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DOCUMENTS AND DEBATES

Assertive Discipline and the 1997 Education White Paper: a reply to Rigoni and Walford

Richard Melling and Jeremy Swinson

Introduction

Rigoni and Walford (1998) are highly critical of the endorsement within the White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (DFEE 1997a) of a continuing professional development programme known as Assertive Discipline (Canter and Canter 1992) which originated in the USA. Attention is drawn in the White Paper to our own study of Liverpool schools (Swinson and Melling 1995) which reported the very positive effects that could be found in classrooms following the training of British teachers. Subsequently Assertive Discipline was mentioned in the Green Paper *Excellence for all Children* (DFEE 1997b) and is specifically identified for central funding in circular 13/97 'The Standards Fund 1998/99'. Clearly this represents considerable support from the present government.

Rigoni and Walford are unconvinced of the merit of this endorsement. They are critical of the programme itself, suggest that the Government have failed to listen to those who have reservations about the programme, are critical of our research and cite this as an example of... 'the ways in which research literature is often ignored by policy-makers'. They also argue that this... 'indicates the need for a thorough and more sophisticated understanding of the potential relationships between research and practice'.

Our views are exactly the opposite. We would argue that the Government has chosen to support an approach which is not only well received in schools but also has a considerable research tradition to which it can refer. We feel that Rigoni and Walford's concerns regarding the nature of Assertive Discipline are unfounded and that the evidence they provide to support their view is at best anecdotal.

The research base for Assertive Discipline

Rigoni and Walford argue that the research base for Assertive Discipline is very limited and imply that it is restricted to three studies, all of which have taken place in Liverpool using novice observers and all of which failed to take into account a possible 'Hawthorn' effect. In doing this they are overlooking the sophisticated video analysis of fifteen classes in the Midlands and Southern England carried out by Nichols and

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Houghton (1995), the effects of Assertive Discipline training in twelve Surrey schools reported by Wood, Hodges and Aljunied (1996), and American studies such as Allen (1983), McCormick (1985) and Ward (1983).

Their suggestion that Assertive Discipline is likely to produce only short-lived benefit is undermined by Squires (1997) and by Squires and Swinson (in press) who have found a persistent effect apparent in schools some four years after Assertive Discipline training had taken place.

It seems to us that Rigoni and Walford's criticisms to some extent misrepresent Assertive Discipline by giving the impression that it depends largely on sanctions. Assertive Discipline is not a sanctions-based system; the emphasis is very much on encouraging appropriate behaviour through positive reinforcement. However, a key characteristic of the approach is that any sanctions system should be mild, published in advance in hierarchical form and applied consistently. The importance of sanctions being systematic, consistent and therefore predictable rather than severe has been established for many years (see Topping 1983: Chapter 20).

Rigoni and Walford are correct in stating that Assertive Discipline is part of a tradition of applied behaviourism. However, they fail to acknowledge that this is probably the most thoroughly researched of any approach to pupil management and certainly the only one to be convincingly supported by empirical evidence, e.g. Madsen *et al.* (1968), Presland (1978), Merret (1981) and Merret and Houghton (1989).

Rigoni and Walford feel that policy makers often ignore the research literature. Whether by accident or design it seems to us that with regard to behaviour in schools the government's policy is in fact entirely justifiable in the light of almost all the available objective evidence.

The criticism of Assertive Discipline

Rigoni and Walford cite several papers from both sides of the Atlantic which have been critical of Assertive Discipline. In general these papers are strong on opinion and weak on evidence.

It is argued that 'a discipline plan designed to control the rule-breaking fifteen percent [of pupils] can cause the already compliant majority to wilt and the few out of control students to explode'. The evidence put forward to support this claim is a quote from a parent who felt that her child's fear of sanctions in Kindergarten was so great 'that she stopped participating in class'. We find it surprising that Rigoni and Walford have failed to apply the same level of scrutiny to this evidence of difficulties with Assertive Discipline as they applied to our own data. Leaving aside the fact that Canter and Canter (1992) do not claim that Assertive Discipline is appropriate for nursery children and the obvious difficulties in interpreting an anecdotal, single case report, one wonders why this 'wilting majority' should be less fearful in classrooms where the teacher's use of sanctions is relatively unpredictable.

To characterize the Assertive Discipline classroom as an environment in which a mere error of social judgement automatically triggers an irksome or possibly substantial sanction would be a bizarre caricature of the actuality. Teachers trained in Assertive Discipline are in fact encouraged to use continuous positive feedback to motivate children and to apply even the mildest of sanctions only after the child has been given a clear and adequate warning that the behaviour in question is not accepta-

ble. We are not surprised that Rigoni and Walford make no reference to any empirical evidence of the 'wilting majority' referred to by Curwin and Mendler (1984) since our own search of the relevant literature has yet to reveal any data of this type. We also note the absence of any evidence supporting the claim that 'out of control' students 'explode' as a result of experiencing a behaviourist management style.

A somewhat more interesting criticism levelled at Assertive Discipline is that it is 'coercive and encourages compliance to arbitrary power rather than personal educational and ethical development'. However, again we are left wondering why the Assertive Discipline classroom finds itself in the dock rather than compulsory education in its entirety. If Rigoni and Walford are arguing against enforcing school attendance then we can understand their doubts concerning Assertive Discipline since, on this basis, it might be conceptualized as being part of a whole edifice of oppression. Our own impression is that this is not being implied and that Rigoni and Walford are unconcerned that children have little choice as to whether they attend school. Perhaps what is being suggested is that coercion at that level is acceptable provided all rules and management decisions within the school are made entirely democratically. It is not clear whether they are prepared to go that far, but in any case, this would still leave the problem of individual freedom once the majority had democratically elected to pursue certain norms of social behaviour. Is it acceptable to be noisy when most of the children want to listen to the teacher? What should happen if an individual fails to change his/her own noncompliance even after listening to the rational arguments of the majority? Perhaps the children themselves would want to create explicit rules, some systematic sanctions and a means of acknowledging cooperation. They may even want to call it Assertive Discipline!

Of course without a significant period of experimentation with truly democratic schooling we cannot be sure. However, the evidence we do have strongly suggests that secondary school pupils actually approve of teachers who take firm control of lessons and prevent uncooperative behaviour disrupting the planned learning experiences (Swinson 1990, Raymond 1987).

We would agree with Rigoni and Walford that Assertive Discipline has little to say about 'personal educational and ethical development' other than being clear that it is not meant to be in any way a substitute for an appropriate and adequately resourced curriculum. On the other hand, there is nothing within the Assertive Discipline management style that in any way undermines existing personal and social educational programmes or in any way reduces the teacher's opportunities to demonstrate ethical interpersonal behaviour. Indeed, it seems to us that Canter and Canter (1992) actually encourage teachers to discuss problems openly and directly with individuals at the appropriate time and to seek conflict resolution rather than escalation.

Conclusion

In our view Assertive Discipline is potentially an extremely beneficial style of pupil management which can greatly improve pupil performance when it is carefully introduced by adequately trained teachers. It achieves these improvements largely as a result of teachers becoming much more positive in their interactions with pupils. Consequently, negative feedback to pupils in the form of admonishments and 'telling-off' are reduced and more time is spent on work. Our surveys of both teachers and the pupils themselves show that both enjoy working in classrooms that are run

on Assertive Discipline lines. Furthermore recent evidence (Squires 1997, Squires and Swinson in press) has shown that far from being a 'quick-fix', Assertive Discipline can remain effective even four years after initial training.

In our opinion the Assertive Discipline model is not 'antithetical to progressive personal and social education'. It does encourage teachers to critically reflect upon their classroom practice and it also encourages teachers, students and parents to listen to one another and to work together to find solutions to classroom discipline problems.

We find ourselves strongly in agreement with one aspect of the Rigoni and Walford article which is contained in the last sentence:

We would like to see Labour policy that is based more on research evidence and an informed debate.

In our view that is exactly what has begun to happen. The Government has been influenced by the growing body of evidence based on classroom observations which points to the beneficial effects of training teachers in the Assertive Discipline programme. We have no doubt that the Government is aware that Assertive Discipline has its critics but clearly it considers their criticisms to be misplaced. It would seem that ministers are more impressed with hard evidence of improved behaviour gathered directly from schools and classrooms than by speculation based largely on a preference for somewhat nebulous alternatives which as yet have no empirical support. Rigoni and Walford call for an 'informed debate' and we submit this paper in that spirit.

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