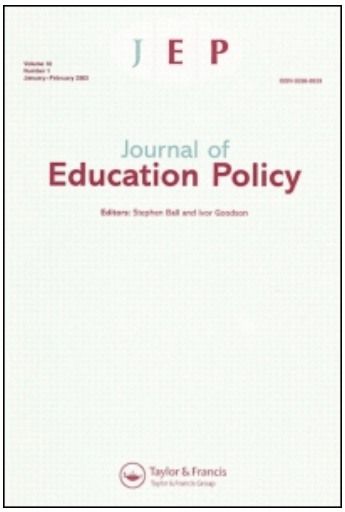

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Questioning the quick fix: assertive discipline and the 1991 Education White Paper

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DOCUMENTS AND DEBATES

Questioning the quick fix: assertive discipline and the 1997 Education White Paper

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Introduction

The 1997 Government White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE 1997) presents the new British Labour Government's proposed legislative framework for education. It is a major and multi-faceted policy document which outlines their overall approach to education and puts forward specific proposals in areas as diverse as base-line assessment, class size, parental support, training for new teachers and new types of school. Unusually, the White Paper invites comments and provides a list of questions for consultation to which answers are requested. There are also several areas where additional more detailed consultation is being undertaken.

This article focuses on one small aspect of the proposals: those recommending the use of assertive discipline. However, while only occupying just over a half a page of an 84-page document, the implementation of these proposals could be to the severe detriment of many children's quality of life and personal development. Further, the official Government endorsement of assertive discipline also illuminates the ways in which research literature is often ignored by policy makers and indicates the need for

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a thorough and more sophisticated understanding of the potential relationships between research and practice.

Government endorsement

Within Chapter 6 of *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE 1997), sections 13 to 16 are concerned with 'improving discipline'. Section 13 briefly argues that good discipline depends on a partnership between the school and the home. Section 14 refers back to the 1997 Education Act passed under the last Conservative Government. This Bill had been highly controversial containing, amongst others, measures to make academic selection easier, and to extend the Assisted Places Scheme. Many of the proposed clauses had to be abandoned owing to lack of time before the impending General Election in May 1997. However, the heavily truncated 1997 Education Act retained many of the original proposals on 'School discipline' as it was supported by the then Labour Opposition. Apart from a ritualistic attempt by the Conservative Right to reintroduce corporal punishment, these was little real debate on these clauses. Thus, Sections 2 and 3 of the 1997 Education Act require LEA and grant-maintained schools respectively to ensure that the governing body prepares a written statement of general principles, within which the head must then draw up, and publicize to pupils, parents and staff, measures to be taken on behaviour and discipline. Section 14 of the White Paper states that the Government will be consulting on detailed new guidance on these matters, but adds:

> This will emphasise the need for every school to have a clear behaviour policy which sets out the boundaries of what is acceptable, the hierarchy of sanctions, arrangements for their consistent application, and a linked system of rewards for good behaviour.

Section 15 enlarges on this theme:

> In particular, we shall ensure wider knowledge of the benefits which schools have gained from the careful introduction of 'assertive discipline'. This involves the whole school in a concerted effort to improve and maintain discipline through a clearly understood behaviour framework, emphasising positive encouragement as well as clear sanctions.

This is then followed by an 'information box' which explains that Liverpool LEA started to encourage its schools to introduce assertive discipline (AD) in 1992 and that it was now used in over 50 of the authority's schools. It outlines three 'essential components' of the AD technique as:

- clear unambiguous rules;
- continuous positive feedback when pupils are successfully keeping to these rules;
- a recognized hierarchy of sanctions which are consistently applied when the rules are broken.

The 'information box' then gave a brief highly positive account of an evaluation of AD in some of Liverpool's schools that had been conducted in 1995.

The White Paper thus presents a glowing endorsement of a particular technique and appears to believe that its benefits are incontrovertible. This is far from the case, for AD has been the subject of continued debate in the USA and Britain since its inception. Although it may be appropriate for some children, at least in the short

term, its application to the wider population of schools and children is highly suspect and potentially damaging.

Assertive discipline and the Canter Corporation

Over the last few years, in both the UK and the USA, educators and politicians alike have expressed renewed interest in the topic of classroom management. Following from the assumption that a quiet, orderly classroom is an essential prerequisite to learning, classroom management is viewed as a method of subduing students' innate, unruly impulses to the end of creating a suitable classroom learning environment. Often distilled into the single word 'discipline', classroom management methods are frequently chosen for their short-term efficacy and are seldom examined in terms of their hidden assumptions or their influence on larger educational or socialization processes. Additionally, the methodology of classroom discipline is increasingly influenced by for-profit commercial endeavours that market their approaches with sound-bites accentuating their strengths while ignoring or minimizing their weaknesses.

Assertive discipline is one of the most popular of these commercial classroom management packages. It is a product of Canter and Associates (formerly Lee Canter and Associates), a multi-million dollar American corporation, and its public spokesperson and co-developer is Lee Canter. The first programmes with video training were produced in 1979. Further developments occurred in 1989 and a new text was published in 1992. 'Through workshops and graduate courses, Canter has brought Assertive Discipline to over 1 million teachers and administrators, making his programme not only the most popular of all such systems but also the most discussed and, possibly, the most controversial' (Charles 1996: 106). The AD model is now very widely used in American schools (Charles 1996) and is becoming increasingly common in British schools (Tytler 1995).

The model

The Canter discipline model emphasizes concrete steps and examples. The approach, replete with negative and positive reinforcements, is based on a neo-Skinnerian, behaviour modification model. The assertive discipline approach (Canter and Canter 1992) begins with another set of declarations intended to market to popular perceptions. Central to their model is the view that all discipline problems begin and end with the student.

- All students are capable of good behaviour; behaviour and misbehaviour are simply choices. Students have the right to firm teachers who set consistent limits and teach students to manage their own behaviour. The most basic assumption is, 'you must believe that if students don't behave, it's because they've chosen not to, or don't know how' (p. 20).
- Assertive teachers respond in clear, confident and consistent statements of expected behaviours and consequences, and they are prepared to back up words with actions.

- Teachers must develop a discipline plan. This plan sets out the teacher's rules, the positive recognition resulting from adhering to the rules, and the negative consequences resulting from not following them. Positive recognition must be the most active part of the plan.
- The plan must include a hierarchy of consequences for the number of times the offence takes place. A sample hierarchy of five to six steps is identified as: (1) warning, (2) consequence, (3) additional consequence, (4) contact parents, (5) send to principal, (6) remove student. Canter suggests that an offence tally be kept on a clipboard.
- Teachers are directed to 'teach' the plans to their students, not to simply post or read their plans.
- This discipline plan, once developed, taught and established, should reach 90–95% of the students. The remaining 5–10% are deemed the difficult students. 'They are the ones who may ignore your rules, may not care about the consequences of their misbehaviour, and may disrupt the entire class' (p. 205). A special plan then needs to be developed for these students.

In short, AD is a 'highly structured system', a mixture of 'common sense' and behaviour-modification techniques, [that] stresses rewards and punishments as a way for teachers to 'take charge' of their classrooms (Hill 1990: 72).

The background to assertive discipline

There are clearly several reasons why AD has grown to be such a popular classroom management package. One reason is certainly that, in many cases, it enables teachers to maintain an orderly classroom, and a classroom where pupils are perceived to be 'on task' for a greater proportion of the day. But another important feature is that it is, first and foremost, a well-financed, professionally marketed, commercial operation. Additionally, at least on the surface, it takes a strong pro-teacher stance by reinforcing teachers' self-perceptions as under-appreciated victims of social forces and by bestowing certain 'rights' on them. It provides teachers with an easy, concrete set of steps to follow, and affixes the source of all discipline problems to students. Strikingly, it sanctifies the whole AD approach by urging teachers to avoid unnecessary complexity and reflection because the programme 'works'.

Since AD provided the formative impetus for Canter and Associates, it holds a central position in the Canter corporate story. A cornerstone of C&A's marketing, the corporate story (which has a myth-like status) is recited by Marlene Canter in the introduction to the AD text. It is fluently and energetically repeated in initial contacts with corporate members, and it is often referenced in subsequent contacts with them.

According to the story, the youthful Lee-the-social-worker and Marlene-the-special-educator became aware that while teachers were well trained by their universities in general teaching strategies, they needed additional training in 'the extra skills necessary to deal with the daily behaviour challenges they faced'. Lee and Marlene then researched 'the problems of discipline in the classroom and the methods that successful teachers were using in dealing with these problems'. They then augmented this with their own experience to form the 'core' of AD. Their goal was 'to help teachers learn to "take charge" of the classroom in a firm and positive manner' (Canter and Canter 1992: xviii). The marketing value of this account is evident in

the careful path it treads in presenting teacher training as being well done in all aspects except classroom discipline. In doing this, the story manages to create a need for this particular product without insulting all teacher education programmes. To do otherwise might offend all teachers and alienate the universities whose support in the USA is essential in granting credit for their courses.

Many American teachers increasingly view themselves as unappreciated victims of growing societal violence. C&A marketing homes in on this feeling of victimization. Early in their text, the Canters (1992) bolster this view by establishing several pro-teacher stances as indisputable truth. They maintain that: (1) today's teachers experience less social respect than they once did; (2) today's students enter school with more behaviour problems; (3) teachers are not adequately trained to deal with contemporary behaviour problems; and (4) teachers are basically on their own, discouraged from asking for help with discipline problems.

The truth of these assertions is largely unexamined. Coontz (1992, 1995) indicates that our perceptions of contemporary social reality are clouded by a distorted view of an idyllic past that, in fact, never existed. In Britain, for example, although there is widespread opinion that school behaviour has deteriorated, the Elton Committee (DES 1989) was unable to find any evidence to support this view. Thus the Canter recitation of how much more difficult it is for contemporary teachers simply may not be based on fact. This is not, of course, to say that some teachers in some schools do not face serious daily problems or that all teachers do not face daily challenges. The point is that the four listed items are unsubstantiated. Teachers were not always respected in the past; respect then and now has always been very individual. Schools have always had students with behaviour problems. Indeed, it might be argued that teachers are better than ever trained to deal with existing behaviour problems.

Crucially, it is important to recognize that there are many teachers who do not have problems with classroom discipline; many have developed a wide range of appropriate skills and 'manage' the students in their classes without a great deal of anguish. In contrast, it has been found that classroom teachers who do not have this ability to deal with student misbehaviour sometimes embrace the practical techniques of AD like the mythical drowning person would a flotation device. The accessibility of this approach via video courses bearing graduate credit within US universities provides teachers with a 'cook-book' disciplinary approach while advancing their positions on the district salary schedule as well.

As a marketing approach, the correctness of such assertions about the past and present situation is largely irrelevant. They are aimed at selling AD as the one possible answer for teachers and schools struggling with discipline problems. This is evident from the Canters' curious postmodern lament that teachers':

> ... exposure to so many different philosophies has resulted in the fact that there is no longer 'one way' to run a classroom and teach students. (1992: 9)

One is left with the message that AD has the answer and the existence of other ideas on classroom management and discipline simply confuses teachers.

Upon closer examination, it is thus evident that AD does not view teachers with such high regard. The notion of educators being confused by too many philosophies is strangely condescending. It suggests that teachers need simple solutions distilled for their use, that the theories behind those solutions are unnecessary and incomprehensible, and that the existence of potentially superior, albeit more complex, solutions should be overlooked for the sake of a single, formulaic approach. We believe that it

behoves governments to look beyond simple quick-fix solutions to perceived problems and to make sure, where there are real problems, that causes rather than symptoms are treated.

Academic critique

The White Paper's glowing endorsement of assertive discipline gives no indication that there has been extensive debate and criticism of the method over the last decade. Our summary presented here is highly selective. It draws mainly on the earlier American literature, for the arguments presented there are largely repeated in later articles. The first major critical article was that by Curwin and Mendler, 'Packaged discipline programs: Let the buyer beware' (1988a), which began a flurry of journal articles criticizing AD. Curwin and Mendler maintained that commercially packaged programmes commonly resorted to power-based methods that focus on getting students to follow directives and require minimal work and change on the part of the teacher. Their goal is simply to get students to follow teachers' orders with few rule violations. Importantly, Curwin and Mendler also noted that packaged programmes offer few possibilities for teachers to use their own judgement and discretion since such programmes ignore the context of rule violations. They argued that power-based, packaged discipline programmes teach obedience rather than responsibility. 'Students cannot learn responsibility without choices and without opportunities to make mistakes and learn from them' (1988a: 70). They recognized that such obedience models did often achieve quick results, but argued that programmes based on responsibility models were likely to have longer lasting results. However, they noted that a programme based on a responsibility model is more difficult to market since it requires more change, flexibility and risk taking on the part of the teacher.

Curwin and Mendler put forward an 80–15–5 principle which contends that 80% of students seldom break rules, 15% break them regularly, and 5% are out of control. They argue that a discipline plan designed to control the rule-breaking 15% can cause the already compliant majority to wilt and the few out-of-control students to explode. The exact proportions are irrelevant here; what is important is that they argue that the rigidity of AD is simply unnecessary for most students. Columbia University Teachers College professor and former RAND Corporation educational researcher, Linda Darling-Hammond, agrees. She has become an outspoken critic of AD since her daughter's kindergarten experience with it. Darling-Hammond is reported as saying, 'She was so terrified by the prospect of having her name placed on the board, being held in from recess or being excluded from class activities that she stopped participating in class' (Hill 1990: 72). Curwin and Mendler conclude:

> Effective discipline comes from the heart and soul of the teacher. It comes from the belief that teaching students to take responsibility for their behaviour is as much the job of the teacher as is teaching history or math. ... Only within the framework of the teacher's internal strength and the development of a caring classroom environment can a discipline plan yield responsible and self-disciplined school citizens. (1988a: 71)

Lee Canter responded to this article with marketing sound-bites that avoided the particular points presented by Curwin and Mendler. He brushed aside their argument by saying:

> The majority of their points are vague and theoretical. Assertive Discipline, on the other hand, is based on experience and research. ... Opinions are easy to come by; facts are hard to dispute. (Canter 1988: 71)

Canter apparently feels teachers should not be mystified with theoretical considerations. He argued that teachers utilizing AD were able to reduce inappropriate behaviour and increase on-task behaviour, and added that AD does teach responsibility since students must choose to either behave or misbehave. He asked what teachers were expected to do in their classrooms while the Curwin and Mendler long-term discipline plan was in process. Canter was clearly untroubled by either the narrowness of available student choice, or the absolute power handed to teachers. Canter concluded:

> Theories such as those of Curwin and Mendler make interesting reading, but teachers don't need more educational literature. They need answers, and they need them now. (1988: 73)

A subsequent flurry of articles took various sides in the debate started by Curwin and Mendler. Render *et al.* (1989a, b) stressed the limited evidence available to support Canter's claims that the programme is 'proven' effective. McCormack (1989) responded to this argument with the main Canter claim that: 'Practitioners say it works!'. While traditional research techniques might be inconclusive (she admitted), she contended that a network of professional practitioner contacts validated Canter's assertions. She claimed that what worked was that students, at least for a while, spent more time on task with fewer behaviour problems.

Curwin and Mendler (1989), no doubt seeing the off-the-mark rebuttals and fearing that no one understood their earlier argument, repeated it. They described AD as 'little more than an attractive, well-marketed behaviour program' (p. 83). They concluded:

> Except in extreme cases, a truly effective discipline plan must include, but go beyond, rules, rewards, consequences, and punishments. It must send a message of respect, dignity, belief, and hope to those most directly affected. *(1989: 83)*

In contrast, AD does not question what constitutes 'inappropriate behaviour'; it does not question whether 'on-task' and 'learning' are two separate concepts; it does not question whether do-or-be-punished is a genuine choice; it does not question whether the ethical development of students is stunted by the emphasis on sheer obedience; it does not question how an obedience model which requires constant supervision, rewards and punishments can serve a larger social purpose.

Alfie Kohn (1994: 195) identified the nature of AD and unearthed some of the assumptions beneath the pro-teacher, pro-student-choice, pro-on-task marketing of C&A.

> To anyone familiar with programmes like Assertive Discipline, it will come as no surprise that such questions are never raised. Indeed, teachers are explicitly discouraged from reflecting on the wisdom of anything they are doing since this only produces 'guilt, anxiety, and frustration' rather than 'lead[ing] to confident behaviour management' (Canter and Canter 1992, p. 9). The assertive teacher 'tells students exactly what behaviour is acceptable. ... No questions. No room for confusion' (p. 27). This matter-of-fact demand for mindless obedience follows quite naturally from the premise that all problems are the students' fault. (Kohn 1996: 14).
>
> When students are 'off task', our first response should be to ask, 'What's the task?' (Kohn 1996: 19)

While most of the critical comment on AD has come from the USA, there has been a parallel, although more limited debate within the UK. Some early criticisms were voiced by Kearney (1988) and were followed by Hanko (1993). An exchange of views between Robinson and Maines (1994a, b) and Swinson and Melling (1995) is of particular importance as Swinson and Melling are educational psychologists based at Liverpool and thus involved with the development and evaluation of AD described in the 1997 White Paper. Robinson and Maines (1994a, b) presented two reviews

that summarized many of the difficulties with the AD programme. They were particularly critical of the ways in which Canter claims that AD has a firm research base, yet that research is not available in any publicly published form. They also took issue with Canter's attempts to shift responsibility entirely to the student. But Robinson and Maines's main criticisms focused on the conflict between the nature of AD, which encourages obedience and conforming behaviour, and the aims of any progressive personal and social education (PSE) programme that stresses the development of individual responsibility within a democratic framework. They argued that PSE should foster mutual respect, encourage students to think ethically, and recognize individual needs. They believe that AD, with its rigid hierarchy of rules, rewards and punishments, does not do so. Swinson and Melling (1995) replied to this criticism and Robinson and Maines (1995) gave a rejoinder.

Assertive discipline in Liverpool

AD was introduced within Liverpool LEA in 1992 by members of the Educational Psychology Service and an advisory teacher who had previously worked on disciplinary matters. The majority of educational psychologists in the city, together with four teachers, were trained to become registered Assertive Discipline Trainers, and the teachers in about 60 schools in the city have since been trained in AD techniques. The vast majority of these schools are primary, but the list includes five secondary schools and five special schools (Swinson 1996).

The educational psychologists involved report considerable success. In their article which responded to that of Robinson and Maines (1994a), for example, Swinson and Melling (1995) report a study of Year 3 to Year 6 classes in two junior schools in well-established council estates in Liverpool. Undergraduates from two local universities were used to observe classes using structured observation schedules before and about six weeks after the introduction of AD. While there are some potential problems with initial observer effects, the study does find statistically significant improvements in pupils' mean time-on-task, and mean number of disruptive incidents. They also found an increase in the mean number of praise statements per lesson, and a reduction in the mean number of negative statements per lesson.

A further study of AD was conducted in one of Liverpool's Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD) schools where, again, systematic observation was conducted by university students (Swinson *et al.* 1996), and another study was undertaken in eight Liverpool schools as part of an MEd course. Both of these studies found very similar differences to the original study.

It is not the purpose of this article to mount a critique of these studies, but there are clear potential difficulties with observer effects, the use of novice observers, and (perhaps most important) the Hawthorn effect. In becoming involved in training, it is clear that these teachers believed that AD could provide them with an 'answer' to their problems. We do not know how much of the change was due to their desire to tackle their problem collaboratively or due to the actual system that they adopted. Other methods might have worked just as well. But what is important here is to note that the research base is very limited. Further, the Liverpool experience is mainly in primary schools and in EBD schools and, while Liverpool has a wider social mix that some might imagine, it is hardly typical of all LEAs. Even if we accept the findings of these studies at face value, and recognize the enthusiasm that has been shown

for the system by many Liverpool teachers, it is not a good basis for government's blanket recommendation of AD for all schools.

Conclusion

Since the original formulation of assertive discipline, there has been some modification in the details of practice. For example, the idea of writing the names of misbehaving children on the blackboard has been replaced by writing names on a clipboard instead. Teachers are now instructed to explain the undesirable behaviour instead of simply checking the name without explanation. Some of the more harsh and shaming 'consequences' of misbehaviour (such as sending children to sit in classes with younger children) have now disappeared. But the quick-fix ideological essence of the programme remains the same. As stated in the White Paper (DfEE 1997) the three key components are: clear unambiguous rules, continuous positive feedback when pupils successfully keep to the rules, and a recognized hierarchy of sanctions which are consistently applied when the rules are broken.

The Government's uncritical enthusiasm for AD in the White Paper is an indication that it has been swayed by enthusiasts and salespeople, and is responding to a 'moral panic' (Cohen 1972) about declining standards of discipline in schools. What appears to have happened here is that HMI and DfEE officials paid short visits to Liverpool and were impressed by what they were told about changes to behaviour in the schools adopting AD. In practice, however, there is no evidence for any overall national decline in behaviour, and to introduce a commercial programme into all English schools where it is largely untried and under-researched is the politics of the 'quick fix' to what may be an imaginary problem. This is not to deny that there are some children and even whole schools which could gain benefits from AD. There may well be some children who need such a highly structured framework, as least for a period, but such a framework is probably simply unnecessary and potentially destructive for the majority of children.

In supporting AD the UK Government has ignored the significant criticism that has been made about it in the USA and UK. Rather than being universally accepted as beneficial, it has been the subject of continued debate and controversy. Our own beliefs are that it is coercive and encourages compliance with arbitrary power rather than personal educational and ethical development. We see the AD model as antithetical to progressive Personal and Social Education which tries to encourage listening skills, problem solving and conflict resolution through rational discussion. It emphasizes a rigid inflexibility that ignores context and personal development. We believe the AD model plays upon a desire for simplicity and quick results. Education is more complicated than that. We would like to see Labour policy that is based more on research evidence and informed debate, and takes a more balanced view of social behaviour and personal development within a democratic society.

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