



ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOURS IN THE CLASSROOM

Neda Mulji

A large group of boys and girls work quietly at their desks as the teacher walks around monitoring their work. There is an air of authority about her, and the discipline seen in that classroom is a school management's dream. However, this same group of boys and girls break into chaos during break time. There is name-calling and queue-breaking at the canteen.

The attitudes and behaviours that we inculcate as teachers in our classrooms are not sustainable if it is only temporary discipline in the presence of a teacher. When students are groomed in etiquette, emotional self-regulation and social wellbeing, a general culture of appreciation and integrity takes root. This can then be seen in the students' personal carriage and demeanour as they conduct themselves at home, at school and in larger society.

Most behaviour in the classroom is now controlled through fear-based means. An empty threat, a proverbial knock on the head, a stern look – all used as weapons of control by teachers desperate to maintain discipline as they single-handedly manage large classes.

However, a more structured approach to discipline would start from working at the core attitudes and behaviours that manifest themselves when the students are not being watched. What they say and how they interact with each other outside of the realms of expectation reveals the essence of who they really are. Often, modern-day discipline strategies skip the essential step of helping students decide who they want to be and what qualities they would like to embody. Much of this has to do with a gap in our curriculum that doesn't directly address social and emotional wellbeing, conscious and unconscious biases and citizenship values.

Let's look at each one individually. A teacher who feels responsible for the social and emotional wellbeing of students will devise ways to check in with them, monitor how students are feeling, keep a pulse on the rapport of the class with each other and help them with active assistance at emotional self-regulation. Students often don't like to be told what to do, but they inevitably mirror their teachers. When the entire staff culture and behaviour revolves around respect towards each other and the students, when teachers take pleasure in their work and use open and verbal means to recognise the good in their students, when students implicitly know the behavioral expectations at school, there is generally no need for active enforcement of rules and discipline.

Most teachers complain that there is no time to set aside for social wellbeing and emotional self-regulation activities – there is just too much content to cover and grading to be turned in. The truth is, none of this has to be done separately if it can be seamlessly woven into the culture of the classroom and the school community at large.

Language plays a key role in how we conduct ourselves as it's one of the prime means of communicating with another. When we ask for something from another person, a request can seem like a demand and get an abrasive response from another. In recent decades, the 'dumbing down' of our language – where we choose to exchange formality for quick and casual terms – interferes with social relationships with a domino effect impacting all levels of the educational institution, and it usually begins with the most basic student-teacher interaction in class.

Consider this scenario: a student is missing from class and the teacher calls out the name for attendance. The students don't know why he isn't in class and the teacher says 'Never mind, he misses a lot of classes.' The intention may be sound – perhaps that comment has come from a place of care and worry. But it gets filtered through the class ranks and eventually the student is told the teacher had said 'he is always absent.' This translates into the student feeling that he was spoken about in his absence, gets derailed, works a little less efficiently in that teacher's subject, and gets made fun of by the peers who repeat the little conversation about him several times in the next few weeks.

What we have here can be classified as 'unconscious bias' at play. While the teacher did not intend to single out a student with a particularly scathing remark, the potential impact of the statement was not considered. In most classrooms, such occurrences are regular with far-reaching effects where pupils perceive that there is bias against them, while the teachers don't take responsibility for it. An awareness of unconscious bias – with projects, activities, conversations and workshops on recognising our own biases and possible intervention can improve the scales of behaviour and positively impact the social interaction of students with their peers and their teachers.

Sometimes teachers are guilty of unconscious bias when their attitude in class projects that students who get higher grades are more 'valued' than those who don't. Teachers not only tend to give more speaking opportunities to students with higher grades, they often also get positions of responsibility as the class monitor or student council member. While this may be a way of rewarding academic performance, it is also counter intuitive as it frustrates or alienates those who are unable to get high grades. It's important for teachers to be seen as fair in class and beyond, to ensure that their attitude towards students isn't coloured by their academic performance, and to set high standards of etiquette that the students will follow in their own interaction in school and society.

Traditionally citizenship education was embedded in the culture of an educational institution. Students and teachers alike recognized and rose to their responsibility towards society. Whether that meant keeping classrooms clean or using the restrooms responsibly, protecting school property or helping peers get home if their car broke down, individuals were aware of the need to play their role. Unfortunately, most students now have to be asked to help – the choice isn't always their own. This change in society at large is also intertwined with how students are taught to conduct themselves when a figure of authority is not present. Can they make individual choices to be a responsible citizen, an unbiased helper? Can they show compassion to someone they are not friends with, but needs their help?

The awareness of rights and responsibilities of being a citizen of a community starts in the classroom. For active participation, students need to be taught the tools of engagement which are largely incorporated in their attitudes and behaviours towards those around them.

The same wheels may keep on turning until teachers work on strategies to include students in actively monitoring and regulating their own attitudes and behaviour. As they say, 'be the change that you want to see.'

The author is a teacher educator, author and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA). The opinions expressed are her own personal views and do not reflect the views of anyone else, including her current employer. She can be reached via email at neda.mulji@gmail.com and Twitter at [@nedamulji](https://twitter.com/nedamulji).

