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Module 18: Classroom discipline

► Unit One: What is discipline?

Discussion task

Brainstorm and definition

The phrase 'classroom discipline' has for most teachers an immediate and clear meaning, but it is in fact quite a complex concept, and hard to define in words. One way into such a definition is to start by brainstorming all the ideas that seem to you to be comprised in it: 'control' for example, or 'rules'.

Try brainstorming a list of such words for yourself, or in your group, and then look at the one shown in Box 18.1. Add to the latter whatever items you think I have missed, delete any you think irrelevant; finally put a circle round the ones you think most basic and essential. Using these, you may now find it easier to formulate a satisfactory definition.

You may be interested in comparing your definition with that given in a dictionary, or with my own as suggested in the Notes, (1).

Optional follow-up study

There are, of course, more subtle and interesting distinctions to be discovered within the concept of 'discipline'. Try discussing the distinctions between the following pairs:

1. 'control' v. 'discipline';
2. 'authoritarian' v. 'authoritative';
3. 'power' v. 'authority'.

Simplified versions of the distinctions between the above pairs of concepts appear in the Notes, (2). For more detailed and careful discussion see: Wilson, 1971: 77-80; Widdowson, 1987: 83-8; Peters, 1966: 237-47.

BOX 18.1: THE CONCEPT OF DISCIPLINE

control	contract	(ground) rules
agree	accept	responsibility
rewards	routine	punishments
respect	smooth	behaviour
norms	power	authority
obey	consistent	authoritative
authoritarian	efficient	cooperation

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► Unit Two: What does a disciplined classroom look like?

Task Examining assumptions

Stage 1: Assessing

Imagine an ideally disciplined classroom. Then have a look at the set of statements in Box 18.2. Put a double plus (++) by statements which seem to you to describe a characteristic which is always typical of the disciplined classroom, and a single one by those which describe a characteristic which is fairly typical but not inevitable. Where you think the characteristic is entirely irrelevant or not very important, put a double or single minus (-); and a question mark where you feel uncertain. You may, of course, make any other combinations you like, or note reservations in the margin.

Stage 2: Rethinking

Read the *Comments* section below, and share ideas with colleagues. Would you, as a result of reading and discussion, alter any of your responses? My own opinions are given in the Notes, (3).

BOX 18.2: POSSIBLE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISCIPLINED CLASSROOM

1. Learning is taking place.
2. It is quiet.
3. The teacher is in control.
4. Teacher and students are cooperating smoothly.
5. Students are motivated.
6. The lesson is proceeding according to plan.
7. Teacher and students are aiming for the same objective.
8. The teacher has natural charismatic 'authority'.

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Comments

1. The question of the relationship between discipline and learning in a lesson is a crucial one. It seems fairly clear that in a disciplined classroom it is easier to activate students in the way the teachers want, and that time will be probably spent on-task, rather than wasted on organizational problems or disruptive behaviour. However, I have seen well-disciplined classes in which little or no learning was taking place, simply because the activities had themselves little learning value: see, for example the first scenario described in Box 2.2, on page 25, and the following comments. Thus, the existence of a disciplined classroom does not, in itself, necessarily imply that learning is taking place. There is, certainly, a link between the two: but it is not a consistent or inevitable one. (Note, however, that the converse is more likely to be consistently true: that is, that little or no learning will take place in a thoroughly undisciplined atmosphere.)

What does a disciplined classroom look like?

2. It is easy to claim that this criterion is irrelevant: what about well-disciplined classes where noisy pair or group work is going on?

But there are other relevant questions which might lead you to a different conclusion. For example: pair and group work involving noisy talk take up only a part of lesson time – what about the rest? Or: imagine yourself walking down the corridor of a school and listening at the door of each classroom. Half are noisy, half are quiet. If you had to guess which were the more disciplined ones, what would you say? I would go for the quiet ones (unless I knew that all the teachers used interactive group work at least half the time!).

- A further argument: disciplined classes may or may not be quiet; undisciplined ones are usually noisy. There is, therefore, arguably some positive correlation between quietness and the level of discipline.
3. The fact that a teacher is in control of proceedings does not necessarily mean that he or she is standing in front of the class telling everyone what to do. The initiative may have been handed over to the students to do what they decide in a particular activity: nevertheless, it was the teacher who took and implemented the decision that there should be such a handover of initiative, and who may, at any point, take it back. However democratic the setup, the underlying responsibility for the control of any disciplined classroom has to be, surely, in the hands of the teacher: how authoritarian or liberal, rigid or flexible he or she is in the operation of this control is another question.
4. Smooth-running process is the main outward manifestation of discipline in the classroom, as it is in any other organization; and there has to be cooperation of participants in order to produce this. It must be noted however, that cooperation between students, or between students and teacher, is not necessarily either willing or democratic: it may well be a result of coercion or fear. There are all sorts of ways of bringing it about: you will have your own ideas about what methods are ethically, educationally, personally or practically acceptable and which are not.
5. Can you imagine a class of unmotivated students which is disciplined? Or a class of motivated students which is undisciplined? My answer to both of these is yes: which means that the correlation between the two is not absolute. The association is one of probability: if the class is motivated to learn, it is more likely to be easy to manage.
6. Again, we have here a case of probability rather than inevitable cause and effect. A lesson which is going according to plan is more likely to be disciplined: the teacher knows where he or she is going, activities are well prepared and organized; and the awareness that the process is clearly planned tends to boost teacher confidence and student trust, which in their turn also contribute to discipline. On the other hand, changes and improvisations do not necessarily lead to indiscipline, and may even prevent it.
7. Students may be quite unaware of the objective of the lesson, and yet be amenable to the control of the teacher, and the class as a whole disciplined. On the other hand, if they actually have and wish to implement opposing objectives of their own – for example, they want to discuss something in their own language when the teacher wants them to do so in the target language – the result may well be chaos, unless they can be persuaded to forgo their own objectives, and do as they are asked. The latter is what in fact happens in many classrooms, especially with younger or adolescent learners in schools.

A shared knowledge of and agreement on lesson objectives is not, therefore, absolutely necessary for a disciplined classroom, but it probably contributes to it, by raising motivation and the likelihood of cooperation.

8. There is no doubt, in my opinion, that there exists such a quality as charismatic 'authority'; that some teachers possess it while others do not; and that the possessors of this quality find it much easier to control classes. The good news is that the classes of teachers who do not possess natural 'authority' (and I speak as one such myself!) can be equally disciplined: we just have to work at it harder.

▷ Unit Three: What teacher action is conducive to a disciplined classroom?

Factors that contribute to classroom discipline

The idea that some teachers have a kind of natural 'authority', as suggested at the end of the previous unit, is not very helpful to the rest of us: what may be helpful is a study of the kind of teacher behaviours that are available to anyone and that are likely to produce a state of discipline in the classroom. These are not limited to classroom management skills, such as knowing how to organize the beginning of a lesson, or how to get students to raise their hands instead of shouting out answers. The choice of an appropriate methodology, for example, is likely to ensure that students feel they are learning in a way that is 'right' and useful for them, and they will therefore be more willing to cooperate. The fostering of interpersonal relationships – feelings of respect and goodwill between individuals – is obviously another important factor. Then there is the question of good planning: a carefully and clearly organized lesson makes for purposeful and orderly process. Finally, student motivation is extremely important, and can be enhanced by teacher action: the more interesting and motivating the learning activity, the more likely it is that students will be cooperative and stay on-task.

To recap: some important factors that contribute to classroom discipline and are potentially within the control of, or influenced by, the teacher are:

- classroom management
- methodology
- interpersonal relationships
- lesson planning
- student motivation.

Question

Have a look at the hints for teachers in Box 18.3. Can you pick out at least one example that has to do with each of the above?

Task Practical hints

Stage 1: Prioritizing

Read through the list of practical hints in Box 18.3, and decide which, for

What teacher action is conducive to a disciplined classroom?

you, are the ten most important. You may, of course, add any you feel are missing.

Stage 2: Discussion

If you are working in a group, compare your answers with those of other participants and try to come to a consensus on the 'top ten'. If you are working alone find, if possible, an experienced teacher to compare notes with; and/or look at the following section, which gives some comments. My own selection appears in the Notes, (4).

BOX 18.3: PRACTICAL HINTS FOR TEACHERS ON CLASSROOM DISCIPLINE

1. Start by being firm with students: you can relax later.
2. Get silence before you start speaking to the class.
3. Know and use the students' names.
4. Prepare lessons thoroughly and structure them firmly.
5. Be mobile: walk around the class.
6. Start the lesson with a 'bang' and sustain interest and curiosity.
7. Speak clearly.
8. Make sure your instructions are clear.
9. Have extra material prepared (e.g. to cope with slower/faster-working students).
10. Look at the class when speaking, and learn how to 'scan'.
11. Make work appropriate (to pupils' age, ability, cultural background).
12. Develop an effective questioning technique.
13. Develop the art of timing your lesson to fit the available period.
14. Vary your teaching techniques.
15. Anticipate discipline problems and act quickly.
16. Avoid confrontations.
17. Clarify fixed rules and standards, and be consistent in applying them.
18. Show yourself as supporter and helper to the students.
19. Don't patronize students, treat them with respect.
20. Use humour constructively.
21. Choose topics and tasks that will activate students.
22. Be warm and friendly to the students.

Adapted from Wragg (1981:22)

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Comments

The original list on which this version is based was derived from the responses of student teachers when asked which hints from experienced teachers they had found most useful. The order of items 1–20 is the same as that in the original, and represents the respondents' overall order of importance. In other words, the most useful hint, for most people, was 'Start by being firm...'; the least useful 'Use humour constructively'.

I added Item 21 (the activation value of tasks) as particularly relevant to language teaching, and worth discussing. I would not, however, include it in my top ten. It is necessary to be fairly rigorous here in your thinking: activation of students (particularly in an activity involving talk and/or physical movement) is

certainly important for learning, but it is a double-edged weapon for classroom discipline as such. It may get students involved and thoroughly cooperative on the one hand, but can over-enliven and unsettle them on the other. (However, we might sometimes consider it justifiable to risk a little unsettling for the sake of the learning!)

Item 22 (which also did not appear in the original) is a misleadingly attractive one: teacher warmth and friendliness, while undoubtedly a positive attribute in itself from other points of view, makes no direct contribution to classroom discipline, and may in some circumstances detract from it.

The next step: learner self-discipline

Although the immediate responsibility for the maintenance of classroom discipline in most situations is the teacher's, the ultimate goal is to reach the point where learners take on or at least share this responsibility. The ability to self-discipline is to some extent a function of the maturity of the learner, but can be fostered by the teacher. The way to do this is not simply to try to hand over responsibility to the learners for running the lesson – this teaches little, and can be disastrous – but first to get them used to the 'feel' of orderly classroom process, then gradually to begin to share decision-making based on this.

► Unit Four: Dealing with discipline problems

Like the previous unit, this one deals with practical recommendations, but this time the focus is on the prevention and treatment of discipline problems as they arise in class, rather than, as up to now, on the creation of a disciplined atmosphere in the first place.

Below is some advice in the form of directions on how to deal with deviant student behaviour in class. These are based on my own experience as a teacher who had to learn the hard way how to teach unruly classes of adolescents in a foreign country. I hope you find them useful: try as you read to recall classroom events in your own experience, as learner or teacher, which are relevant to the different topics.

In spite of the prescriptive tone, do not treat these directions as any kind of objective 'truth'! They should be regarded as one possible expression of classroom realities, which can be tested against your own experience and may furnish a starting-point from which you may develop strategies that work for you.

Before the problem arises

The teachers who are most successful in maintaining discipline in class are not those who are good at dealing with problems, but those who know how to prevent their arising in the first place. I suggest three main preventative strategies:

Dealing with discipline problems

1. Careful planning

When a lesson is clearly planned and organized there is likely to be a constant momentum and a feeling of purpose, which keep students' attention on the task in hand (or in anticipation of the next) and does not allow the formation of a 'vacuum' which may be filled by distracting or counterproductive activity. Moreover, the awareness that everything is planned and you know where you are going contributes a great deal to your own confidence, and to your ability to win the trust of the students.

2. Clear instructions

Problems sometimes arise due to student uncertainty about what they are supposed to be doing. Instructions, though they take up a very small proportion of lesson time, are crucial. The necessary information needs to be communicated clearly and quickly, courteously but assertively: this is precisely what the task involves, these are possible options, those are not (see Module 1: *Presentations and explanations*, Unit Three). This is not incompatible with the existence of student-teacher negotiation about what to do: but too much hesitation and mind-changing can distract and bore students, with obvious implications for discipline.

3. Keep in touch

You need to be constantly aware of what is going on in all quarters of the classroom, keeping your eyes and ears open: as if you have sensitive antennae, or a revolving radar dish constantly on the alert, ready to pick up 'blips'. This achieves two things: first, students know you are aware of them all the time which encourages participation and personal contact on the one hand, and discourages deviant activity on the other; second, you yourself are able to detect a student's incipient loss of interest or distraction and do something about it before it has become problematic.

When the problem is beginning

Inexperienced teachers tend to ignore minor problems, in the hope that they will go away by themselves. Occasionally they do; but more often they simply escalate. In principle, it is advisable to respond immediately and actively to any incipient problem you detect.

1. Deal with it quietly

The best action is a quiet but clear-cut response that stops the deviant activity, keeping the latter as low-profile as possible. For example: if a student has not opened his or her book in response to an instruction from you, it is better quietly to go up to them and open the book yourself than draw the attention of the whole class by a reprimand or loud, repeated instruction. Over-assertive reactions can lead to the very escalation you wish to avoid.

2. Don't take things personally

This is a difficult instruction to obey sometimes, but an important one. Inexperienced teachers of adolescents are often upset by remarks that were not intended personally; or allow incidents of unpleasant conflict to rankle long

after the student has forgotten they ever happened. Try to relate to the problem, not the student, as the object to be attacked and dealt with. A more difficult piece of advice: even if you are quite sure the criticism was meant personally, do your best to relate to it as if it was not: don't let the student pull you into personal conflict.

3. Don't use threats

Threats are often a sign of weakness; use the formula 'if you...then...' only as a real, factual option that you are ready to put into practice, not as a weapon to make an impression or intimidate.

When the problem has exploded

The priority here is to act quickly in order to get the class to revert to smooth routine as fast as possible. Often it is preferable to take a decision, even if not a very good one, fast, than to hesitate or do nothing.

1. Explode yourself

Often a swift, loud command will do the trick, with a display of anger: provided, of course, that you do not really lose your temper or become personally aggressive! The trouble with displaying anger is that you cannot do it too often, or it loses its effect.

2. Give in

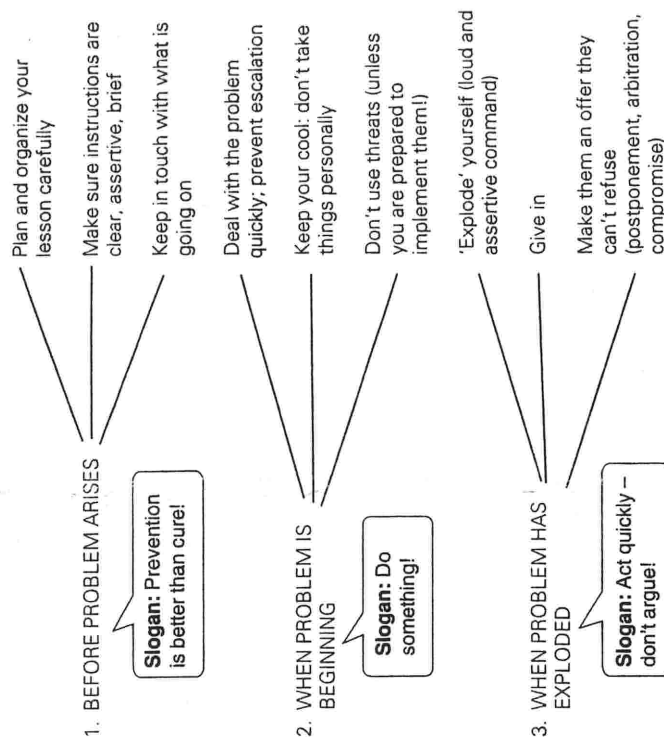
For example, if students refuse to do homework you might say, 'All right, don't'. This is a perfectly respectable option, which is unfortunately shunned by many teachers who feel they risk loss of face. Its advantage is that it immediately defuses the situation, and if done quickly and decisively, will not be seen as dishonourable surrender! It also puts you in a position to fairly demand something from them in return! But again, it cannot be used too often, for obvious reasons.

3. Make them an offer they can't refuse

If they are pushing you into a confrontation, and you cannot give in but do not wish to impose your will by getting over-assertive – look for a way of diverting or sidestepping the crisis. Some strategies are: postponement ('Let's come back to this tomorrow at the beginning of the day. Now, to get back to...'); or compromise ('I'll tell you what: you have to do all the assignments, but I'll give you extra time to finish them...'); or arbitration ('Let's discuss this with the class teacher, and accept his or her decision...').

The above guidelines are summarized in Box 18.4.

BOX 18.4: ADVICE ON DEALING WITH DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS



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Unit Five: Discipline problems: episodes

In this unit you are asked to apply your own expertise or knowledge of the subject of classroom discipline to critical analysis of actual classroom incidents. It is, of course, far easier to criticize and recommend when it is someone else's problem, and when you have plenty of time to consider and weigh alternatives than it is to take the right decisions when you yourself are involved in a real-time classroom crisis! Nevertheless, vicarious experience and decision-making like this has its uses for professional thinking, and is an interesting exercise in itself.

Task Analysing episodes

Read through the descriptions of episodes shown in Box 18.5. Deal with them in any order that you like and think about or discuss the following questions:

- What caused the problem?
- What could the teacher have done to prevent it arising?
- Once it had arisen, what would you advise the teacher to do?

My own comments follow.

Comments

Episode 1

The causes of this were, possibly, that the book is indeed boring, coupled with Terry's wish to disrupt, challenge, or simply take a break from routine. Apart from choosing a different text, it is difficult to see how the teacher could have foreseen or prevented the incident. Now the priority is to neutralize the challenge and get the class back on task. I would say something like: 'Yes, we do have to do this book; we'll discuss whether it's boring later' – and get someone else to go on reading. I would, however, as promised, discuss the book later with the class or with Terry himself, and devote some thought to the selection of the next text.

Episode 2

This situation is a very common one, rooted in lack of firm and consistent rules in the classroom, or the teacher's failure to insist on them: the result is that a number of students are getting little or no learning value from the lesson. The teacher should have insisted on quiet and attention from the start, and stopped each murmur as it began. Possibly she is afraid of losing popularity: her reproaches when they occur, lack 'attack', are rapidly disregarded, and the result is that constant inattention and chat is tacitly accepted as the norm.

To reverse the situation when it has got as far as this is extremely difficult. It may be necessary to hold a serious discussion with the class, agree with them on explicit new ground rules and then insist strictly on their implementation from then on.

Episode 3

Here, the incident was caused by the teacher's over-lengthy explanation, the child's impatience, and the failure of the teacher to pick up and stop the disturbance when it started. Most people's intuitive reaction would be to reprimand John; but probably a more effective response would be to use the silence to instruct the class firmly to start work on the worksheet, promising to deal with any further problems in response to raised hands. Once the class is working, the teacher could go to John, make it clear that his behaviour is unacceptable, but that the incident is now over and he should be working. A further word or two with him after the lesson may make it less likely that he will repeat the behaviour.

Episode 4

The immediate cause of this incident, given the confident and cheeky character of members of the class, was the teacher's mistake in getting into an argument with one boy in the middle of an organizational routine involving all the class – an argument which escalated rapidly into a full-class disturbance. He should have finished distributing and collecting books and dealt with the notebook

BOX 18.5: EPISODES: DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS

Episode 1

The teacher of a mixed class of thirteen-year-olds is working through a class reader in an English lesson. He asks Terry to read out a passage. 'Do we have to do this book?' says Terry. 'It's boring.' Some members of the class smile, one says 'I like it', others are silent awaiting the teacher's reaction.

(from E. C. Wragg, *Class Management and Control*, Macmillan, 1981, p. 12)

Episode 2

The teacher is explaining a story. Many of the students are inattentive, and there is a murmur of quiet talk between them. The teacher disregards the noise and speaks to those who are listening. Finally she reproaches, in a gentle and sympathetic way, one student who is talking particularly noticeably. The student stops talking for a minute or two, then carries on. This happens once or twice more, with different students. The teacher does not get angry, and continues to explain, trying (with only partial success) to draw students' attention through occasional questions.

(adapted from Sarah Reinhorn-Lurie, Unpublished research project on classroom discipline, Oranim School of Education, Haifa, 1992)

Episode 3

The teacher has prepared a worksheet and is explaining how to do it. He has extended his explanation to the point where John, having lost interest in the teacher's words, begins to tap a ruler on his desk. At first the tapping is occasional and not too noticeable, but John begins to tap more frequently and more noisily, building up to a final climax when he hits the table with a very loud bang. The class, startled by the noise, falls silent, and looks at both John and the teacher to see what will happen.

(adapted from E. C. Wragg, *Class Management and Control*, Macmillan, 1981, p. 18)

Episode 4

The teacher begins by giving out classroom books and collecting homework books.

Teacher (to one of the boys): This book's very thin.

Boy 1: Yeah, 'tis, isn't it.

Teacher: Why?

Boy 1: I've been drawing in it.

Boy 2: He's been using it for toilet paper, sir.

(Uproar)

(adapted from E. C. Wragg, (ed.) *Classroom Teaching Skills*, Croom Helm, 1984, p. 32)

Episode 5

The students have been asked to interview each other for homework and write reports. In this lesson they are asked to read aloud their reports. A few students refuse to do so. The teacher tells these students to stand up before the class and be interviewed by them. They stand up, but do not relate to the questions seriously: answer facetiously, or in their mother tongue, or not at all. The teacher eventually sends them back to their places, and goes on to the next planned activity, a textbook exercise.

(adapted from Sarah Reinhorn-Lurie, Unpublished research project on classroom discipline, Oranim School of Education, Haifa, 1992)

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problem later, privately. Now that there is uproar, he should immediately abandon the individual problem, and devote his efforts to regaining order and finishing the book collection and distribution as quickly as possible. The problem of the mutilated notebook may be taken up again after the lesson with the boy alone.

Episode 5

The cause of this was the lack of authority of the teacher (her inability to demand and get student obedience), and the mistaken tactic of allowing obviously undisciplined students, in a group, to take over centre-stage. What I usually do if students do not want to read aloud something they have written is take it and read it aloud myself: they accept this because I can make it sound much better than they can, and my main objective (displaying students' work to each other) is gained.

Given the very uncomfortable situation of students actually making fun of a teacher-directed learning task, the reaction of stopping it and going on to the next bit of the lesson was the right one, although late. Certainly, however, the teacher should talk to the students later, one at a time, in order to make it clear that this behaviour was unacceptable and to try to prevent a recurrence.

Notes

(1) Defining classroom discipline

A possible definition: Classroom discipline is a state in which both teacher and learners accept and consistently observe a set of rules about behaviour in the classroom whose function is to facilitate smooth and efficient teaching and learning in a lesson.

(2) Distinctions between pairs of concepts

'Control' is imposed from above by an authority who is invested with superior influence; 'discipline' is accepted by participants in the activity of studying as an essential and integral part of that study (compare the use of the term 'discipline' to denote an area of study such as philosophy or science).

'Authoritarian' describes a teacher whose authority derives from some exterior empowering agent, or who is 'bossy'; 'authoritative' describes one who is obeyed because he or she is trusted to know best about the subject of study and how to learn it (hence the phrase 'to be an authority on...').

'Power' is the sheer ability to impose one's will on others, through physical coercion, or other forms of pressure; whereas 'authority' is the demand for cooperation and obedience that is accepted because it is rooted in a law, social order or accepted value system.

(3) Possible characteristics of classroom discipline

My responses would be as follows. Where I have found it difficult to make a clear decision, symbols in brackets indicate possible alternative choices.

1. Learning is taking place. +(?)
2. It is quiet. +
3. The teacher is in control. ++
4. Teacher and students are cooperating smoothly. ++
5. Students are motivated. ?(+)
6. The lesson is proceeding according to plan. +(?)
7. Teacher and students are aiming for the same objective. ?(+)
8. The teacher has natural charismatic 'authority'. ?(+)

My reasons are discussed in the *Comments* section within the unit.

(4) Practical hints for classroom discipline

My chosen 'top ten' would be: 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 15, 17, 19.

Further reading

- Charles, C. M. (1992) *Building Classroom Discipline* (4th edn.), New York: Longman.
- (Practical and readable, written for trainee or practising teachers; a summary of various models of classroom discipline and guidelines for practical application)
- Cohen, L. and Manion, L. (1977) *A Guide to Teaching Practice*, London: Macmillan.
- (A valuable practical guide to all aspects of school teaching)
- Kounin, J. S. (1970) *Discipline and Group Management in Classrooms*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- (An analysis of various aspects of discipline, some interesting and useful perspectives)
- MacLennan, S. (1987) 'Integrating lesson planning and class management', *ELT Journal*, 41, 3, 193-7.
- (On alternating lively and quiet activities in the lesson process)
- Peters, R. S. (1966) *Ethics and Education*, London: George Allen and Unwin.
- (Philosophical analysis of various aspects of education; see particularly Part Three: 'Education and social control')
- Underwood, M. (1987) *Effective Classroom Management*, London: Longman.
- (Not just on discipline, but on a variety of aspects of classroom management and lesson planning: practical and comprehensive)
- Widdowson, H. G. (1987) 'The roles of teacher and learner', *ELT Journal*, 41, 2, 83-8.
- (An analysis of the different roles of the teacher as authority, and resulting interaction between teacher and learner)
- Wilson, P. S. (1971) *Interest and Discipline in Education*, London: Routledge.
- (A philosophical discussion of the two concepts: see particularly the analysis of discipline versus control, pp. 77-80, quoted in Wragg, 1984)

- Wragg, E. C. (ed.) (1984) *Classroom Teaching Skills*, London and Sydney: Croom Helm.
(A collection of research-based articles on various aspects of school classroom teaching; see particularly Chapters 2, 3 and 7)
- Wragg, E. C. (1981) *Class Management and Control*, London: Macmillan.
(A slim booklet of highly practical and accessible information, tasks and background reading)