are resigned to develop management strategies only once they have entered the profession? That only through continued experience can they hope to establish effective classroom management and discipline practices? The authors concede that it is unclear whether undergraduate teaching programs do not address management techniques or whether new educators were not able to interpret such information before entering the classroom. Nevertheless, it can be argued that teacher education programs could do more to prepare new educators for eventual classroom discipline issues.

I entered my first class, therefore, as I believe many new teachers do, without the necessary preparation in developing an effective classroom management and discipline system. I believe that teachers, having no real formal training in discipline programs or theory, are left to create a management style that mirrors the experiences they had from their teachers, who seemed to be effective in maintaining order and control in their classrooms. Add to this the values and

discipline styles experienced from parents or other authority figures and you have new teachers creating a classroom management system that may not reflect the classroom setting or their own philosophy of education. Is this the reason why classroom management remains such an elusive and popular topic today? Alfie Kohn (1996) mentions that due to teachers' dissatisfaction with classroom management systems there is an insatiable hunger for new discipline programs and a need to reexamine how we "manage" children in the classroom. In the situation I found myself, I felt I needed to manage students as a dictatorial authoritarian, a "Machiavellian Teacher", someone who was feared rather than loved. This seemed to work in the chaotic setting of my first placement.

Changing the "Machiavellian Teacher"

Years later, when confronted with a class in an inner-city school that was unresponsive to the coercive tactics that, until then, were quite successful, I quickly realized that the "Machiavellian" mentality would be ineffective and that I had to re-evaluate my classroom discipline techniques. I came across a management system called the Honor Level System (HLS) created by Discipline by Design (www.honorlevel.com). The program was a result of more than two decades of development to initially meet the needs of schools in western Washington. It is a school-wide management system that provides for both forward and backward movement to various behavior stages and clearly outlines criteria necessary in order to reach the next desired behavior level. Schoolwide management systems such as HLS encourage students to behave by exacting more consequences as students fail to adhere to pre-established rules. My adaptation of the HLS clearly informed students what would happen, step-by-step, if classroom expectations were not adhered to. Previous punishments by the Machiavellian teacher were sporadic and, in hindsight, were not implemented consistently or fairly causing some students to resent and distrust me. With the HLS, students could not readily argue with why they were receiving a punishment because expectations were so clearly outlined throughout the year.

The curriculum and ethics courses offered during my graduate studies allowed me to reflect on my philosophy of education and, indirectly, on my philosophy of discipline as well. In order for any educator to develop a useful classroom management system, I believe he needs to clearly articulate his philosophy of discipline. What is it designed to do – improve the behaviour of students in class or maintain order and a "learning" environment as the teacher sees fit? I learned there must be a balance between the needs of the teacher and those of the students. But which take precedent and at what time? Can balance be achieved? I was satisfied with my classroom-adapted version of HLS for a time, but I came to the conclusion that the system neither focused on improving students nor helping them construct a different picture of why they should behave appropriately.

Students were following the rules, but there was no binding philosophy serving to improve the relationship between myself and the students I was teaching. In addition, “honor” was too vague a term for eleven and twelve year-olds to comprehend. Trust, however, is more easily identified because character traits such as responsibility, reliability, honesty, and self-discipline are related to trust and mirror the character traits promoted in most classrooms today. The motivation for further change, therefore, occurred as I began to reflect more on my own philosophy of education and discipline.

Being the “Machiavellian Teacher” may be an easier way to manage a classroom, but in the end, it undermines the philosophy of teaching and discipline I believe many educators share. If I wanted to help create meaningful change in the way students behave, more opportunities for reflection and relationship building, rather than consequences, were needed. As early forms of the new Trust Level System (TLS) helped establish the environment for learning and teaching, I could now reflect on how the system could move from a method of compliance to one that allows students to reflect on their behaviour and whether it is conducive to the student-shared values of the classroom. Thus, having an effective intervention system allowed me time to reflect on the conflict between allowing teachers the opportunity to put an immediate end to offensive and disruptive behaviour, while simultaneously developing a process where students can reflect on their behaviours and make meaningful changes to meet the needs that cause their misbehaviours. The TLS became my new discipline system.

Given the amount of positive feedback received from principals, teachers, learning assistance teachers and teachers-on-call these past fourteen months, I believe there is a need for alternative discipline programs in school districts. The Trust Level System is an attempt to provide a flexible, versatile, effective, and systematic means of helping teachers intervene and record student misbehaviours in the classroom. The TLS provides teachers with tools that will bring structure and effective change to an area of teaching that easily influences the learning and teaching environment. Yet the structure is not rigid. It can be adapted to a teacher’s personality, style, and philosophy of discipline. But I urge teachers to reflect on their philosophies and use the system to help influence a desire for meaningful change in students’ behaviour and in the way teachers discipline - moving from a Machiavellian-style of behaviour management to one that inspires dignity, reflection, and trust.

- Dennis Staginnus