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A review of Canters' Assertive Discipline

Vincent J. Bonnema
University of Northern Iowa

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Abstract

Discipline procedures in our schools today vary not only from building to building but from classroom to classroom. Teachers are expected to maintain "good discipline, but are often left to interpret a few general rules in the student handbook as they see fit. Rules in the individual classrooms are often left to the teacher. While many administrators see value in allowing teachers to maintain this type of control, others are implementing school-wide programs of discipline. Assertive Discipline, developed by Lee and Marion Canter in the mid 1970's, is just one of many discipline packages available for implementation.

A REVIEW OF CANTERS' ASSERTIVE DISCIPLINE

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by

Vincent J. Bonnema

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Norman McCumsey

10/27/87
Date Approved

Adviser

James E. Albrecht

11-5-87
Date Approved

Second Reader of Research Paper

Dale R. Jackson

11/5/87
Date Received

Head, Department of Educational
Administration and Counseling

Discipline procedures in our schools today vary not only from building to building but from classroom to classroom. Teachers are expected to maintain "good" discipline, but are often left to interpret a few general rules in the student handbook as they see fit. Rules in the individual classrooms are often left to the teacher. While many administrators see value in allowing teachers to maintain this type of control, others are implementing school-wide programs of discipline. Assertive Discipline, developed by Lee and Marion Canter in the mid 1970's, is just one of many discipline packages available for implementation.

While there has always been a need for teachers to anticipate student misbehavior and have a set of standards designed to prevent or respond to it, there is belief that teachers today are experiencing greater pressure to maintain a classroom where misbehavior is held to a minimum. This trend is an offshoot of the call to increase academic standards. In the United States today the public wants teachers to "return to the basics" and make sure that students move up the scale of world-wide achievement. Many teachers are initially responding to this call by tightening their control of student activity in the classroom. Assertive Discipline serves this purpose. According to Canter (1979a)

the word assertive means "to state or affirm positively, assuredly, plainly or strongly" (p. 11).

This paper will summarize the Assertive Discipline procedure and give examples of its use. A consideration of why many teachers use the procedure will also be made. No program or model is without its critics, even the Canters' model. Therefore, several criticisms of the Canters' approach will be reviewed. Finally, possible applications of the Assertive Discipline program in elementary classrooms will be explored.

"Assertive Discipline is a program that was developed as a result of seven years of research and evaluation into effective classroom discipline skills" (Canter, 1979b, p. 33). "After its conception, the program was field tested by 20,000 teachers and principals and was found to reduce behavior problems by 80%" (Canter, 1979c, p. 107). Since that time the program has grown very rapidly throughout this country and abroad. Mrs. and Mrs. Canter now sit at the top of a consulting empire which was formed by the program known as Assertive Discipline. What makes this program so widely used?

Zakariya (1983) states that "Assertive Discipline is based on Assertion Training, which is an approach designed to help people learn how to express their wants and feelings,

without violating the rights of others" (p. 14). This model then is built upon the premise that the teacher must have some way to communicate his desires and feelings to the students without infringing on those students' rights. How does the teacher do this? According to Zakariya (1983) the assertive teacher not only expresses her wants and needs to the class, but she is also prepared to reinforce her needs with appropriate actions. "She responds in a manner which maximizes her potential to get her needs met, but in no way violates the best interest of the students" (p. 13).

What are the basic needs and rights that all teachers have? Zakariya (1983) states the following:

The right to establish a classroom structure and routine that provides the optimal learning environment in keeping with the teachers own strengths and weaknesses.

The right to determine and request appropriate behavior from the students which will meet the teacher's needs and which encourage the positive, social and educational development of the student.

The right to ask for help from the parents, the principal, and others when assistance with a student is needed. (p. 14)

Teachers who subscribe to this program turn poor discipline procedures into effective ones. Instead of being

interested only in the students' rights, and worrying whether or not they will violate them by disciplining, they first consider their own rights. The assertive teacher asks for appropriate behavior from the student, behavior which does not necessarily meet the students' needs, but the teacher's needs. Canter (1979c) tells teachers that they have the right to demand quiet, if that's what they want. They also have the right to have the children in their seats, or to get respect from the children.

Do the students have any rights at all under this model? According to Zakariya (1983) students can expect the following:

The right to have a teacher who is in a position to, and will help the child limit his inappropriate self-disruptive behavior.

The right to have a teacher who is in position to, and will provide the child with positive support for his appropriate behavior.

The right to choose how to behave and to know the consequences that will follow his/her behavior. (p. 14)

These rights, both the teacher's and the students', are an important aspect of the Assertive Discipline program. These rights form the basis for the day-to-day enforcement of rules, and for the rules themselves. To successfully

establish this program, teachers must make students aware of

these rights and review them periodically throughout the year.

After the rights have been established the classroom

teacher makes the students aware of his rules for behavior.

By proceeding in this manner the burden of deciding how to

react in a particular situation is lifted from the teacher.

If the student chooses to break the rules, he will suffer

the pre-stated negative consequences. It's not a judgment

call which can backfire for the teacher if he is not

consistent. The child knows the rules and the teacher enforces

them (Canter, 1979c).

Zakariya (1983) believes that the Assertive Discipline

plan, designed by the teacher, served as the foundation for

his discipline efforts. "Each classroom program is as unique

as the particular class setting and the ideas of the creative

assertive teacher" (p. 15). When planning his program the

assertive teacher asks himself the following questions: "What

behavior(s) do I want the students to eliminate? - or engage

in? What limit setting consequences will be appropriate?

What positive consequences would be appropriate? What planning

is necessary to implement the limit - setting and/or positive

consequences?" (Zakariya, 1983, p. 15).

When the teacher has decided upon appropriate and

inappropriate behaviors and has made them known to the class,

she also informs them that there will be limit setting or
negative consequences. Canter (1979c) suggests the following
pattern, open to teacher change, for establishing these
consequences. If a child breaks a rule the teacher writes
the child's name on the board. The teacher is careful not
to break the flow of the lesson or verbally say anything to
the child about his action. This serves as a warning. If
the action continues the teacher calmly places a check next
to the child's name and the child forfeits a privilege such
as ten minutes of free time. The next check may signify ten
more minutes. The third check, if needed, may mean that the
teacher will call the child's parents after class, and the
fourth a trip to the principal's office. Canter (1979c)
also encourages teachers to add a severe clause to the plan
for serious infractions of the rules. If this is the case
the teacher may immediately move to step four or five if the
child's action warrants it.

Assertive Discipline, used in the intended way, does
not only deal with negative actions however. Fereira (1983)
reports that in his school individuals receive recognition
tokens from their teacher for positive behavior. The tokens
are collected when a certain limit is reached and the children
receive a classroom banner. Six banners earn the class a
Disney film or the class can work for twelve banners, at

which time they enjoy an ice cream bar or lunch on the lawn with the principal.

Canter (1979c) suggests positive consequences as well. He believes that the teacher must daily praise the students for positive actions. Periodically the teacher should send some type of recognition note home with students who exhibit appropriate behavior. Throughout the day the teacher should establish a routine to let the students know when they are all staying on task. One possibility would be to drop marbles in a jar when the class is following directions. When the jar is full the teacher should reward the children with an activity or event that they all value, such as an extra fifteen minutes of free time.

Teachers who choose to use Assertive Discipline soon learn that it is an extremely structured program. The teacher must establish and communicate her rights, the students' rights, the rules of the room, and the negative and positive reinforcers. This program seems like it would take an inordinate amount of instructional time to administer each day. Why do so many administrators and teachers like a program that is so time consuming and rigidly structured?

One school was so impressed with Assertive Discipline that they extended it to their lunch room where they now claim to have developed a restaurant-like atmosphere

(McCormack, 1981). Why do so many schools seem to use this program? Assertive Discipline provides results.

Mandlebaum (1983) tells the account of a study he participated in to study the effectiveness of Assertive Discipline. The researchers went into a third grade classroom where the teacher had a twenty year history of discipline problems. The researchers trained her in the use of Assertive Discipline and then observed her as she went on, off, and back on two week periods of using the program with her class. By measuring out-of-seat time and free talking, the researchers found that student behavior measurably changed for the better while Assertive Discipline was in use.

The principal was so happy with the results of the study that he asked the researchers to come back and help every teacher who had discipline problems in their room. The teacher indicated that she would be starting the program full-time with her next class. The students themselves accomplished more work in a shorter time. They liked the positive consequences and disliked the negative ones.

Canter (1979c) claims that "all children, regardless of background or ability, can behave appropriately at school" (p. 108). Assertive Discipline, developed on the foundation of this belief, seems to have convinced many administrators and teachers that this is true.

Assertive Discipline does have critics. Watson (1982) claims that classroom management systems like Assertive Discipline are not consistent with the guidelines suggested by contemporary research. "Systems like Assertive Discipline undermine both the socialization and the education process" (Watson, 1982, p. 75). Researchers such as Watson seem to believe that while Assertive Discipline does have immediate positive effects on the ability to control behavior in the school, its long term effects are devastating.

Why doesn't Assertive Discipline prepare students for life in society? Watson (1982) believes that in the classroom, where the teacher has control of the major reinforcers and punishments, Assertive Discipline may work, but this program doesn't prepare students for the future. Will there always be someone in each child's life to provide positive and negative reinforcement? Absolutely not.

Schools must prepare students for life, willingly upholding society's values and laws. We must help children develop the ability to control their own behavior so that it will be in keeping with society's values, not merely guided by self interest. (Watson, 1982, p. 76)

How is this goal accomplished? Watson (1982) believes "research shows that rather than firm control, mutual control does a better job of socializing children. Mutual control

means adding warmth, respect, concern, and giving children a voice in the decision making process" (p. 81). Writers like Watson are claiming that the best thing we can do for our children is to show them some sensitivity and some concern.

Other critics of the Assertive Discipline program object to it for different reasons. Davidman and Davidman (1984) attack the role of the teacher in this model. These authors claim that teachers trained in the Canterian method may become overly cold and authoritative. The reason for this danger is found right at the beginning of the model where the teacher is taught to stress her own rights at all times. These rights are overly me oriented, according to the Davidmans, not student oriented. The concern seems to be that by putting their concerns over the students', teachers may become too authoritarian, overly obsessed with student discipline.

These criticisms can be easily justified. The public owns the classrooms of America's government schools. These rooms are meant for the use of the teacher and the children, but they are not the private kingdoms of each individual teacher. If any teacher, through Assertive Discipline or otherwise, becomes overly aggressive towards his students an injustice is being committed.

The Davidmans (1984) make another point which also may have merit. They claim that the Assertive Discipline program

does not take into account the uniqueness of each child. It has class-wide rules and regulations. Some of the built-in consequences might be psychologically harmful for an individual.

Does the quality of instruction have anything to do with discipline in the classroom? Many educators believe that it does. Another possible fault of the Assertive Discipline model is that teachers aren't encouraged to look for probable causes of misbehavior such as a personal need for attention or a boring curriculum. The teacher is only encouraged to deal with the misbehavior itself and not to deal with the possible reason for it.

Gartrell (1987) believes that "the negative effects of Assertive Discipline can be crushing for children, especially those between the ages of four and eight" (p. 10). During these years one of the most important things happening in the child's life is the development of attitudes regarding school and learning. The attitudes are a major contributor to the child's success as a student. When a child of this age continually sees her name on the board, in front of everyones' eyes, negative attitudes toward school can be formed. These attitudes may last a lifetime.

For the child who is frequently punished a self fulfilling prophecy can also be formed. This child may learn to believe

that "I am what you tell me I am." This child is punished
for having a problem rather than being helped to overcome
the problem (Gartrell, 1987).

What kinds of programs do critics of Assertive Discipline
offer as an alternative? Crockenberg (1982) "supports any
sort of discipline program where the students have a right
to share in the rule making" (p. 61). Gartrell (1987)
"suggests the Jones, Glasser or Ginott models, all models
where the teacher communicates to the students in more subtle,
private ways, and in which the students are highly respected
as individuals" (p. 11).

The proponents and critics of Assertive Discipline seem
to have totally opposing views regarding discipline in our
schools. Watson (1982) does hint at some middle ground when
he writes, "The basically sound intuitions of good teachers
have often saved us from the excess of unsound educational
philosophy" (p. 90). Whether one agrees that Assertive
Discipline is an "unsound educational philosophy" or not,
Watson's words contain a lot of wisdom.

Teachers should never adhere to any one educational
philosophy so strongly that they loose their own perception
of what is best for each of their students. No one theorist,
however well trained, is able to form a miracle plan for
discipline or any other educational issue. Classroom teachers

should take plans such as Assertive Discipline and modify
them to meet their own need, situation and students.

Assertive Discipline works. Many studies have shown
that teachers with discipline problems have been able to
correct them by following this procedure. Teachers that
wish to use this model, however, have to realize that the
students need to be given some input into the classroom rule
formation. Teachers also must be able to adjust the program
so that they take the time and effort to search for the cause
of student misbehavior.

Teaching is a challenging occupation in many different
ways. Many teachers need to use a more structured method of
discipline now than ever before. The public often holds
teachers accountable for student achievement and behavior
but doesn't always provide their necessary support.

Assertive Discipline, based on Assertive Training, is a
discipline approach designed to help teachers learn how to
express their wants and desires without infringing on the
rights of others. Many teachers all over the world are using
this model in their classrooms.

Although many believe deeply in this program, others
are very concerned about its long-term effects. The sensitive
and sensible teacher who uses the Assertive Discipline model

will temper it with their own knowledge of their students'
personalities, activities and needs.

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