

# **Handling Discipline and Motivation Problems in the Classroom through Group Processes**

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Teachers often confront discipline and motivation problems in the classroom: children may interrupt, talk back, arrive late, or disobey rules. Some children lack motivation and suffer from anxiety and learning difficulties. In terms of the social composition of the class, in many classrooms there is a child who is overbearing, aggressive, rejected, and takes the role of class clown. Discipline and motivation problems make it difficult for teachers to achieve their objectives of teaching and educating children in a supportive, safe classroom environment and to feel that the work of teaching is as satisfying and enjoyable as they would like.

Most teachers handle discipline and motivation problems using an individual approach. They seek explanations and solutions for the individual student, looking at problems in the child's personality, family, or relationship with the teacher and the class. For example, in the case of a rejected child, they may ask what in his behavior "invites" rejection: he may be aggressive, neglected, or lacking in social skills. The assumption is that helping the specific child will make the problem disappear. In the case of a child with a discipline problem, they may assume she/he lacks boundaries and fails to take responsibility, and that this is the source of the problem. **The individual approach is useful and beneficial; the group approach does not contradict it, but adds to it** by providing another angle for understanding and coping with problematic classroom situations.

**When discussing the group approach, the basic assumption is that the class is a group.** A "group" is defined as "more than two people conducting an interaction, with a mutual relationship and mutual influence." Groups have organizing rules and norms, and external boundaries that define them (e.g. Homeroom 4C). The people in the group perceive themselves as belonging to the group. **A class in school is defined as a task-oriented group**, in that it has content to cover. The class as a group has academic objectives (to acquire knowledge and skills), educational objectives

(to learn social rules and habits), and emotional/social objectives (to enable emotional growth, realization of potential, and good interpersonal relationships among the children). These goals are attained within the framework of the class as a group. Individual work with a particular student is also always **in the context of the group**, as the child is situated within a group of children. In addition, concurrent with the task-oriented learning processes taking place in the classroom, many interpersonal and group processes occur as well. It is therefore important for teachers to be familiar with group processes and to know how to put them to use in achieving their aims.

**In the group approach, we attempt to understand the process undergone by the class as a group.** The assumption is that the group process creates and contributes to the specific problems of certain children. We try to understand why a particular phenomenon in the classroom is happening at this particular point in the year (for example, the start of a new school year encourages boundary testing), or what the problematic child may be saying in the name of the entire class, assuming that he is a “group voice” speaking for others as well (the rude child may be testing the teacher’s boundaries on behalf of the whole class).

Thus, for example, a rejected child often expresses all of the weak parts that the group is unwilling to cope with, and absorbs the intolerance and aggression of the entire group. The assumption is that because the problem is group-based, the solution should be group-based as well: for example, activities to promote tolerance in the classroom, acceptance of differences, and mutual help. If the class behaves that way, the problematic child will also be less rejected and will find a place in the class.

We assume that if there is a problem in the class and it is not addressed at the group level, it will reemerge and be reactivated by a different child every time. In fact, teachers tell of classes in which rejection of children “migrates” from child to child but always exists; on the other hand, there are classes in which there are more and less popular children, but no humiliating rejection of certain children – which is the goal.

**To “think in groups,” we need to assume that every group/class (like every person) has a personality:** it has its own traits, its anxieties, its unconscious – a hidden world of feelings expressed through defenses and external symptoms such as

discipline and motivation problems. It has anger and its own ways of coping with problems. Above all, it has typical development stages, like a person developing from infancy to adulthood. Teachers do tend to describe classes as a whole, as in “this class is a jungle,” “a stressed-out class,” “a wonderful class.” They are describing the character of the class – the “group whole,” beyond its component individuals.

A good teacher should be familiar with the characteristics of the class/group he is dealing with and should be able to work with it in the optimal way for that class/group, according to its basic qualities. This approach is similar to individual work with students, aimed at bringing them to their best possible level according to their starting points.

**A “good group/class”** is considered one that undergoes a process and develops, “fights its fights,” seeks solutions for its difficulties and learns lessons. It is capable of dialogue, coping with anger and criticism, dealing with weaknesses, working actively, and providing mutual help. The teacher in a good class is active and provides containment and guidance; he is able to withstand difficulties without escaping, attacking, or falling apart, and is capable of teaching and educating the children as needed.

**A “difficult group/class”** has no boundaries, has unfettered competition, envy, and anger, gets stuck, and is unable to adapt to realistic requirements. Its teacher is destroyed and is therefore ineffective, is often hurtful and vindictive, is not active enough and insufficiently contains the difficulties. She/he is unable to carry out her task of teaching and educating.

It sometimes seems to many teachers that one or several children “ruin” the class, and that if only they could be removed, the situation would improve. This line of thought has a bit of truth to it, as occasionally one child does damage the class’s overall “flavor,” like a grain of salt in a pitcher of water. But usually the particular child represents a general difficulty in the class. The teacher needs to be able to work with the existing situation and with the strengths and hardships of the class, whether easy or challenging, and believe that even a class that starts out difficult can reach a better place through the teacher’s correct, professional work.

**I will try to explain how discipline and motivation problems can be understood and handled through two key concepts from group theory:**

### **1. Developmental Stages of the Class as a Group**

Teachers will find it easier to cope with difficulties in the classroom when they are aware of the developmental stages of the class as a group, and when they understand what is happening and what is required of them at each stage.

**The school year can be divided into four distinct stages.**

Of course, each class is different in terms of the children's ages, their characteristics, the teacher's personality, etc.; however, stages common to all classes can be identified.

**The pre-class stage** – before the school year actually begins, during the preparatory period, the teacher receives information about the class she/he is about to teach. She/he has thoughts and wishes, hopes and fears, even before meeting the class in person. For example, the teacher may not want to teach fifth grade because she/he feels it is a problematic age, or may want an easier grade, or may not want a particular class because she/he has heard they are difficult.

Teacher recommendations: teachers should be aware of their fantasies/thoughts, try to channel them, and not allow them to dictate what actually happens; meet the class without biases; not try to know everything in advance; give themselves a real chance to get to know the group as it is; plan realistic goals for the group based on advance information, and be patient in the process of achieving them.

**The opening stage – usually from August to December,** divided into two sub-stages:

**A. The beginning stage** – the first month. Everything is new, stressful, and evokes anxiety and aggression. There may be extremes of negative behavior in the classroom that will pass with time. Sometimes everything seems wonderful and the difficulties are still hidden. The class and the teacher get to know one another as well as the rules and requirements. Typical classroom behaviors include dependence (at the expense of independence and initiative, and sometimes impaired motivation); boundary

testing (talking back, struggles with the teacher); insecurity (withdrawal); comparisons to previous years (by both teachers and students); aspiring to be the same – differences are threatening, and a conflict with the teacher may unify the class. Sometimes a particular child may be chosen as a scapegoat and used to take out all of the group's aggression so that it feels less threatened by weakness, which remains entirely with that child.

Teacher recommendations: teachers should be responsible for order and rules, which should be clear and attainable; invest extensive effort in inculcating habits, in the awareness that acquiring habits is a process, and requires time and patience; set appropriate class goals based on gradual knowledge of the class and a realistic view of its strengths and weaknesses (for example, do not expect the class to acquire a habit within a week that it did not previously have); think about what they want to change in the class, and start a gradual process – for example, class cohesion, or acquiring study skills; make room for everyone; create an atmosphere of security (try to provide a model of a teacher who copes with events – containing, not panicking, not vindictive). The teacher should allow dialogue with the children and invite them to express their opinions and feelings. It is better for the teacher to somewhat forego being obeyed out of fear in the short term, in order to achieve long-term discipline, which is based on the children's commitment to the rules; to relinquish some of the scope of academic material covered during this stage in order to establish habits and relationships. Teachers should realize that the children are not yet fully available for study and that time needs to be set aside for group processes. If these are handled well, the class will be available for learning later on.

**B. The authority struggles stage** – sometimes starts immediately at the beginning of the year, other times several weeks later. If at the beginning stage the class can be likened to an infant (dependent, helpless, anxious), in the current stage it is like a two-year-old or an adolescent fighting for independence and power. The key characteristic of this stage is the class's struggle with the teacher's authority during the learning process and the accompanying requirements (homework, tests).

There are more power struggles and boundary testing; children stop being "nice," start to express their opinions, and want to be differentiated and different. There is more resistance, arguing for the sake of argument, anger, discomfort, competition, and envy.

Sometimes a particular student may be delegated to test the boundaries for everyone, and will talk back and disrupt the class to see how much is permitted and how the teacher responds. Sometimes resistance and anger may be expressed passively, through giving up, withdrawal, and lack of motivation, which also makes learning difficult. In any case, in this stage there are many disruptions to learning.

Teacher recommendations: teachers should not be alarmed by the resistance and anger, but should contain them; allow argument but maintain task orientation (allow 5-10 minutes per day for dialogue about complaints and expression of feelings); focus problems and seek practical solutions; handle difficulties and disruptions; be aware that this stage involves testing the teacher (Will he stay nice and accept everyone? Is she/he strong enough to cope?); know that this stage passes.

Coping with both of the initial stages of the year can be difficult and intense for the teacher. This part of the year can be compared to beach waves that must be overcome in order to reach the quiet sea waiting beyond them. The teacher must bring the class to a state in which it is organized and available for learning. Obviously, not all classes respond in the same way, and each class will have different occurrences at varying intensities. However, in all classes a great deal of effort will be required of the teacher in coping with the challenges of the first part of the year.

**The working stage – usually from December to spring break.** The “serious study” stage. If the initial problems have been dealt with and the class has established learning habits and patterns of social relationships, there is usually a calm, with less sabotage processes and more availability for learning and work. This is a practical stage with greater balance between individual needs and class needs, and adaptation to constraints of the situation. Both teacher and students understand that “it is what it is” – not in despair or anger, but in acceptance. There is more directness and intimacy. This stage should be somewhat easier than the others, as it deals “only” with the task at hand – learning – and less with turbulent group processes.

Teacher recommendations: teachers should promote learning, maintain a good atmosphere, identify pressures, and cope with any difficulties that arise through practical dialogue; hold class discussions to resolve problems, and emotional discussions when

necessary; of course, be responsible for the level of teaching so that it is well-suited to the class; help each student realize his or her potential and be the best they can be. At the same time, it is recommended and essential that the teacher also devote attention to herself and her professional actualization, experience satisfaction and pleasure in teaching, and be the best teacher she/he can be under the existing circumstances.

**The separation stage – from after spring break to the end of the year** – the last part of the school year. This stage often evokes frustration, since after a good period of learning there may be regression to discipline and motivation problems that seemed to have been solved but now reappear. There is anxiety that “everything I worked for as a teacher is collapsing,” anger, helplessness, and sometimes a sense of exhaustion and failure. The goodbye stage involves a reversion to some characteristics of the beginning stage – on one hand an increase in anxiety (especially in classes in their last year of elementary, middle, or high school), and on the other hand a reduction in tension, crossing of boundaries and limits, an atmosphere of vacation long before the year actually comes to a close; feelings of satisfaction or disappointment and frustration with the year’s achievements and the certainty that no more may be achieved; anger reemerges, pressures arise as to what has not been covered, and there is a sense of fatigue.

Teacher recommendations: Teachers should not be alarmed by the regression that occurs during the goodbye stage; they should realize that this is normal, should not become angry or break down, and should not worry that all of their achievements have disappeared; they should contain the regression and continue to work with the class in a focused way, while addressing the separation-related phenomena.

Before dealing with the class and the students, it is no less important for the teacher to treat his own feelings with respect; to be aware that he is tired, tense, and stressed in anticipation of the end of the year, that he may be exhausted by disappointments and anger, and that it is not easy for the teacher himself to say goodbye time and time again to classes in which he has invested so much emotional energy; to accept that the year is over and to mobilize his energy for the next process. A teacher who maintains herself will have more available energy to maintain the class

during the ending stage. The ending stage requires a great deal of energy from the teacher, much like the beginning of the year.

**In working with students, the key tool for dealing with separation is to maintain boundaries and rules, on one hand, and to hold emotion-focused class discussions, on the other hand.** In terms of discipline, the teacher exercises judgment in deciding where to insist and refuse to ease requirements, and where to “cut corners” towards the end of the year. In terms of dialogue, the teacher invites the children to talk and express their thoughts and feelings about the separation. She/he listens, asks questions, and provides empathy and appropriate responses; she/he sends the message that all emotions are legitimate as long as they are not expressed as problematic behavior.

It is important that teachers not deny the separation. Even if the teacher is continuing with the same class for another year, the present school year is still coming to an end. Next year the class will be a different entity, possibly with different children, at a different age, with different subject teachers. Hence, it is important to conduct year-end activities; to allow students to express their feelings and give feedback that helps both students and teacher; to gain closure.

**Feedback is given to the children, to the teacher, and to the class as a whole.**

Feedback by each child for him/herself – invite each child to tell about one thing he wanted and attained this year (academically, socially, or personally), and something he may have wanted but did not achieve. Each child should write to himself, and then possibly share with a friend, and later with the whole class. The message should relate to the importance of expectations and goals to be achieved next year as well, and of drawing personal conclusions: why did I succeed, or not succeed.

Feedback for the teacher – what was good for the students, what needs attention or should be improved. This feedback may be provided directly or anonymously. It is important for the children to feel that they have the right to speak their mind and that the teacher is listening.

A symbolic activity may be used to provide feedback to the class: each child draws or uses art materials to represent the class at the



beginning and the end of the year, in order to see the differences and intervening process; a story or poem about the end of a period can be used (bibliotherapy); every teacher should find the tools she/he feels comfortable with.

The message of giving feedback is that it is important to observe oneself and assess one's condition at the end of the year; that learning and development are processes, and that things change over time. Year-end feedback can later be used as a good starting point for the next year.

In my experience, teachers who are familiar with the stages of development of classes as groups and who know how to adapt their behavior to the needs of each stage succeed in leading the class to learn, and deal better with motivation and discipline problems that arise.

**In my opinion, it is not the teacher's objective to bring the class to a situation where there are no problems at all (although this is a normal, legitimate ambition), but to cope in a highly efficient manner with problems as they arise.**

## **2. Group Voices**

A basic assumption in groups is that specific group members express opinions and behaviors that reflect both themselves and processes occurring within the group as a whole. The behavior of individuals may express the wishes, anxieties, and difficulties of the entire group. For example, if the group is aggressive and angry, it may "delegate" one member, who has a personal tendency to anger, to express anger on its behalf. The angry person will express both his own anger and that of the group; for example, he will test the facilitator's reaction to anger for the group.

### **Examples of group voices in the classroom:**

- The class clown – provides comic relief as a break from serious studies; tests the teacher's limits; expresses students' passive aggression towards the teacher by not allowing her to teach.

- The tardy or rude student – tests limits, struggles with the teacher for everyone, tests the teacher’s tolerance.
- The scapegoat – in his weakness, he expresses everyone’s weaknesses, so that they can feel strong and take out aggression on him for weaknesses and difficulties that are theirs too.

A teacher familiar with the group voices phenomenon knows that it is not always enough to deal with a problem on the individual level. He must **also** consider whether the individual student’s behavior expresses a general message from the class and represents a broader problem. He can ask himself: “what is this pupil trying to tell me in behalf of the whole group” the speculated answer will lead to an empathic dialogue with the class as a whole

The problem should be addressed on the group level. For example, if there is violence against a scapegoat in the class, preventive actions should be taken; norms of nonviolence and tolerance of others should be reinforced; nonviolent children should be rewarded; aggression should be devalued.

**In this article, I have shown how discipline and motivation problems are related to the developmental stages of the class.** Such problems can express anxiety in the beginning stage, power struggles later on, and exhaustion and separation issues at the end. They may be conveyed through specific students who serve as a “group voice,” speaking for the class as a whole.

It is important for teachers to try to understand the group processes taking place in the classroom. Teachers should attempt to avoid responding with anger or hurt feelings to discipline or motivation problems; instead, they should ask themselves: What is happening in the class? Why now, at this stage? What is the class trying to tell me – for example, through the disruptive child? What would be the most effective action to take? The teacher should seek ways of coping by maintaining boundaries while also communicating with the students on an emotional level, listening, and searching together for solutions to the problems identified. In this way, she/he will enable the class to learn, which is essentially her mission. **An effective teacher who knows how to work with the class on both the individual and the group level can**

**experience satisfaction and interest in her work – also a key goal for teachers.**

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