

Discipline – Improving Classroom Management through Action Research: A Professional Development Plan

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Abstract

Action research is an effective plan for the professional development of teachers. It helps practitioners' to improve their teaching skills. This research paper examines the strategies used by the researcher to maintain discipline in classroom through action research. The paper determines whether punishment and de-motivation are better reinforcing tool to maintain discipline and whether there is a relation between punishment and de-motivation with learners' behavior. The teacher identified the areas of improvement in maintaining classroom discipline. For this particular research, Individual Action Research Plan was adopted. A professional plan was developed and implemented using Skinnerian model of discipline (1930-1955) to maintain discipline in classroom through positive reinforcement instead of punishment. The sampling consisted of 60 students (30 males and 30 females) of grade 9-10. The data was collected through personal observations, reflective diary and audio recordings. The study concludes that there is a definite relationship between punishment and de-motivation with learners' behavior. The students were more relaxed when the positive reinforcement was adopted and when the routine plan was made keeping in mind the interest of the students. They were more engaged in class when the punishment and de-motivation were avoided. Positive reinforcement, substituting punishment and implementing students' opinion helped a lot in maintaining discipline and in improving learners' behavior. The action research helped the researcher to maintain classroom management through effective discipline practices.

Keywords: Classroom management, Action research, Discipline, Professional development plan

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Introduction

Teaching is my passion and I always believe that unless teaching practitioners' workout to find the solutions to the problems, reformation cannot take place in teaching practices. Action research helped me to polish classroom management skills. Mills (2003) defined action research as any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, administrators, counselors, or others to know about particular teaching practice or learning process. Guskey (2000) focused on teachers as the key to successful reform and stated, "The overwhelming majority of educators are thoughtful, inquiring individuals who are inclined to solve problems and search for answers to pressing questions. The inquiry/action research model of professional development provides them with opportunities to do just that" (p. 26). Hollingsworth & Sockett (1994) described teacher research as being instrumental in creating the groundwork and vision needed to further "professionalize teaching and rethink . . . schools" (p. 17). Similarly, Oja and Pine (1989) stated that those teaching practitioners who engage in the process of action research are more reflective. Suter (2006) asserted that teachers can make exemplary contributions to instructional improvement if they conduct action research.

Many teachers find it difficult to maintain discipline in classroom. It is moderately difficult for them to use effective techniques to prevent the development of classroom discipline problems (Fields, 1986; Hart, Wearing, & Conn, 1995; Johnson, Oswald, & Adey, 1993; Lewis, 2001; Oswald, Johnson, & Whittington, 1997). Many of the researchers believe that there are at least three main approaches to maintain classroom discipline (Lewis, 1997; Wolfgang, 1995). Researchers believe that teachers must develop clear expectations and apply a range of rewards and recognitions for good behaviour as well as punishments for misbehaviour (Canter & Canter, 2002; Swinson & Melling, 1995; Swinson & Cording, 2002). Others argue that discipline can only be attained by student self-regulation which is facilitated by using techniques such as negotiating, discussing, and contracting (Freiberg, 1996; Pearl & Knight, 1998; Schneider, 1996; Vitto, 2003; Wade, 2000). The third orientation favours team work, whereby the team takes responsibility for ensuring the appropriateness of the behaviour of all its members (Edwards & Mullis, 2003; Glasser, 1984; Johnson & Johnson, 2006; Schneider, 1996).

Recent researches suggest a number of strategies to maintain discipline. Some of these strategies include the application of punishment, humiliations, yelling, and teachers' aggression, which is believed to increase hostility (Lewis, 2001). In contrast, there are few

strategies that may be more productive such as positive reinforcement, recognition of responsible behavior and giving attention to misbehaving students.

Background of the Study

Discipline is one of the important areas for teachers to maintain for achieving timely educational goals. It is normally associated with command and control and is often taken as synonymous with punishment or regulation. Weinstein & Mignano (1993) defined discipline as an important contributing factor to develop a caring community. Three pillars form the basis for this type of discipline: Respect for authority figures, a system of rewards and punishment, and a set of consequences (Sonn, 2002:24). Pienaar (2003) believes that discipline is a process in which a person learns.

Discipline in a classroom aims at securing children's compliance with adult demands (Kohn, 1996: xii) for which, teachers often adopt approach of punishment. It is a very popular method for influencing behaviour in schools. Punishment suppresses behaviour, either by the presentation of something negative or by the removal of something positive (Woolfolk, 1998).

Punishment consists of delivery of an unpleasant or aversive stimulus following a response (Roediger et al., 1984). It is usually viewed as negative since it is designed to force an individual to remove, or to unlearn some unwanted cognitive or affective behavior (Van Wyk, 2000: 1). It does not generally motivate learners to improve their behaviour; it simply teaches them to avoid the punishment (Galvin et al., 1999:85).

Another strategy teachers' use to maintain discipline is by demotivating students in front of others. Dornyei (2005: 143) defines demotivation as "specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action".

Teachers may use harsh language, threat students to complete their work on time and criticize students, which may lead to less class participation or behavior problem among students. Lack of respect for teachers is one of the main causes of discipline problems in the classroom. When students are asked to do something in class, they protest, and refuse to carry out the instruction. It only happens when teacher uses strict rules or apply other such methods to de-moralize students. Contrary to that, if the rights are given to the students' to be liberal, they often abuse the so-called 'rights' and at times, the teachers are unable to curb the situation. The decline of learner's performance could also be due to tighter academic standards where hard work and

creativity are necessary to cope, in addition to less personal attention and fewer opportunities to participate in classroom decision-making (Berg, 2003:530-631).

Oxford (1998) carried out an investigation on approximately 250 American students (both in high schools and universities) about their learning experiences over a period of five years. During this investigation, students were expected to comment on a variety of topics related to their experience with teachers, friends, etc. Four types of de-motivation factors were revealed: the teacher's personal relationship with the students; the teacher's attitude towards the course or the material; style conflicts between teachers and students and the nature of the classroom activities. Many negative gestures were found such as the teacher's lack of caring or patronage/favoritism; the teacher's lack of enthusiasm and sloppy management towards the course or the material; their conflicts about the degree of closure or seriousness of the class and the amount of irrelevance and repetitiveness. The research revealed that most teachers easily attribute students de-motivation to various reasons including psychological, attitudinal, social, historical and even geographical reasons without realizing the potential de-motivating roles of them.

Sonn (2002) believes that positive discipline is the best form of discipline as it focuses on positive aspects of behaviour in the class, reinforcing good behaviour through rewards and involve learners in decision-making about rewards and punishment (Sonn, 2002:25).

Psychologists have dominated debates on school discipline and classroom management (Slee, 1995:18). Examples are B.F. Skinner (science of behaviour), W. Glassers (reality and control therapies) and C. Rogers (humanist psychology).

Prior to 1970 there was no real need for systematic classroom control models (Allen, 1996:1) since behavioural problems in the classrooms were minimal. Educators asserted their authority to maintain discipline (Allen, 1996) and the learners were well-behaved. However according to Charles (1999:7) Redl and Wattenberg developed the first discipline plan in 1951 to understand the difference between individual behaviour and group dynamics. Their techniques helped educators to deal with misbehaving learners. In 1965 B.F. Skinner (Charles, 1999:68) introduced the concept behaviour modification to modify misbehaviour. After this period, the discipline in schools deteriorated. This necessitated the development of formal discipline models to deal with disciplinary problems.

Jacob Kounin's (1971) constructed a model to advocate that classroom management can be used to modify learners' behaviour

(Charles, 1999:8). Rudolf Dreikers (Charles, 1999:43) presented his Confronting Mistaken Goals discipline plan, which stated that educators could model democratic behaviour by involving learners in setting rules and consequences. Following this system was the work by Lee and Marlene Canter (Charles, 1999:82), which culminated in the assertive discipline plan.

In order to reduce student de-motivation, Williams and Burden (1997) suggested strategies: to recognize the complexity of motivation; be aware of both initiating and sustaining motivation; discuss with the learners why they are carrying out activities; involve learners in making decisions related to learning the language and in setting language-learning goals; recognize people as individuals; enhance intrinsic motivation; build up a supportive learning environment and give feedback that is informational (pp.141-142).

To diminish teacher de-motivation, Corno and Kanfer (1993:312-13) put forward a set of self-motivating strategies for teachers: reflect immediately after a lesson on how it went and plan what to do differently next time; value your teaching; observe other teacher as a learning tool; analyze why you are anxious about aspects of your work and think through ways to overcome it; rearrange the classroom layout for maximal attention from students and call teacher study groups to resolve problems cooperatively.

The above sets of strategies serve as guidelines in reducing student and teacher de-motivation in classroom learning activities.

I always presumed that I could keep better discipline in classroom. To maintain discipline, I was using such strategies which were increasing hostility rather promoting responsible student behaviour (Lewis, 2001). Those strategies were appropriate from my lens, but when I observed change in behavior of students' and their less participation in classroom activities, I decided to review my discipline management practices. I revisited the methods, which I was using for maintaining discipline. I dived into the problem, had conversation with few of the students and their parents and read the research literature about discipline. Gradually I developed a deeper and more specific understanding of the problem in the context of my own classroom as I collect evidence from classroom observation, diary and recordings. Based on the areas of improvement, I later developed a plan. The plan includes the conceptualization of strategies and activities to maintain discipline in classroom. I implemented the new plan while focusing on two areas of improvement: substituting punishment and de-motivation with positive reinforcement to maintain discipline. I personally believe

that action research is never-ending. The revised plan becomes the object of new reflections for me and still I am improving.

Research Design

This research is particularly important to assess self and to improve discipline practices. The study focuses on how action research improves the practitioner's own understanding of (her/his) educational practices to maintain discipline in class. This action research tried:

- To determine the current discipline practices in the classroom;
- To determine whether punishment and de-motivation was the better reinforcing tool to maintain discipline;
- To determine, through action research, whether there is a relationship between learners' behavior and the discipline practices.

Methodology

Action research is a form of self-reflection aimed at the improvement of a social practice (Hopkins, 1985:56). This paradigm relies on qualitative data, holistic analysis and description derived from close contact with the targets of study. Using the techniques of in-depth personal observations, I tried to find the issues associated with my classroom discipline practices.

For this particular research, Individual Action Research type is adopted. Skinnerian model of discipline (1930-1955) was used to maintain discipline in classroom through positive reinforcement instead of punishment. This model places emphasis on reinforcement immediately following a given behaviour, and if this reinforcement is not provided behaviour will weaken. According to Skinner, humans behave the way they do because of reinforcement. Reinforcement is anything that happens to the individual after the individual performs a particular action (Charles, 1999:70). Positive reinforcement is the process of supplying a stimulus that reinforces behaviour and negative enforcement is the process of removing something following misbehaviour (Charles, 1999:70). Reinforcement includes verbal approval, high grades, prizes, and rewards.

This model suggests shaping desired behavior. The main features of this model are:

- Behavior is conditioned by consequences.
- Behavior is maintained by reinforcement.
- Behavior becomes weaker if not followed by reinforcement.
- Behavior is also weakened by punishment.

- In the early stages of learning, constant reinforcement produces the best result.
- Once learning has reached the desired level, it is best maintained through intermittent reinforcement, provided only occasionally.
- Behavior modification is applied in these two main ways: The teacher observes the student perform an undesired act; the teacher rewards the student; the student tends to repeat the act; The teacher observes the student perform an undesired act; the teacher either ignores the act or punishes the student, then praises a student who is behaving correctly; the misbehaving student becomes less likely than before to repeat the act misbehaviour (Charles, 1999).

Behavior modification successfully uses various kinds of reinforcers. They include social reinforcers such as verbal comments, facial expressions, and gestures; graphic reinforcers such as marks and stars; activity reinforcers such as free time and collaborating with a friend; and tangible reinforcers such as prizes and printed awards (<http://www.teachermatters.com/classroom-discipline/models-of-discipline/the-skinner-model.html>).

Sampling

The sampling consists of 60 students (30 males and 30 females) of grade 9-10.

Data collection strategies

The data was collected through personal observations, reflective diary and audio recordings. Students' forum was also launched where students shared their views without hesitation.

Ethical Consideration

In Action Research, the researcher has to keep all ethical consideration in mind. Richard Winter (1996) lists a number of principles which include: consulting the authorities for taking permission; taking consent from the participants before making observations or examining documents, and sharing the work with the participants. The researcher discussed the plan with the students and also took permission from the management, students and parents' before initiating the action cycle.

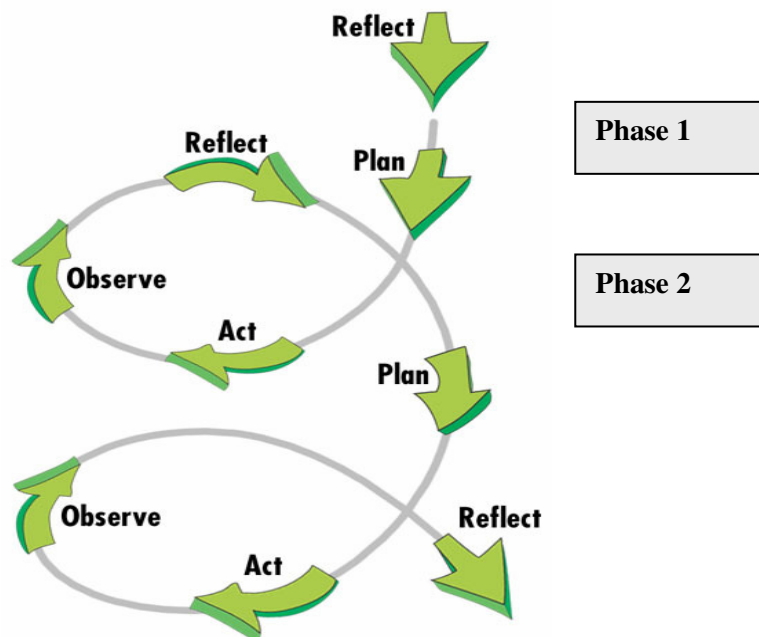
The Action Cycle

Stephen Corey (1953) defined action research as the process through which practitioners study the problems associated with teaching, evaluate

it and take possible actions to improve teaching practices. Borg (1965) has also emphasized that teachers should know the problems in their own classrooms and get involved in finding the best possible solutions for the improvement of teaching – learning and evaluation processes.

Susman (1983) distinguishes five phases to be conducted within each research cycle. Initially, a problem is identified and data is collected for a more detailed diagnosis. This is followed by several possible solutions, from which a single plan of action emerges and is implemented. Data on the results of the intervention are collected and analyzed, and the findings are interpreted in light of how successful the action has been. At this point, the problem is re-assessed and the process begins another cycle. This process continues until the problem is resolved.

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) developed a concept for action research. They proposed a spiral model comprising four steps: planning, acting, observing and reflecting.



Reflect (Identification of the problem)

I have been in the field of teaching since many years. I always believed that I am a good teacher. My students love me and they share personal problems with me from their personal problems to their academic issues.

The students always took interest in my class and also maintained excellent grades.

Since from the last three years, I changed my pattern of maintaining discipline. I felt that my students were taking advantages of my leniency. They started asking extra questions, not related to the subject and also started interfering in my personal matters. Although they maintained good grades, but were not completing homework on time, complaining about their personal matters, taking long leaves, avoiding attending extra classes, talking with each other, using cell phones, flattering to get good marks, arguing with me on different issues, taking self-decisions at many instances rather respecting my views, so on and so forth. I felt that unless strict rules are imposed, it is impossible to maintain discipline, but I never reviewed the strategies I used to maintain discipline in classroom. I thought punishment and de-motivation would be the best tool to maintain discipline. It widened the gap of trust and also instigated them to show disruptive behavior. I became a strict teacher and whenever students asked anything, I mostly de-motivated them in order to maintain discipline. Whenever my students were late to submit their assignment or forgot to complete their homework, I punished them by making them sit for long hours, or by attending extra classes on Sundays. I also started asking them to sit on the floor or to re-write the homework three to five times. At times, I threatened students to take them out of the class or inform their parents if they won't listen to my commands. I also started giving less attention to those students, who were not listening to the guidelines. I was a bit dissatisfied with all this, but in order to maintain discipline, I had to adopt strict measures. Sometimes least interested students were asked not to attend the class. They shift their seating arrangement occasionally, but this time, it was also banned.

According to UNICEF's Asian Report (2001:6), "punishment reinforces uncertainty and an identity of failure. It reinforces rebellion, resistance, revenge and resentment".

I also observed the same kind of response. Few of the students started arguing with me and started coming late to attend the classes. They were also caught red handed using cell phone in the class. I never used physical punishment, rather ask students to attend extra classes or to do extra home work. Whenever I threatened to inform their parents about their mis-conduct, they showed no sign of fear, rather commanding me to follow their instructions. This time it was uncontrollable for me as whenever I used punishment (not physical), they were more hyper and at times argued with me.

Gottredson (1989) reported that students viewed most disciplinary problems as resulting from rules that were unjust or unfairly applied. In particular, students who are already at-risk for disruption may see confrontational discipline as a challenge to escalate their behavior.

I often de-motivated students by personal attacks and barely encouraged them. Those who were good at studies were criticized without any reason while those who were weak were further de-motivated by sharing their weakness with others. Since there were female students as well in the class, male students mostly considered my taunts as an insult; at the same time, female students often felt embarrassment whenever I criticized them.

Some teachers interrupt female students more often than male students or allow female to be easily interrupted by others during class discussions (Hall & Sandler, 1982) while praising female students for being polite and waiting their turn (Eccles & Jacobs, 1986). In my classroom, there was no gender discrimination. Both genders were treated equally. Sadker & Sadker (1986a) believe that boys receive more teacher reactions of praise, criticism and remediation. Baker (1986) reported that in secondary science classrooms more precise teacher comments were rendered to males than to females in terms of conduct. In my classroom, relaxation in punishment was often granted to female students due to their sensitive nature.

Before I begun action research, I asked myself the following questions (Barrett and Whitehead, 1985) What is my concern? Why am I concerned? What do I think I could do about it? I thought that the strategy of keeping discipline in my class was successful. But was I good at maintaining discipline? I guess, yes; but from the students' point of view, it was not. Since from the last few months, I observed that few of the students were less participative in classroom activities and showed sign of disruptive behavior.

Christophel and Gorham (1995, 1992) initiated two different investigations of de-motivation. The results indicated that most subjects attribute de-motivation to what the teacher had done or had been responsible for. Gorham and Christophel (1992) also summarized a rank of order of the frequency of the various demotives, with first five categories as dissatisfaction with grading and assignments; the teacher being boring, bored, unorganized and unprepared; the dislike of the subject area; the inferior organization of the teaching material and the teacher being unapproachable, self-centered, biased, condescending and insulting. These ranks offer initiative insight into the true nature of teacher's role in de-motivation.

Collection and Organization of Data

There was something missing in my classroom. That bond of trust and understanding, students' inquiry on different topics, thirst of knowledge, request to arrange extra classes, all these things were missing. I wanted to know whether my strategies to maintain discipline were appropriate or not? And if suitable, then what were the reasons for student's less participation and disruptive behavior?

I felt that my views about keeping discipline were skeptical. I wanted to find what really was happening? Why the student's behavior changed towards me and why were they less participative? Punishment and de-motivation are so common practice throughout the world then what's wrong if I was practicing it to maintain discipline? But when I observed change in students' behavior, I decided to look into my discipline practices.

The capability of reflection is basic to teacher professionalism (Raines & Shadiow, 1995; Perrone & Traver, 1996). Therefore, I finally decided to learn and improve the areas of weakness.

Plan

Teachers need to express feelings before any substantive analysis of the teaching can occur (Richert, 1993). I conducted an extensive research to find the issues via recorded audios, observations and through reflective diary. The writing of reflection diary provided an opportunity for the expression of feelings and analysis of work. Reflection on teaching practice does not occur in a vacuum but within broader issues of purposes, goals, values and constraints. I therefore planned to write reflective diary on regular basis.

Direct observation of classrooms is the best methodology available for studying how teachers' teach. Good and Brophy (1974) showed clearly that teachers are unaware of some of their behavior. Moreover, teachers may report that they engage in instructional practices thought to be desirable more than they actually do. For both reasons, teacher self-reports (for example, teacher surveys and interviews) are unlikely to represent teacher behavior accurately. Student surveys may capture students' attitudes toward what teachers do. Audio recordings of lessons can provide very useful information for reflection. Pak (1985) recommends recording for a one or two week period and then randomly selecting a cassette for closer analysis is the best strategy to look closer into the teaching practices.

I decided to record the audio tapes for two weeks and later listen to the randomly selected audio tape to identify the areas of improvement.

Since students' feedback was crucial, I maintained a networking group for students to share their views and opinions.

Act

Keeping all these considerations in mind, I planned to observe my discipline practices. I also started writing a reflective diary after every class. I mentioned my weakness, strength and areas of improvement on regular basis. The reflective diary, more than just listing experiences and knowledge of commercial awareness, included revisiting initial understanding and knowledge and re-evaluating the experience, as suggested by Boud, Cohen and Walker (1993). I also shared the views with my colleague suggested for peer review for my classroom and later gave me feedback. These feedbacks along with the audio recordings helped me to identify the areas of improvement. Students networking group was also launched where students shared their views, which helped a lot to validate my findings.

Observe (findings)

Good observation requires looking at what is happening and describing it accurately. Its purpose is to provide a sound base for reflection by producing a widely accepted understanding of what actually happened (Quixley, 1997). Based on the data collected, I observed that my strategies to maintain discipline were inappropriate.

Corporal punishment, favoritism, arguments with the students, dictator attitude, external environment, de-motivating students, loud voice, self-praising, commenting on external affairs, repeating the instructions, use of harsh language, strict classroom rules, arranging extra classes, giving extra homework were the key identified areas, which causes distraction and discipline problems.

Reflect

The researcher focused on two areas of improvement

1. Punishment to maintain discipline
2. De-motivation to maintain discipline

The discipline strategies exaggerate students' behavior and they were less participative in classroom activities. The student may associate the punishment with being honest rather than with the original offense; the result may be that the student learns not to tell the truth (Dalton, 1973). In my classroom, punishment promoted violent behavior in few of the students who bully others to distract classroom discipline while de-motivation held the other students back to share their ideas and views

with me. Few of the students were so much frustrated that they started using cell phones during the class to create more nuisances, while the other students were less participative. Whenever I asked questions, most of the students kept quiet as they were quiet aware that sooner or later, they will hear negative comments.

Extra homework and classes were arranged for mischievous students. Whenever students were punished, most of them started protesting and firmly decided not to follow my instructions. If misbehaviour is the learner's way of making mistakes, then the mistakes need correction rather punishment. The problem with punishment is that it transforms the offender into a victim (Galvin *et al.* 1999:86). As a result, the offenders do not take ownership; instead they look for retribution rather we should be positive enough to find, how can we help them. In my classroom, punishment and de-motivation offended few of the students, while others were instigated to behave the same.

Revised Plan

Based on the observations and reflections, I prepared a plan of action using Skinnerian model of discipline to maintain discipline in classroom through positive reinforcement. This model places emphasis on reinforcement immediately following a given behaviour, and if this reinforcement is not provided behaviour will weaken. Positive reinforcement is the process of supplying a stimulus that reinforces behaviour and negative enforcement is the process of removing something following misbehaviour (Charles, 1999:70). I used positive reinforcement to motivate students for active participation.

Skinner used the term operant to refer to any "active behavior that operates upon the environment to generate consequences" (1953). In other words, Skinner's theory explained how we acquire the range of learned behaviors we exhibit each and every day.

Act

I started appreciating students whenever they completed work on time and also motivated them to continue their efforts. Whenever it was difficult for the students to complete their tasks, I facilitated them. They were encouraged to raise questions. Their queries were replied with positive gestures. This helped to re-gain the trust and students were now more comfortable in sharing their ideas as well as their issues with me.

Those students who were misbehaving in classroom were given negative reinforcement. According to Skinner (quoted in Tuckman 1992: 61), when bad behavior is punished, it may merely be suppressed and may reappear later under different circumstances. Ironically the punisher

may serve as a model for future aggressive behavior on the part of the person being punished. I was using the mode of punishment to maintain discipline but experienced the same, as mentioned by Skinner. The students suppressed their feelings but finally exposed it, which was bitter for me to accept. But this time, two of the mischievous students were asked not to attend extra classes, late sittings as they were distracting others attention. They were also given less attention during the class. Strategies such as ignoring misbehaving students persuaded students to behave acceptably. New rules were set for all the students. They were also asked to submit their cell phones before entering the class. The reinforce strategy was used by allocating 5 minutes time at the end of the each session for the students' to use cell phone.

I started using verbal appreciation and stopped my habit of de-motivating students. In place of punishment, I preferred to encourage those students, who were not showing interest in classroom activities. Since homework was mandatory to give, I reinforced students by giving less work and sometimes no work to those, who actively participating during classroom teaching. The behavior of few of the misbehaving students was conditioned when they looked at those, who were given less or no homework.

To confirm maximum participation, different strategies were used. Activities were integrated in the lesson plans and group discussions were encouraged. I tried to appreciate students whenever they submitted assignments on time. This encouraged other students to participate as well.

Observe

Since it was a well thought out, flexible and coordinated action plan, it helped to maintain discipline and it was found that when the punishment, harsh attitude and de-motivation were substituted with positive discipline strategies, discipline was maintained (to an extent) in the classroom and student participation was maximized.

Reflect

The study concludes that there was a definite correlation between punishment and de-motivation with learners' behavior. The previous classroom discipline practices were unsuccessful. The students were more relaxed when the positive reinforcement was adopted and when the routine plan was made keeping in mind the interest of the students. They were more engaged in class when the punishment and de-motivation were reduced, and when their opinions were valued. I noticed that positive reinforcement, substituting punishment and accepting students'

opinion helped a lot in maintaining discipline. Although there are many more areas where I need to work, but being a reflective teacher, I successfully improved classroom management by using revised strategies to maintain discipline.

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