

# The Influence of Teacher Behavior on Classroom Discipline and Learner Autonomy

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Accepted: 05.05.2025

Published: 05.07.2025

<https://doi.org/10.69760/portuni.010311>

## Abstract

This article explores the critical role of teacher behavior in establishing and maintaining effective classroom discipline. While traditional models of classroom management often emphasize external control and student compliance, this study shifts the focus toward teacher conduct as a model for learner behavior. Drawing on social learning theory and principles of self-regulation, the article highlights how a teacher's verbal and non-verbal actions, attitudes, and relational strategies shape the classroom environment and influence student autonomy. Emphasis is placed on the teacher's responsibility not only to instruct but also to exemplify the behavioral standards expected of learners. The analysis reveals that fostering student self-control, modeling respectful communication, and promoting intrinsic motivation lead to more sustainable and inclusive forms of classroom discipline. The discussion also considers the limitations of punitive approaches and advocates for the development of teacher training programs that prioritize behavioral modeling, empathy, and social-emotional competence.

**Keywords:** *teacher behavior, classroom management, student self-regulation, social learning theory, discipline strategies*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Effective classroom discipline has long been recognized as a cornerstone of productive teaching and learning. While much of the discourse on discipline focuses on controlling student misbehavior, contemporary research underscores the central role of teacher behavior in shaping the classroom climate and fostering self-regulated learners (Brophy, 2006; Korpershoek et al., 2016). Rather than relying solely on rules and punishments, educators are increasingly encouraged to model desired behaviors and to create environments that support autonomy, mutual respect, and emotional safety (Reeve & Cheon, 2021; Cheon, Reeve, & Yu, 2023).

The teacher's conduct—ranging from verbal communication and emotional tone to non-verbal cues and consistency—serves as a behavioral guidepost for students. According to social learning theory, learners tend to observe and internalize the behavior of authority figures, particularly those perceived as competent, consistent, and caring (Bandura, 2002). When teachers demonstrate self-discipline,

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empathy, and respectful interactions, students are more likely to replicate these behaviors, thereby reducing the need for external control mechanisms (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

Equally important is the concept of self-regulation in students. Autonomy-supportive teaching not only encourages learner engagement but also promotes the internalization of discipline, responsibility, and goal-setting behaviors (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Alrabai, 2021). A growing body of evidence suggests that when teachers prioritize autonomy, emotional support, and fairness, students become more motivated and display fewer behavioral issues (Ahmadi-Azad, Asadollahfam, & Zoghi, 2021; Brandisauskiene et al., 2023).

This article examines teacher behavior as both a tool for classroom management and a model for student development. Through the lenses of social learning theory and self-regulation theory, it argues for a shift in discipline paradigms—from externally imposed rules to teacher-guided internalization of norms. The discussion further evaluates how autonomy-supportive teaching can enhance learners' behavioral, emotional, and academic outcomes.

## **2. TEACHER AS A ROLE MODEL**

Teachers serve not only as instructors but also as powerful behavioral models for students. The concept of modeling—central to Bandura's (2002) social learning theory—emphasizes the importance of observed behavior in learning. Students, especially in formative years, often imitate the attitudes, language, and conduct of their teachers, whether consciously or unconsciously (Cheon, Reeve, & Moon, 2012). Therefore, the personal behavior of the teacher is inseparable from the behavioral norms established in the classroom.

Verbal behaviors, such as tone of voice, clarity of expectations, and feedback style, play a vital role in setting classroom norms. Encouraging and respectful communication fosters a culture of trust and collaboration, while sarcastic, dismissive, or punitive language can generate resistance or fear (Wubbels & Breckelmans, 2012). Equally influential, however, are non-verbal behaviors—gestures, facial expressions, posture, and eye contact—that often communicate more about the teacher's intentions and values than spoken words do (Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

The power dynamic in classrooms can either be oppressive or empowering. When teachers use their authority to impose obedience, students may conform temporarily but fail to internalize appropriate behaviors. On the other hand, when teachers model emotional regulation, fairness, and responsibility, students tend to mirror these qualities. Research suggests that students' motivation and behavior are strongly influenced by how they perceive their teacher's fairness, respect, and consistency (Friedrich et al., 2015; Klem & Connell, 2004).

Thus, the teacher's role as a model is not a peripheral influence—it is central to behavior formation, social norms, and the emotional climate of the classroom.

## **3. DISCIPLINE AND AUTONOMY**

Traditional discipline strategies often rely on external control: issuing commands, enforcing rules, and applying rewards or punishments. However, such approaches may undermine student autonomy and

lead to short-term compliance rather than long-term behavioral development (Reeve & Cheon, 2021). A growing body of literature advocates for a shift toward self-regulation, where students are taught to monitor, evaluate, and adjust their own behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Dietrich & Cohen, 2021).

When students are given opportunities to make choices and reflect on the consequences of their actions, they begin to internalize behavioral expectations. For example, autonomy-supportive classrooms allow learners to express themselves, negotiate solutions, and take responsibility for their learning environment (Leisterer & Paschold, 2022). Rather than punishing mistakes, teachers can treat them as teachable moments that foster growth and accountability.

Furthermore, students' self-regulation is closely tied to emotional and cognitive development. Classrooms that encourage student voice, emphasize mutual respect, and reduce fear of failure are more likely to develop responsible and resilient learners (Cheon, Reeve, & Yu, 2023). Instead of focusing on what students should *not* do, autonomy-supportive discipline focuses on helping them understand *why* a behavior is or is not appropriate.

Ultimately, when discipline is reframed as a shared responsibility—rather than a top-down system—students are more likely to behave appropriately, feel respected, and develop lifelong skills in decision-making and accountability.

#### **4. CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT MODELS**

Classroom management is not solely about enforcing discipline; it is about fostering a productive, respectful, and emotionally safe environment. Among the many models developed, those emphasizing communication-centered approaches have shown greater long-term effectiveness than those relying heavily on behavioral control. Communication-centered discipline involves clear expectations, active listening, and reciprocal respect between teachers and students (Emmer & Sabornie, 2015; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2012).

Traditional reward-and-punishment systems may yield temporary compliance but often fail to promote intrinsic motivation or self-awareness. According to Korpershoek et al. (2016), these approaches may even lead to resentment, surface-level behavior modification, or avoidance strategies rather than true behavioral understanding. When students are only motivated by external rewards or fear of punishment, they often do not internalize the value of their actions or decisions (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Instead, a teacher's behavior sets the emotional and behavioral tone of the classroom. Teachers who exhibit patience, consistency, and fairness tend to cultivate classrooms where students feel valued and accountable. Conversely, inconsistent or emotionally reactive behavior from the teacher may contribute to classroom instability or tension (Friedrich et al., 2015). A teacher who can manage their own emotions and engage in constructive communication creates a model for students to emulate, fostering long-term discipline rooted in mutual respect and internal motivation.

Thus, effective classroom management begins not with external systems of control but with the teacher's own behavior and interpersonal skills.

## 5. SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY IN THE CLASSROOM

Social learning theory, developed by Albert Bandura (2002), offers critical insights into how students acquire behaviors through observation, imitation, and interaction. According to this theory, learning is not only the result of direct instruction or reinforcement but also emerges from the modeling of behaviors seen in influential figures—particularly teachers. This perspective is essential for understanding how classroom culture develops and how student behavior is shaped over time.

A key component of Bandura's theory is the concept of self-efficacy—the belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations. When teachers model confidence, responsibility, and resilience, students are more likely to believe they can do the same. This modeling effect is especially strong in group settings, where learners often mirror peer and teacher behaviors in collaborative or problem-solving tasks (Cheon, Reeve, & Yu, 2023). Therefore, group-based instruction is a powerful context for observational learning.

Motivation in the classroom is also influenced by perceived success and the minimization of failure. Bandura (2002) emphasizes that learners are more likely to engage in behaviors they believe will lead to positive outcomes. Teachers can facilitate this process by setting realistic goals, providing constructive feedback, and creating opportunities for students to succeed through guided modeling.

Furthermore, social learning theory reinforces the need for teachers to be aware of their non-verbal behavior, as even subtle actions such as body language or tone of voice can communicate expectations and values. When a teacher is seen as consistent, competent, and caring, students are more likely to internalize the behaviors they observe, leading to more autonomous and motivated learners (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

## 6. THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-EFFICACY IN LEARNING

Self-efficacy—the belief in one's capacity to succeed in specific tasks—plays a fundamental role in learners' motivation, resilience, and academic achievement. Bandura (2002) emphasized that students who believe in their ability to control their own learning processes are more likely to engage actively, persist through challenges, and adopt effective learning strategies. In contrast, students with low self-efficacy tend to avoid effort, give up quickly, and exhibit anxiety in the face of academic demands.

Lifelong learning is not solely about acquiring content knowledge; it is also about developing the skills and dispositions necessary for self-directed learning. Central to this is the learner's ability to regulate emotions, set realistic goals, and manage their own behavior—all of which are connected to self-efficacy (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The increasingly complex and rapidly changing educational landscape demands that students be equipped with not only knowledge but also confidence in their ability to learn autonomously across different contexts and throughout life.

Teachers play a decisive role in nurturing this sense of efficacy. Every interaction—whether it involves feedback, encouragement, or modeling problem-solving behavior—either strengthens or weakens students' beliefs about their capabilities. Teachers who maintain high but realistic expectations, offer constructive support, and avoid punitive responses create a learning environment where students are

more likely to develop a positive academic self-concept (Reeve & Cheon, 2021; Wang, Hall, & Rahimi, 2015).

Moreover, autonomy-supportive teaching has been shown to increase learners' belief in their own agency. When teachers give students opportunities to make meaningful choices, reflect on their progress, and learn from mistakes, they foster a culture of growth and self-confidence (Leisterer & Paschold, 2022; Cheon, Reeve, & Yu, 2023). In this way, self-efficacy is not only an outcome of effective teaching but also a prerequisite for students' long-term educational success.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This article has emphasized that teacher behavior is a foundational element of classroom management, discipline, and learner development. Moving beyond traditional discipline models centered on control and compliance, it argues that teachers must serve as behavioral role models who guide students toward autonomy and self-regulation. The classroom becomes not only a space of instruction but also a social environment where values, attitudes, and behavioral norms are implicitly taught and observed.

Drawing on social learning theory and the concept of self-efficacy, we have seen how students internalize behaviors by observing teachers. A respectful, emotionally stable, and communicative teacher can profoundly influence student motivation, engagement, and responsibility. Discipline, therefore, is most effective when it is not imposed but nurtured—when students understand the consequences of their actions and are given meaningful opportunities to choose, reflect, and grow.

Based on these insights, several recommendations for teachers emerge:

- Model the behaviors you expect: consistency, respect, and emotional control.
- Use communication-centered strategies rather than control-based ones.
- Support autonomy by involving students in decision-making and problem-solving.
- Encourage reflection rather than punishment to develop responsibility.
- Reinforce student self-efficacy through positive feedback and realistic goal-setting.

For teacher training programs, this shift in perspective demands a redesign of pedagogical preparation. Future educators must not only learn subject knowledge and classroom procedures but also develop emotional intelligence, communication skills, and an understanding of motivation and learning theories. Practical training should include observation, reflection, and role-play scenarios that highlight the impact of teacher behavior on classroom dynamics.

Ultimately, the success of classroom discipline lies not in control, but in connection—the ability of teachers to lead through example, to foster trust, and to empower students to take ownership of their own learning and behavior.

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