

## DISCIPLINE

The progressive release of sections of the Vinson Report have attracted considerable media attention and been debated by teachers in both government and non-government schools. The discussion of discipline raises many questions for public education and, for Christians, it provides an opportunity to shed some light on a topic of perennial interest to teachers and the community. The focus in *Blast from the past*, *TCFNews* last month and this month, featuring *The Concept of School Discipline and a Christian Interpretation* by Dr Anna Hogg refreshes our minds about the Christian principles of discipline.

Fundamental to an understanding of discipline is the distinction between discipline and control. Discipline is always about self-discipline: consistent good behaviour for a common purpose involving self-direction and a limitation of behaviour. Such behaviour has a moral dimension, a sense of free will and is more than control.

When reviewing discipline policy, be it at a class, school or system level, a focus on control, rules, sanctions and intervention is to enforce order not discipline. In keeping with much of the current literature on educational reform, a holistic approach is needed to discipline. In what follows, the reforms to rules, sanctions and intervention are acknowledged as important and requiring attention by schools, systems and government, but what is promoted is the positive development of discipline in schools, public schools in particular.

### Values

If discipline has a moral dimension, then the values that underpin schooling need to be articulated and permeate the culture, relationships and teaching of the school community. For faith-based schools, these values are defined in the nature of the faith that conceives them. For government schools, community values become a cornerstone and other independent schools are free to adopt their own set of values. Some have considered that government schools are disadvantaged by not aligning with a particular values system but this is not necessarily the case. Getting agreement on a set of community values is not difficult. The current discussion paper, *The Values of NSW Public Schools* like its predecessor *The Values We Teach* provides a widely accepted, but contestable, set of values.

While such statements are to be applauded, they are of little consequence unless they become the focus for what schools do. Implementation into the policies and practices of schools and the lessons of teachers is what the community is looking for – action not words. Discipline has a values base.

### Relationships

Most indiscipline occurs because of breakdowns in personal relationships. Students are off-side with a parent, a friend or a teacher. Broken relationships are rarely healed through the application of rules even where they bring justice. The relationship between teachers and students has always been fundamental to learning and discipline. Students are experts at picking hypocrisy and respond poorly to teachers who are not themselves what they want their students to become. Students look for authentic adults and the teacher who doesn't actually like students will always struggle to achieve discipline. Discipline is about relationships.

### Pedagogy

With the move to new syllabus in Years 7-10, the concerns of middle schooling and the alienation of students, there is a strong move to improve teaching pedagogy to make it more student centred and focussed on engaging learners in real world (authentic) tasks. While supporting such a move, teachers should not believe that pandering to the interests of students or delivering lessons through improved pedagogy alone can provide discipline. If good behaviour exists only when students are interested then discipline has still to be learnt. The students who put their heads down to do mundane tasks show discipline. Discipline is more than pedagogy.

### Democratic practices

Discipline is also a function of school climate and in schools that exhibit good communication, collaboration, inclusiveness, representation, appropriate decision-making process and a focus on the

common good, discipline is more likely to be taught and achieved. Discipline is about school structures and organisation.

### **Interventions**

Teaching discipline is a positive approach to discipline in schools and involves a values base, positive teacher-student relationships, student-centred pedagogy and democratic practices. This holistic approach can also be an appropriate base for explicit teaching techniques to encourage discipline and for taking appropriate action when indiscipline occurs. Teacher training courses and inservice education abound in particular practical strategies. Schools are also able to call upon specialist teachers and units to assist students with particular behaviour disorders.

Schools should constantly review their discipline codes to see if they are encouraging discipline or merely establishing control. What does it say about rules? Are there many rules or a few general rules that students have to apply in different contexts? Discipline can be taught by requiring students to apply general rules, for example, respect other people and other people's property, in a range of contexts.

All these interventions and discipline systems within schools are important and necessary but no government can rely on such measures alone to bring about discipline in schools. Most of these interventions and policies are about dealing with indiscipline, about getting control, about getting the *right* behaviour in the setting of the school community. Students who are truly disciplined carry their consistently good behaviour into the community.

### **Holistic approach**

If discipline is to be a focus in schools, then a multifaceted, holistic approach is needed that will see, at the one time,:

- a values statement implemented so that it permeates all aspects of school life
- a focus on caring teacher-student relationships
- teachers using a teaching pedagogy that is student-centred and engages students in authentic tasks
- implementation of democratic practices in schools and
- the use of appropriate interventions, sanctions and discipline codes.

Christians in every sector have a role to play in this pursuit of truth and goodness.