Why discipline needs to be reclaimed as an educational concept

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Why discipline needs to be reclaimed as an educational concept

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This paper considers different conceptualisations of school discipline within both UK education policy and wider educational and philosophical literature. Initially, it is noted that notions of “behaviour management” dominate discourses about school discipline. It is suggested that this is unhelpful as behaviour management skills are underpinned by a behaviourist understanding of learning that denies pupils an important degree of agency over their own development – pupils are rather portrayed as unruly and morally deficient. It is therefore maintained that discipline needs to be reclaimed as an educational concept as it can be a valuable personal quality whose possession indicates a capacity to set important goals for oneself and see them through even in the face of difficulty. With reference to the diverse philosophies of Dewey, P.S. Wilson, Durkheim, Oakeshott, and MacMurray, it is contended that a re-conceived notion of school discipline might enable less controlling and behaviourist and more educational discipline in at least three ways: the ethical (by guiding the ethical development of pupils), the humanising (by encouraging pupils to act for the sake of others rather than only think about themselves) and the epistemic (by supporting pupils to engage in the pursuit of valued interests and knowledge).

Keywords: discipline; agency; philosophy

Introduction

There is a significant body of literature dedicated to the issue of how to “manage” pupils to help them to “behave better” in schools.¹ This managerial way of thinking and speaking about school discipline has exerted considerable influence on both education policy and practice. Indeed, the vocabulary of “behaviour management” is rather replete in UK education policy, where demands for an even greater teacher focus on managing pupil behaviour through systems of reward and sanction have more recently been made.² In England, the first key principle recommended to teachers and schools in the recent Behaviour and Discipline in Schools report is a consistent approach to behaviour management. Further principles include: classroom management, rewards and sanctions, behaviour strategies and better management of transitions. While recent Scottish policy does endorse more relational approaches to school discipline and the encouraging of positive behaviour precisely what constitutes “positive” behaviour is subject to little critical interrogation.³ Furthermore, it is a mandatory expectation that all Scottish teachers will have developed a set of “positive behaviour strategies” before they can register to teach with

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the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS 2012). Given these practical imperatives and points of policy emphasis it is perhaps unsurprising that the most frequently bought literature by teachers concerning school discipline is of the how to control and manage your class variety. Thus all too often notions of behaviour management dominate discourses around school discipline at the levels of policy, teacher education and practice. Such behaviour management literatures and discourses may well have some educational value in terms of offering practical strategies that can support teachers to get pupils on task and engaged in learning. However, in this article, it will be argued that the emphasis on teacher “management” denies pupils a certain vital degree of agency over their own education and development, instead portraying them as unruly and morally deficient and rather in need of “management” without which they could not learn to behave better.

The argument will unfold in three phases. It will first be maintained that advocates of behaviour management (such as Bill Rogers) rather unhelpfully assert that “positive” discipline can be promoted when behaviour management skills are learned by teachers. It is instead claimed that the behaviour management skills in question are underpinned by a controlling and behaviourist understanding of learning that denies pupils an important degree of agency over their own education and development. This “positive” view of discipline is therefore rejected and it is secondly averred that discipline needs to be reclaimed as an educational concept. The paper thereafter draws upon philosophical literature in an attempt to articulate how discipline might better support the ends of education. Following Dewey, it is put forward that discipline can be genuinely educational when it is conceived of as a valuable personal quality whose possession indicates a capacity to set important goals for oneself and see them through even in the face of considerable difficulty. Furthermore, it is argued that genuinely educational discipline involves pupil agency where pupils actively shape, and direct their own learning and development. This agentic understanding of discipline can be contrasted with the behaviourist view. On the controlling and behaviourist view of discipline, pupils are portrayed as unruly and morally deficient and in need of management without which they could not learn to behave better.

With reference to the diverse philosophies of Oakeshott, P.S. Wilson, Durkheim and MacMurray, it is thirdly contended that a re-conceived notion of school discipline might enable less controlling and behaviourist and more educational discipline in at least three ways: the ethical (by guiding the ethical development of pupils), the humanising (by encouraging pupils to act for the sake of others rather than only think about themselves) and the epistemic (by supporting pupils to engage in the pursuit of valued interests and knowledge). I conclude by briefly contemplating some practical implications of the theoretical position adopted in the paper. In particular it is suggested that when it comes to the matter and manner of school discipline teachers should ask a set of questions of themselves that focus on educational rather than managerial ends. First then what is “positive” discipline from a behavioural managerial perspective?

**Behaviour management and discipline as “positive” reinforcement**

Positive discipline is learned behaviour. It can make a difference. (Rogers 2011, 68)

Bill Rogers is one of the most well-known advocates of teachers’ learning behaviour management skills so as to overcome issues of school discipline. As he
puts it, “behaviour management is essential to the smooth running of a school” (Rogers 2011, 5). Rogers opines that the meaning of discipline is generally misunderstood by parents and teachers who too often equate it with mere punishment. Rogers, however, specifies that discipline is actually concerned with guidance and the ways in which teachers balance pupil rights and responsibilities and enhance social order (Rogers 2011, 50). In this respect, Rogers at least partially echoes an important distinction (between school discipline and school punishment) made over 30 years earlier by Peters (1970). For Peters, discipline is a very general concept concerned with bringing human activity to order while punishment is a much more specific concept concerned with what happens or should when human activity is not successfully brought to order. Thus, readers of Rogers work are encouraged to make critical discriminations between disciplining pupils on the one hand and punishing them on the other. Indeed, Rogers (2011) seems to distinguish between “positive” discipline (positive language and possession of a global behaviour management skill set) and corrective discipline (negative language and lack of global behaviour management skill set).

Rogers explains that “positive” discipline entails the adoption of positive rather than negative language – he thinks too many teachers overuse negative terms like “don’t”, “stop” or “no”. An example of the positive language Rogers prefers is asking students to sit on the mat rather than telling them not to wander (Rogers 2011). However, for Rogers, positive discipline entails more than the adoption of positive language –

Language alone … is not enough. Language is affected by the “global set” of behaviour. Positive language is also affected by our tone of voice, how hurried or snappy our speech is, by eye contact, proximity to the student and body language … How our language is heard by the student depends greatly on our characteristic nonverbal behaviour. (Rogers 2011, 55)

Rogers thus cites teachers’ non-verbal behaviour as being as central to establishing positive discipline as their verbal utterances. Indeed, Rogers (2011, 56–57) identifies six key non-verbal behaviours that together make up a “global set” of teacher skills that can augment positive language and in turn promote positive discipline. These are:

- **Tone of voice** – Don’t be hostile and indecisive, but instead be assertive and uplifting in use of voice.
- **Bearing and general body posture** – Stand with confidence and move in a relaxed way – jerky movements may lead to kinaesthetic learners focussing on teacher movement rather than instruction.
- **Postural/gestural cues** – Do we smile and show engagement and confidence in our faces with reasonable frequency?
- **Proximity** – Teachers should consider how physically close they are to students when they speak to them as these aspects of behaviour can evidence intent, support and care.
- **Eye contact** – Can demonstrate attention or interest. It is important to gain initial eye contact and follow with directional language to remove ambiguity about the meaning of the eye contact.
- **Take up time** – The use of tactical pausing can enhance expectation and be a powerful social cue.
Rogers explains that these skills may not in themselves have much effect on discipline – however, taken “globally they can convey a positive, managerial tone” (Rogers 2011, 58). Furthermore, Rogers exclaims that “positive” alteration in teacher language and behaviour can positively influence the behaviour of students adding that this “is not manipulation or mere technique” (Rogers 2011, 58). What should be made of these claims that the teacher adoption of positive language and six key non-verbal behaviours can lead to a positive improvement in pupil behaviour? I do think it possible that such behavioural tips may have some value in terms of offering practical strategies that can support teachers to get pupils on task and engaged in learning. Teachers are after all often expected to be in control of their classes so the desire to seek quick fix solutions is understandable – perhaps especially so in the case of those new to the profession. However, the practical value of such managerial tricks is I think fairly limited in range and probably does not extend beyond pupil socialisation. For example, Rogers (2011) has a point when implying that the consistent application of rules and consequences in schools may help to acquaint pupils with social norms (even if it is far from an original one) – and as Biesta (2009) also points out, socialisation is an entirely valid and important purpose of education, even if it is not the only purpose of education. However, there also appears to be both contradictory and morally questionable features in the account of positive discipline given by Rogers. To start with, Rogers seems to at least partially contradict his assertion than the “global set” of positive teacher behaviours are not mere “technique”. He, after all, later states that effective behaviour management is not a matter of teacher personality – instead key non-verbal behaviours like tone of voice and body gesture are learned skills than can positively improve pupil discipline. Quite why Rogers classifies his list of global behaviours as “learnable skills” but not “technique” is left unexplained. More questionable though is Rogers’ denial that the behaviour management skills he describes are manipulative.

In spite of Rogers’ declaration that human beings are not dogs (Rogers 2011, 58) the six key behaviours of positive discipline that he outlines nonetheless betray some remarkably Pavlovian tendencies. Indeed, some of the key practices endorsed by Rogers seem to be underpinned by a largely behaviourist understanding of human learning. In the behaviourist model of learning made famous by Pavlov and Skinner, human behaviour is held to be straightforwardly modifiable on the basis of repeated actions and consequences (Woods 2008). Rogers’ adoption of the word “positive” is perhaps apt then as the positive “language” and “nonverbal behaviour skills” he describes may well amount to no more than behaviourist strategies of “positive reinforcement”. As Woods (2008) explains, positive reinforcement occurs when a particular desired behaviour is followed by the issue of a reward with the intention of reinforcing the future frequency of occurrence of the rewarded behaviour. While Rogers does suggest that teachers may wish to discuss whether or not to reward pupils who display desired behaviours, he does undoubtedly seem to think that teachers can change pupil behaviour in desired directions by adopting the positivist language (accompanied no doubt by the six positive key global non-verbal behaviours) of consequences and reinforcements. In describing the importance of class routine, for example, he states that:

most teachers during the establishment phase of the year develop routines for pack up, tidy up and leave the room in an orderly fashion. If they don’t do these things the positive enforcement needs to include a consequence … this is clearly not simply a
punishment, it is a way of reinforcing accountability and responsibility in relation to the social good. (Rogers 2011, 114)

Thus the behaviour management skills propounded by Rogers seem to be under the sway of behaviourist psychology – Rogers’ approach to behaviour management is altogether enlivened by the language of consequences and positive reinforcements. Furthermore, Rogers holds some rather pessimistic and deterministic views of the educational potential of some pupils. He rather troublingly claims that the repertoire of behaviour management skills he pitches can help teachers “deal with argumentative students and the more objectionable members of the human race, in our schools” (Rogers 2011, 4–5). To describe pupils as “more objectionable members of the human race” certainly underscores the impression that Rogers has fairly fixed ideas about the moral limitations and behaviour of some schools pupils. A significant problem then with positive reinforcement strategies generally and with Rogers account of positive discipline particularly is that they both tend towards predetermined ideas about what good or bad behaviour consists of and of how it may be brought about. Thus, in Rogers’ work, positive discipline is not so much positive for pupils but mere positive reinforcement. More widely, discipline conceived as “management of pupils” increasingly comes to look like something that teachers largely do to pupils and in a deterministic fashion rather than something that pupils can take some personal responsibility for. Indeed, an unacknowledged effect of the behaviour management skills endorsed by Bill Rogers is a denial to pupils of an important degree of agency over their education and development – pupils are instead caught up in a web of teacher-led behaviouristic gestures, utterances, routines, reinforcements and consequences. Indeed, in the behaviourist view, pupils are portrayed as unruly and morally deficient and in need of management without which they could not learn to behave better.

In this respect, the recent English policy, The Importance of Teaching, has claimed that there is well-known academic evidence that documents how simple rules, rewards and sanctions can help pupils to improve their behaviour by taking responsibility for it. However, it is a moot point whether rewards and sanctions (consequences) actually help pupils to take personal responsibility for their conduct. Tellingly, the academic research is not named in the Importance of Teaching policy and this may be because there is ample evidence to suggest that rewards and sanctions actually fail to promote intrinsic motivation in pupils to engage in learning for its own sake – pupils are instead motivated by external factors like fear of sanction on the one hand or desire for teacher approval on the other. Thus the dominant discourse of behaviour management that has emerged in UK education policy and practice, in more recent times, appears to have some unfortunate educational consequences. Chief among these are, the marginalisation of debate about: (1) how schools might promote educational discipline and agency in pupils rather than their external management and control and (2) how discipline is often a necessary part of and motivation for, valuable learning. A new way of thinking about school discipline is arguably needed, one that puts the education back into school discipline. If behaviour management discourses do generally encourage merely behaviourist way of thinking about learning generally and pupil discipline particularly, what literatures might aid reclamation of discipline as a distinctively educational concept? Moreover, what precisely does it mean for pupils to have some agency over their education and development; and what theories of discipline might better connect pupil
agency to distinctively educational rather than managerial goals? In the remainder of this paper, I will try to address these questions by drawing upon philosophical literature – as there is a diverse if neglected range of philosophical texts that explore how school discipline might promote educational ends.

**Pupil control, pupil agency and educational discipline**

A person who is trained to consider his actions, to undertake them deliberately, is in so far forth disciplined. Add to this ability a power to endure in an intelligently chosen course in face of distraction, confusion, and difficulty, and you have the essence of discipline. (Dewey 2008, 156)

One of the first philosophers to raise awareness of the potential pitfalls of teachers being overly directive of pupils in their efforts to establish a climate of school discipline was John Dewey. Dewey was critical of the view that society should transmit and communicate “habits of doing, thinking and feeling from older to younger” (Dewey 1997, 3). His famous work *Democracy and Education* contains some pertinent observations on the nature of discipline, particularly in the 10th chapter which bears the title *Interest and Discipline*. There, he firstly explicates the concept of interest. The *interested person*, he says, is simultaneously lost and found in some matter or other of experience. The term interest indicates the “engrossment of the self in an object” (Dewey 2008, 153). Dewey argues that, etymologically speaking, interest is that which provides a link between otherwise disparate things. This aspect of interest, he continues, has important educational ramifications. He states that guiding someone to perceive the connection that exists between the agent of learning and any material to be learned is “simply good sense; to make it interesting by extraneous and artificial inducements deserves all the bad names which have been applied to the doctrine of interest in education” (Dewey 2008, 155). However, interest does not terminate when a person comes to understand an object. Interest is the “moving force” (Dewey 2008, 156) in a process of broader developing events, whose fruition is reached in action. To be interested in something *necessarily* involves having wider aims and purposes. A link between pupil interests and wider purposes is in fact a crucial feature of Dewey’s concept of discipline.

Discipline was for Dewey, a disposition of persistence and endurance in the face of challenge and difficulty. The disciplined person has the important executive ability to set goals based on their interests as well as the wherewithal to think about what actions are necessary to achieve these goals. The merely obstinate, by way of comparison, carries an action through just because they have started down that road. Their stubborn activity need not bear any relation to their wider ambitions; indeed they need not have any conscious purposes. Discipline, however, Dewey stresses, is a *positive* quality and it is positive because of the *agency* persons take over their own action and conduct. Discipline is not something that happens to pupils but something that pupils do. Only when pupil action is self-directed and consciously chosen does it makes sense to describe it as displaying *agency*. The idea that discipline involves a disposition to actively and consciously take responsibility for one’s own learning and development, even in the face of obstacle, is very different to the notion of discipline advanced in the behaviour management literature. However, the Deweyian view of discipline as something that pupils do through their own agency has been largely neglected in favour of managerial explanations in more
recent debate about school discipline. Though neglected Deweyian thought on discipline has been taken up by Charles Clark and before him, P.S. Wilson. Clark (1998) and Wilson (1971) both draw a distinction between controlled school pupils on the one hand and disciplined ones on the other. Though children subject to control may be being schooled or even socialised, they are not being educated (MacAllister 2013). While control and discipline are both the forms of order that require compulsion, the compulsion in each is quite different (Wilson 1971; Clark 1998; MacAllister 2013). For Clark and Wilson “control is merely a means of ordering things to get something done and the compulsion involved can be physical and/or psychological. The compulsion involved in discipline, by comparison, is both logical and moral” (MacAllister 2013, 25). Like in Deweyian thought, Wilson and Clark suggest that genuine discipline entails creating spaces in schools where pupils are granted a degree of agency to explore and direct their own interests rather than just follow their teacher’s guidance. Furthermore, when teachers … lose sight of the interest of children, compulsion can only take on a more sinister form of manipulation … When the discipline of children in schools is external to a child’s interest the order is not educational but controlling and should not be called, or thought to be, discipline. (MacAllister 2013, 25)

As Smith has it, genuinely educational discipline comes from immersion in the “work itself” (Smith 1985, 60) rather than in the implorations and directions of the teacher. However, the philosopher who most clearly explains the relation between agency and genuinely educational discipline is probably John MacMurray.

In The Self as Agent (1956), MacMurray explains that human agency signifies a capacity to act in the world and so influence and change the world. Through acting, persons generate or “bring into existence” an actuality or possibility – to act is to determine a possibility (MacMurray 1956). Furthermore, action involves thought and “choice” for MacMurray – a choice to generate a present possibility in this way rather than that and so (with time) determine the past in this way rather than that. MacMurray argued that only the past is wholly determinate. While we can predict what the future might look like and consist of, a determinate future is not a “real” future (MacMurray 1956). MacMurray argued that persons are only really agents able to change the future shape of the world before them, if they really are free to shape the world before them (1956). If all actions were determined in advance, then human beings would be predetermined and controlled objects rather than free agents (MacMurray 1956). Importantly MacMurray thought it was morally necessary for all persons to be conceived of as free agents able to actively and consciously alter the world around them. I think that MacMurray’s notion of the future as indeterminate, until human persons make choices through action (and agency) can reveal the limitations inherent in behaviourist ways of thinking about education generally and school discipline particularly. What distinguishes the self as agent from the self that is managed and controlled by others is the capacity to effect change in the world and so determine the future. Thus, in different ways, the philosophies of Dewey, Wilson, Clark and MacMurray show that genuinely educational discipline involves pupil agency (where pupils actively shape, and direct their own learning and development) rather than mere pupil control and management (where teachers control pupils who are granted little freedom to direct their own learning and development).
The ethical, epistemic and humanising purposes of discipline

So far it has been put forward that the sorts of behaviour management skills endorsed by Bill Rogers are underpinned by a controlling and behaviourist understanding of learning that denies pupils an important degree of agency over their own education and development. On the controlling and behaviourist view, pupils are portrayed as unruly and morally deficient and in need of management without which they could not learn to behave better. This “managerial” view of discipline has been rejected and it has been claimed that discipline can be genuinely educational when it is conceived of as valuable personal quality whose possession indicates a capacity to set important goals for oneself and see them through even in the face of considerable difficulty. It has been suggested that genuinely educational discipline involves pupil agency. But if genuinely educational discipline does involve learner agency (as is here claimed), to what ends should learner agency be directed? A consideration of the philosophical literature on school discipline reveals at least three potential ways in which pupils may actively discipline their efforts in distinctively educational ways: the ethical, the epistemic and the humanising.

Ethical discipline

While I may have so far given the impression that I take a rather dim and disdainful view of managerial and behaviourist understandings of school discipline, this does not mean that I think the behaviour management literature has nothing of value to say about how discipline might be educational. It is rather to say that I do not think such texts go far enough in explicating the links between pupil socialisation on the one hand and the ethical development of pupils on the other. Consideration of the philosophy of Emile Durkheim might help to explain my thinking on this point. In Moral Education, A Study in the Theory and Application of the Sociology of Education (1961), Durkheim devoted considerable attention to the subject of disciplining schoolchildren. Durkheim thought that possessing a sentimental attachment towards the social group was an important step in a child’s moral development. For Durkheim, the function of the school is to unite the child with larger society. The role of the teacher is to act as an intermediary between the child and society. Durkheim though maintained that discipline was a vital part of a child’s wider moral education. He speculated that there were three elements to morality: those of discipline, spirituality (which for him consisted in attachment to a social group) and self-determination or autonomy. Discipline was, in a vital sense, the fundamental element of morality that unites the others. Without discipline a person could not hope to attain the other elements of spirituality and self-determination.

Durkheim believed that a classroom was its own society and that an undisciplined classroom was lacking in morality. The morality of the class society was, for Durkheim, determined by the resolution with which a teacher reinforces impartial rules. On top of connecting the child to wider society, Durkheim suggested that the rules externally imposed by the teacher can over time become part of the pupil’s internal moral constitution. Although the child does not begin life as master of his or her appetites, discipline in schools can and should enable such self-mastery to emerge. Self-mastery of desire and attachment to the social group do not represent moral maturity for Durkheim though since the capacity for self-determination was also necessary. Durkheim seems to think that teachers should help pupils to see the
value of the rules so that they can come to freely desire them on their own terms. Self-determination appears to consist in a sort of rational or “enlightened assent” (Durkheim 1961, 120) to prevailing social standards rather than a merely habitual acceptance of them. Thus, even if Durkheim does not clearly explain how teachers can help pupils to become self-determining in the end, he does at least make clear that genuine moral development entails guiding pupils into the moral values and rules of a community but in such a way that pupils eventually become autonomous and self-determining. This understanding of ethical development is of course largely Kantian in nature – it was Kant (2007) who first suggested that all human persons should be granted the freedom to rationally determine for themselves how they ought to live. Unfortunately, however, the literature on behaviour management does not really grapple with the complexities of whether or not pupils should be inducted into community values or whether or not pupils should be encouraged to become autonomous and self-determining through discipline. In contrast, John MacMurray considered such matters in depth. His thought arguably reveals limitations in Durkheim’s, which (like behaviourist thinking) arguably encourages practices that do not go far enough in encouraging educational questioning of community values as well educational exploration of the lived reality of pupil experiences.

**John MacMurray and humanising discipline**

MacMurray (1956) contrasted human agency with human autonomy. While the sort of human autonomy defended by Durkheim positions the ideal life as being (eventually) self-directed by individuals, MacMurray instead argued that human agents have come to recognise that rational autonomy is an individualising chimera – we rather need others to be ourselves. For MacMurray, agency is something that is shared within a community and something that adds richness to community life. MacMurray did not just philosophise about human agency though. He also wrote extensively about how school discipline might promote educational rather than individual, social or managerial ends. In *Reason and Emotion* (1961), MacMurray contrasted a traditional form of discipline that socialises the child into the world with a personal form of discipline that invites the child to engage with the world. Discipline, on the traditional and social view, can be conceived as the teacher-led initiation of the child into the knowledge and values of a given community where this initiation is justified because it is thought to be of benefit to the child and to wider society (MacAllister 2014). On the traditional and social view, discipline inducts the child into the social values and bodies of knowledge deemed valuable by a community; but the community is unlikely to be altered as a result. In contrast, discipline in MacMurray’s

more radical and personal view is of an entirely different order – it requires that children be free to work out for themselves what is valuable in experience. Here, the child is not to be initiated into the external knowledge and values of a community. Instead, the disciplined and personal valuations that children themselves give to objects must drive education and learning and in the process renew the wider community. (MacAllister 2014, 126)

Furthermore, for MacMurray, the purpose of discipline is to help pupils learn to become more human. MacMurray felt that traditional approaches to education (and discipline) encouraged a rather egocentric and inhuman focus on the prospering of
the self rather than on the wider prospering of all persons in a community. For MacMurray, genuinely educational discipline involves less focus on finding the value in one’s own experiences and much greater focus on finding the value in other persons and in acting for the sake of other persons. Thus MacMurray thought learning to be human takes discipline of a very particular sort. For MacMurray, educational processes should not first and foremost discipline the attention of persons towards intellectual matters and epistemic development (MacAllister 2014). Nor should discipline primarily be a matter of fostering social and ethical development either. Education should instead encourage pupils to pay disciplined attention to each other – it should promote friendship-type relations (MacAllister 2014). MacMurray felt that the capacity to relate with others in a non-selfish and genuinely friendly way is hard and needs to be learned. In MacMurray’s philosophy then genuinely educational discipline entails pupils learning to feel and act for the sake of others rather than only think about themselves. However, MacMurray’s philosophy of educational discipline is arguably limited by its anti-intellectualism (MacAllister 2014). MacMurray, for example, does not perceive educational value in pupils disciplining their attention towards the pursuit of knowledge. This is in stark contrast to the views of liberal educationists such as Peters and Oakeshott.

**Epistemological discipline**

Though the work of Dewey, Wilson and Clark does raise awareness of the ways in which immediate pupil interests and experiences might be disciplined in educational settings, it has also been argued that such philosophies do not value enough pupil initiation into what a community deems to be valuable knowledge (MacAllister 2013). However, since Aristotle (2004) explained that *epistemic knowledge* is that knowledge which is teachable and pursuable for its own sake (as opposed to for instrumental reasons), pupil initiation into what a community deems to be valuable knowledge has generally remained a key purpose of education. Importantly, liberal educationists such as Peters (1970) and Oakeshott (1972) explain that pupils are far from passive when pursuing knowledge in any meaningful sort of way. Indeed, for both thinkers, the pursuit of valuable knowledge requires significant pupil discipline and agency. Peters maintained that the bodies of knowledge that make up the traditional school subjects are sometimes called “disciplines” because coming to understand them is a tough demanding business that requires much effort (1970). Similarly, Oakeshott explained that genuinely educational engagements between the generations of mankind involve learner discipline as well as liberation.

He says that an educational engagement is at once a discipline and a release … It is a difficult engagement of learning by study in a continuous and exacting redirection of attention and refinement of understanding which calls for humility, patience and courage. Its reward is … emancipation from the mere “fact of living” … and from the servitude of a merely current condition. (Oakeshott 1972, 47–48)

While genuinely educational discipline may well often require that learning begins from immediate pupil interests and experiences; Peters and Oakeshott also bring home how it is educationally valuable for pupil interest and effort to be disciplined within and by wider traditions of knowledge too (MacAllister 2013). Whether epistemological development begins from pupil interest (Dewey, Wilson, and Clark) or
teacher knowledge (Peters and Oakeshott), there is general philosophical consensus that pupils should be supported to engage in the disciplined pursuit of valued interests and knowledge. It is doubtful though that the mere adoption of positive language or the learning of six non-verbal behaviours can provide teachers with the skills they need to support such ethical, humanising and epistemic pupil development. Such things are not so easily achieved – they rather take considerable thought, time, commitment, action and effort on the part of both teachers and pupils.

Concluding thoughts

In this paper, it has been argued that discipline needs to be reclaimed as an educational concept. It has been suggested that notions of “behaviour management” all too often dominate discourses about school discipline. While advocates of behaviour management such as Bill Rogers assert that “positive” discipline can be promoted when behaviour management skills are learned by teachers, it has been averred that this line of thought is unhelpful. It has instead been claimed that the behaviour management skills in question are underpinned by a controlling, behaviourist understanding of learning that denies pupils an important degree of agency over their own education and development. On the controlling and behaviourist view, pupils are portrayed as unruly and morally deficient and in need of management without which they could not learn to behave better. The paper has therefore sought inspiration from philosophical literature in an attempt to articulate how discipline might better support the ends of education. Following Dewey, it has been put forward that discipline can be genuinely educational when it is conceived of as a valuable personal quality whose possession indicates a capacity to set important goals for oneself and see them through even in the face of considerable obstacle. Furthermore, it has been argued that genuinely educational discipline involves pupil agency where pupils are agents in so far as they actively shape, and direct their own learning and development. This agentic understanding of discipline is in contrast to the behaviourist view. With reference to the diverse philosophies of Oakeshott, P.S. Wilson, Durkheim and MacMurray, it has thirdly been contended that a re-conceived notion of school discipline might enable less controlling and behaviourist and more educational discipline in at least three ways: the ethical (by guiding the ethical development of pupils), the humanising (by encouraging pupils to act for the sake of others rather than only think about themselves) and the epistemic (by supporting pupils to engage in the pursuit of valued interests and knowledge).

By way of conclusion, I would like to briefly consider some possible practical ramifications from this (so far) essentially; theoretical discussion of school discipline. First and foremost when it comes to the matter and manner of school discipline I think teachers should ask a set of questions of themselves that focus on educational rather than managerial ends. Instead of asking: “what strategies can I learn to better manage my pupils”, I think teachers should instead ask “how might discipline in my class and/or school be educational?” While not wanting to restrict possible ways of thinking about discipline to the specific literatures and notions explored in this paper, further questions geared toward unpacking how discipline may be educational might include: “(1) what knowledge and skills are worth passing on to pupils and what knowledge and skills are pupils interested in learning about and how can I help pupils acquire such knowledge and skills in a disciplined way; (2) how can I help pupils become disciplined by and acquainted with social rules
and norms but in a way that also encourages critical questioning and debate about social norms and rules; and (3) how can I help pupils to think about both themselves and others?”. While these questions are admittedly very general they nonetheless open up debate about the wider aims of school discipline in a way that managerial discourses tend not to. While behaviour management strategies are not necessarily without practical value, their practical value is probably limited to pupil socialisation rather than any wider ethical, epistemic or humanistic development. The positive language and nonverbal skills Rogers describes, for example, may well help teachers to be able to better communicate the “worth of things” (2011, 58) to pupils. However, unless teachers also spend time thinking about what they think is worthwhile communicating to pupils in the first place then the strategies increasingly look like short-term fixes that do little other than socialise pupils or worse – manipulate them in rather purposeless ways. This is why it is practically important for teachers to consider the wider educational purposes of the disciplinary approaches they adopt. The three different philosophies of school discipline outlined in this paper each have weaknesses and are not intended to offer definitive guidance to teachers about how they should seek to arrange discipline in their classrooms – far from it. Indeed, teachers probably need to work out for themselves how best to promote discipline in their classrooms and schools. However, it is hoped that the philosophies explored here will encourage further thought, debate and research amongst educationists about the distinctively educational purposes that school discipline might or ought to be put to. Behaviourist and managerial methods of school discipline in contrast have the unfortunate effect of marginalising debate about the ends to which discipline ought to be put. Behaviour management strategies also obscure the fact that pupil discipline is often a necessary feature of important learning. In our current climate of global recession and with employment opportunities increasingly hard to come by it is arguably more important than ever that teachers “do all they can to help young persons” learn how to set valued goals for themselves and see them through even in the face of challenge and difficulty. Seen in this light it is difficult not to conclude that schools do pupils a great disservice if they downplay opportunities for the development of educational as opposed to managerial discipline.

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Notes
2. See, for example, Department for Education (2010) and especially the Department for Education (2012).
5. Woods (2008) also suggests that behaviourist thinking underpins the majority of approaches to discipline in schools.
7. Smith (1985) also speaks about the ways in which managerial approaches to discipline manipulate pupils rather than empower them.
8. The title of a Cowley text well fingered by teachers Getting the buggers to behave certainly adds weight to the impression of pupils being inherently unruly and in need of teacher action (rather than pupil) to be “made” better.


10. Wilson (1971), Clark (1998) and MacAllister (2013) all consider how discipline might be a vital part of learning rather than something that is used to get pupil attention prior to learning.

11. Though much referred to in education circles of late, Foucault’s (1981) Discipline and Punish actually contains very little discussion of how educational institutions might seek to transcend the normalisation to which he thinks they are prone. Slee (1995), Dupper (2010) and Kafka (2011) have all also called for discipline to be reclaimed as an educational concept.

Notes on contributor

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