Strategies of Teachers in Managing Students' Disciplinary Problems
Strategi Guru dalam Pengurusan Masalah Disiplin Pelajar

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study is to uncover teachers' strategies in classroom control and personal involvement in decision-making. Contextually, the main problem existed in a private school because teachers were frequently transferring discipline cases to the Head of Discipline (HOD) for matters that could be solved at the personal level. In addition, the HOD's time and personal space to manage serious discipline cases were interrupted by minor matters that deserved lesser attention. Qualitative methods were used in data collection that included purposive sampling, questionnaires and voiced-recorded interviews. Analyses from data revealed that respondents' portrayed four different orientations in classroom control: (a) self-directed; (b) student-directed; (c) organizational-directed; and (d) situation-directed. However, their strategies for personal involvement in decision-making were reported to be hampered by a list of unfavorable conditions and obstacles that are contextual to the organization. For recommendations, the HOD could consider managing these conditions and obstacles to further encourage teachers' participation in the vital areas of discipline management.

Keywords: *classroom control; private school; qualitative method; discipline management*

Introduction

The issue of teachers mistreating students captured numerous nationwide attentions in local newspapers and other electronic media. The Ministry of Education (MOEM) have also issued Professional Circulars 7/1995 (MOEM, 1995) and 10/2001 (MOEM, 2001), that prohibits teachers from using excessive force for disciplining, while conversely, remind teachers to not abdicate their responsibilities to discipline students. In the area of school leadership, there is a lack of local studies on how teachers behave as decision-makers in a strictly controlled environment (Johari, Ismail, Osman, & Othman, 2009; Sukor & Shoib, 2006). For a private school, the threat of liability remains from parents and stakeholder of the school in the areas where teachers are barred by the school management from disciplining their students unlawfully (Tie, 2004).

To explain the contextual environment of the private school, the socio-economic background of students came from higher income families and thus enabled them to be enrolled into to a premium paying education institution. Historically, parents were prone to intervene with discipline management policies and practices because they viewed themselves as stakeholders (or customers) of the school. Private school is viewed as a better option to provide a better environment for learning, while some parents wanted to protect their children from any unfair punishment due to previous unpleasant experiences in other schools. Subsequently, they are prone to involve actively and influence school policies to prevent their children from facing any social embarrassment or unwelcomed psychological effects due to disciplining (Sithole, 1999). Unfortunately, classroom discipline problems impact can teachers negatively on their emotional, stress level and social well-being. For teachers, the lack of

classroom management skills is listed as one of the top causes for stress (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012; Hoots, 2014; Klassen & Chiu, 2010).

Problem statements

The main problem existed in a private school because teachers were frequently transferring discipline cases to the Head of Discipline (HOD) for matters that could be decided at the personal level. As a result, the HOD's time and personal space to manage serious discipline cases were interrupted by minor matters that deserved lesser attention. In essence, the researcher has uncovered an organizational problem that is contextual to the researched organization. Additionally, when confronted with discipline problems in classrooms, teachers have to discern and decide for the best disciplinary action in order to yield a positive outcome for students of the school (Lee, Yeo, & Hadijah, 2015). Therefore, there is a need to uncover teachers' classroom control strategies, and explain how they apply their strategies in classroom control when physical punishments are prohibited by the school management. Eventually, the researcher seeks to uncover the unfavorable conditions and obstacles as an opportunity to uncover the factors that inhibit teachers' involvement in organizational decision-making.

The purpose of the case study to uncover and explain teachers' strategies to deal with discipline problems in a bureaucratic environment, while simultaneously look into their obstacles and conditions towards personal involvement in decision-making.

Objectives of study

The objectives of this case study are:
1. To uncover teachers' classroom control strategies in a context where physical punishments are prohibited by the school management.
2. To explain how teachers apply classroom control strategies in a context where physical punishments are prohibited by the school management.
3. To uncover unfavorable conditions and obstacles to personal involvement in decision-making.

Methods

In terms of research design, qualitative methods were used for this study that involved purposive sampling, open-ended questionnaire, in-depth interviews. Additionally, the researcher has also applied data, methodological and theoretical triangulations (Denzin, 2006) to understand the phenomenon. These approaches were used because of the nature and complications associated with a case study (Maxwell, 2009).

Sampling

For the researcher, the Head of Discipline (HOD) was the key personnel to approach for the study. Due to his previous encounters and experience with teachers in the school, the Head of Discipline was invited to identify as many teachers as possible as respondents. The process of selection through purposive sampling was aimed to improve the case representation and increase the meaningfulness of the study.

Research Instruments

To gather information on their personal participation in decision-making, a *decision-making questionnaire* was also developed to capture data pertaining to the objectives of the study,

with a myriad of questions that are open-ended in nature. Other than the open-ended questionnaire, the researcher used a voiced recorder to capture the respondents' opinions and views. Eventually, fifteen respondents including the HOD managed to complete the whole process of data collection (from the initial twenty-three respondents) that included face-to-face and voiced recorded interviews.

Data analyses

All data were then transcribed, coded and analyzed with the qualitative software (ATLAS.ti) to uncover findings. Subsequently, the researcher conducted an inter-coder reliability test by inviting two other researchers to further evaluate if there are high similarities in the coding and interpretation process. The researcher applied triangulation methods to enhance the validity of evaluation and research findings through the collection of documents, minutes of meetings and other evidences that are useful as references.

Results

Research Question 1: What are teachers' classroom control strategies in a context where physical punishments are prohibited in the organization?

For the researched organization, teachers were found to apply four-directed strategies in classroom control. These four-directed strategies are: (a) self-directed; (b) student-directed; (c) organizational-directed; and (d) situation-directed. Self-directed strategies are all kinds of tactics that are used to educate, correct and prevent from disciplining students unethically and ineffectively. Student-directed strategies are all kinds of tactics administered on students to educate and correct their misbehaviors. Even though prohibited by the school management, respondents reported using mild punishment on students to prevent them from repeating the same mistakes. Organizational-directed strategies consist of tactics to comply with school management orders, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and teachers' code of ethics. Situation-directed strategies are tactics used to control, reduce or eliminate discipline situations from escalation and re-occurrence.

Research Question 2: How do teachers apply their strategies in classroom control where physical punishments are prohibited by the school management?

Through further analyses, respondents were queried in their tactic(s) and purpose(s) behind their strategies in the researched organization. Table 1 highlights the four-directed strategies with the list of tactics that teachers used in their classroom management, while Table 2 elaborates on the purpose behind each directed strategies. Both tables present the data findings that were coded from the response of the interviewees. In total, there are 34 tactics listed among the four directed strategies that teachers apply in classroom control.

In relation to using self-directed strategies for the purpose of education, correction and prevention, one respondent highlighted,

"Normally, I would be strict to ensure that students would understand my lessons, so that the teaching and learning processes are not interrupted".

(Line 43 from personal transcripts)

As for another respondent, she highlighted the need to use student-directed strategies for education, prevention and correction.

"I always give students a chance to explain themselves and before making my conclusion. I give them the benefit of doubt and to remind them that they have to be responsible for what they say or do."

<div align="right">(Line 41 from personal transcripts)</div>

In aspects of situation-directed strategies, another respondent highlighted the purpose of correcting and preventing discipline problems from escalation.

"If every discipline problem is to be reported to the management, I feel that a trivial discipline case could worsen by the time a solution is determined".

<div align="right">(Line 48 from personal transcripts)</div>

As for organizational-directed strategies for the purpose of education, prevention and correction, another teacher highlighted,

"I prefer the school to enforce more punishments other than just reprimanding so that students can really change from their mistakes".

<div align="right">(Line 48 from personal transcripts)</div>

Table 1: Classroom Control Strategies among Fifteen Respondents

Strategies		Tactics	No. of times mentioned	Mentioned by
Self-directed	1.	Approachable to students	3	Teacher B
	2.	Avoid being emotional	2	Teacher M, J
	3.	Aware of students' behaviors and temperaments	8	Teacher K, J, D, M, F, B
	4.	Improve communications with students	4	Teacher B, C
	5.	Do not stereotype students on their past	21	Teacher L, I, N, K, H, A, J, J. D. E. O. G
	6.	Eagerly investigates	16	Teacher I, J, J, D, C, M, E, F, B, G
	7.	Flexible with different behaviors	8	Teacher I, F, B, J
	8.	Prefers correction over punishment	4	Teacher J, K
	9.	Prefers to reason than to enforce	9	Teacher J, C, M, B, N, K
	10.	Rationalize on students' patterns of behaviors	10	Teacher I , A, D, M, E, O, G
	11.	Resourceful to relate to students	3	Teacher D, F
	12.	Sensitive and aware of socio-cultural differences	3	Teacher O
	13.	Strict to get things done	14	Teacher F, B, H, A, D, E, O. G
	14.	Strict when discipline problems occur	8	Teacher N, A, M, O, B, G, L, E
Student-directed	15.	Allocates time for students to reflect and apologize	8	Teacher B, F, O, G, L
	16.	Allows students to explain	3	Teacher F, N, K
	17.	Demands compliance to school rules	6	Teacher A, F, O, G, L
	18.	Execute mild punishment	2	Teacher L, E
	19.	Explain rationale before punishment	1	Teacher C
	20.	Focus on building students' trust	12	Teacher J, C, B
	21.	Intolerant towards repeated mistakes	11	Teacher N, H, A, D, E, F, B
	22.	Treats students' childish behaviors leniently	5	Teacher B
	23.	Refers to counselor	3	Teacher A, F
	24.	Reminds students on behaviors	2	Teacher N, A
	25.	Scolds students publicly	4	Teacher D, O
	26.	Show temperaments to students	1	Teacher D
	27.	Ignore students' manipulative behaviors	1	Teacher J
Situation-directed	28.	Anticipate risks and threats	5	Teacher M, F
	29.	Contain problem from escalating further	4	Teacher B, D, C
	30.	Prioritize on urgent matters	4	Teacher N, D, B
Organizational-directed	31.	Rely strictly on SOPs for decision-making	6	Teacher J, E
	32.	Transfer to HOD for urgent/complicated discipline problems	13	Teacher I, N, K. A. J, D, F, O, B, K
	33.	Improve collegiality among teachers	5	Teacher I, C, B, G
	34.	Influence to improve on SOPs	7	Teacher I, C, M, E, F

Table 2: Multipurpose Purposes behind Respondents' Four-directed Strategies for Classroom Control

Strategies		Purposes	Examples
Self-directed	a)	For Education: To improve on personal strengths (such as skills, leadership styles and problem solving) in classroom management	Teacher D, N, I
	b)	For Prevention: To avoid from overreacting and punishing students unjustly	Teacher J, K
	c)	For Correction: To improve on personal weakness through self-reflection	Teacher A, O)
Student-directed	a)	For Education: To teach and cultivate students towards good behaviors	Teacher A, F
	b)	For Correction: To highlight students' mistakes and guide them to change	Teacher K, D
	c)	For Prevention: To curb students' misbehaviors from deteriorating and re-occurring in the future (Examples: Teacher J, M)	Teacher J, M
	d)	For Punishment: To enforce change through autocratic styles of classroom leadership	Teacher L, G
Situation-directed	a)	For Education: To manage discipline situations according to importance and urgency	Teacher N
	b)	For Correction: To foresee risks and manage uncertainties	Teacher O, M, F
	c)	For Prevention: To control situations from deteriorating and to evaluate them reoccurring	Teacher C, D
Organizational-directed	a)	For Education: To manage discipline problems within personal roles and scope of SOPs	Teacher E, F, H
	b)	For Prevention: To depend on SOPs for protection when responding to familiar/unfamiliar discipline problems.	Teacher J, E
	c)	For Correction: To improve collegiality and influence organizational change towards effectiveness and efficiency through personal opinions, consensus or collaborations.	Teacher N, B, C, G

Subsequently, the researcher realized that teachers have the choice to personally involve in decision-making if organizational conditions are favorable and obstacles are not threatening to their professional reputation. *Social Cognitive Theory* (Bandura, 1999) and *Thorndike's Law of Effect* (Woodworth, 1950) argued that when conditions are favorable and obstacles are lesser, teachers are more likely to personally involve in decision-making to counter students' discipline problems in the classrooms. Table 3 shows the list of unfavorable conditions that teacher respondents felt that inhibit further involvement in decision-making.

Table 3: Comparisons between a Serious and Less Serious Discipline Problem from Respondents' Perspectives

Aspects	Highlighted by	Situation of Discipline Problem	
		Less Serious	Serious
Involvement of principal	Teacher J	Less likely	More likely
Involvement of more people	Teacher K,J,E.O,B	Less likely	More likely
Standard Operating Procedures	Teacher B	Less procedures	More procedures
Potential physical injury	All respondents	Less likely	Likely
Time for contemplation	Teacher L, J	Shorter duration	Longer duration
Urgency for decision-making	Teacher H,J,F,G,B	Need not be immediate	Must be immediate
Emotional harm or hurt	Teacher I,K,M,G	Less likely	More likely
Need of corroboration	Teacher N	Less likely	More likely
Requires transfer	Teacher L,A,D,O,E,F	Less likely	More likely
Types of portrayal	Teacher L,H,J	Verbal	Physical and emotional
Familiarity to the problem	Teacher L,N,K,A,B,C	High	Low
Pranks and mischiefs	Teacher A	More likely	Less likely
Frequency of encounter	Teacher B,N	More	Less
Elements of risk	Teacher O	Low	High

Note: Aspects of differentiation were identified through data coding and limited to a total of fifteen respondents.

Research Question 3: What are the unfavorable conditions and obstacles that inhibit personal involvement in decision-making?

Findings from this case study contributed and supported on a lack of local evidence to explain why some teachers prefer to transfer discipline case to other personnel-in-charge habitually. Among the prominent factors that motivated transfers are personal conveniences, to reduced risks/mistakes and more freedom to concentrate on to their daily personal professional practice. All mentioned responses were analyzed into six major obstacles as seen in Table 4. Evidently, the two most mentioned obstacles to personal decision-making came from: (a) Standard operating procedures; and (b) parental involvement. These findings are consistent with the initial speculation of the private school as a bureaucratic organization.

Table 4: Respondents' Obstacles and Unfavorable Conditions in Personal Decision-Making

Type of obstacles	Unfavorable Conditions	No. of times mentioned	Mentioned by
Parental involvement	Teachers were cautious when communicating with parents	13	Teachers I, N, H, A, D, M, F, G
	Parents could be confused with many processes in SOPs	1	Teacher I
	Parents were fed with one-sided story from their children	3	Teacher G, N
	Parents lacked counsel to understand situation	4	Teacher C
	Parents lacked respect for teachers	1	Teacher D
	Parents not totally honest with child's discipline history	2	Teacher B
	Parents were demanding as a client	2	Teacher A
	Parents were defensive and overly protective of their child	7	Teacher A, D, F, D, G, C
	Parents complained and complicated discipline matters	3	Teacher A, H, E
Pre-existing work culture	Teachers had difficulty to assimilate with teachers from different backgrounds	2	Teacher O
	Teachers had different expectations and consistencies to discipline problems	2	Teacher O, L
	Teachers had differing opinions on work expectations	1	Teacher F
	Teachers do not like interruptions to personal work	2	Teacher J
	Teachers lack collaborations and discussions	5	Teacher J, E, A, F, G
	Teachers lack initiatives to intervene with trivial problems	8	Teacher A, J, E, F, O
	Teachers had resistance to change	11	Teacher A, J, E, O, K, M
	Teachers had difficulty to cope with leadership styles	3	Teacher A, O
Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)	Difficulty to comply with rigid procedures	6	Teacher J, D, B
	Inconsistency and changing expectations	6	Teacher E, O, B, G, C
	Some procedures are irrelevant and need to be reviewed	3	Teacher F
	Subjected to biases when implemented	1	Teacher G
	Subjected to miscommunication and misinterpretation	5	Teacher A, J, M, G, I
	Decision may turn out to be unfavorable to management	2	Teacher M, G
	Leniency in screening and enrolling students with previous discipline problems	1	Teacher B
	Involved many processes	15	Teacher I, N, J. F, O, H, D, B
	Restricts personal involvement for decision-making	8	Teacher L, J, D, O, B, G
	SOPs is never a perfect guide for solutions	1	Teacher B
	Source of information only came from HOD and principal	1	Teacher N
Socio-cultural difference	Teachers taking premature actions without considering socio-cultural differences	2	Teacher O, B
	Students resist to accommodate and assimilate due to different paradigm	2	Teacher K, O
Students with learning disabilities	Teacher enforcing punishment on these students without knowing the state of learning disorder	3	Teacher B, C
Teacher-student relationship	Teacher-student relationship subject to stereotyping and biases	2	Teacher M, F
	Disciplining could affect existing relationships	5	Teacher K, A, J, B, G
	Leniency could invite more discipline problems	2	Teacher B

Note: Reasons to obstacles of personal decision-making were identified through data coding and limited to a total of fifteen respondents.

Discussions

Findings on the four-oriented strategies in classroom control were conceptualized to explain the strategies that teachers used in the researched organization. Generally, there are many models and theories on effective classroom management. Contextually, the researcher has managed to expand his theoretical understanding in this subject that resulted from his direct observation and in-depth interviews from respondents. Respondents directed their classroom strategies for different purposes, mainly to educate, prevent, correct and to punish students on their misbehaviors. Evidently, these purposes were interwoven in their tactics that are often decided based on many internal and external factors. From this case study, it is evident that teachers portrayed different strategies of classroom control that were based on their experience, their perceived obstacles and conditions surrounding their professional practice. Additionally, they would differentiate the features that determine if a discipline case is to be classified as serious or less serious. If discipline cases are perceived as serious, respondents would usually be compliant with the school's standard operating procedures (SOPs) to protect themselves from parents' threats of litigation, and other potential threats that could jeopardize their career.

Implications

To relate to initial problem statements of the study, it is beneficial for the HOD to contemplate if teachers in the researched organization could be trained to be more self-aware in four aspects (self, student, situational and organizational). As teachers are encouraged to become better decision-makers, it is important for them to have the foresight to justify their means and ways when disciplining students in their classrooms. Notably, they should strike a balance between the four aspects to determine the best decision to the problem. Thus, this research has provided the opportunity for the HOD to look into the vital areas of training and leadership in discipline management.

This case study has also enabled the researcher to explore and uncover as many perspectives as possible despite the small number of respondents. In addition, the unfavorable conditions and obstacles associated with personal decision-making have also been highlighted for the reader. For the particular school management to encourage more participation in organizational decision-making, they can start with educating, managing and reducing the obstacles that could limit the extent of personal involvement among teachers. Strategically, the HOD can help teachers overcome the fear of making personal mistakes through decision-making that could cause their reputation or profession. To avoid from disciplining students wrongly and to avoid threats from parents, they relied strictly on organizational SOPs to determine their roles, responsibilities, and authority to intervene on students' discipline problem**.** However, this is not always the case when discipline problems become urgent, complicated and unpredictable, or when organizational guidelines are ambiguous and unwritten. Except for urgent situations, teachers would usually refer to their counterparts for decision-making. Otherwise, they have to refer to their experience, interpersonal and classroom management skills to intervene further in organizational decision-making.

Suggestions for future research

Suggestions for future research could include larger samples of respondents and in different school contexts. Due to the selective and a small number of respondents, findings were not

meant to be generalized to the whole population of teachers in the school. As precautions for future researchers, it is important to win trust from respondents, and be transparent with personal intentions and purpose of the research. Other precautions include the need for future researchers to sharpen communication skills as participant observers, to reduce personal error of personal judgment (or biases) through triangulation and seeking confirmation (or validation of data) from respondents.

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