

Teachers' classroom discipline and student misbehavior in Australia, China and Israel

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Abstract

This paper reports students' perceptions of the classroom discipline strategies utilized in Australia, China and Israel. It examines data from 748 teachers and 5521 students to identify how teachers' use of various disciplinary strategies, and the extent to which these relate to student misbehavior, differ in three national settings. In general, Chinese teachers appear less punitive and aggressive than do those in Israel or Australia and more inclusive and supportive of students' voices. Australian classrooms are perceived as having least discussion and recognition and most punishment. In all settings greater student misbehavior relates only to increased use of aggressive strategies. Implications are discussed. © 2005 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The issue of how best to discipline students in classrooms is of continuing interest and concern to the community. For example, in 2002, as in nearly all preceding years, students' lack of discipline ranked within the first two most serious problems confronting the public schools in the annual Phi Delta Kappa Polls of the public's attitudes toward the public schools (Lowell & Gallup, 2002). In 2002, 43 percent of respondents rated students' lack of discipline as a very serious concern, with an

additional 33 percent suggesting it was somewhat serious. Of all the school-related factors capable of influencing student responsibility in classrooms, teachers' discipline strategies, the focus of this paper, are among the most potent (Ingersoll, 1996; Lewis, 1997a).

Ensuring that students behave responsibly in classrooms is important for two independent reasons. First, it serves as a means of preparing students to take their place in society as responsible citizens, an aim of primary importance to schooling (Rothstein, 2000). Secondly, without satisfactory levels of student responsibility, the best planned and potentially most engaging

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lessons may fail to have the desired impact. Often it may only require a small proportion of students to misbehave and they become sufficiently distracting to students and frustrating to teachers that the most carefully planned lesson fails to promote effective learning among the students (Barton, Coley, & Wenglinsky, 1998). This paper examines the relationship between discipline processes and student misbehavior in three different national settings, namely Australia, China and Israel.

Interest in classroom discipline relates not only to the good it can do but also to the damage inappropriate discipline can cause. For example, two recent publications emphasize the potential negative impact of particular discipline strategies. The first conjectures that

Unnecessarily harsh and punitive disciplinary practices against students create a climate that contributes to school violence. This issue is little recognized and scarcely researched. (Hyman & Snook, 2000, p. 489).

The second publication reports the perceptions of over 3500 school students in Australia (Lewis, 2001). This study demonstrates empirically that, in the view of these students, their teachers are characterized by two distinct discipline styles. The first of these was called “coercive” discipline and comprised Punishment and Aggression (yelling in anger, sarcasm, group punishments, etc.). The second style, comprising Discussion, Hints, Recognition, Involvement and Punishment, was called “Relationship based discipline”. After presenting a thorough data analysis the report concludes:

Students who receive more Relationship based discipline are less disrupted when teachers deal with misbehavior and generally act more responsibly in that teacher’s class. In contrast, the impact of Coercive discipline appears to be more student distraction from work and less responsibility. (p. 315).

These findings appear consistent with those of Miller, Ferguson, and Byrne (2000) who, after examining students’ perceptions of what factors cause classroom misbehavior, highlight the poten-

tial for teacher behavior such as shouting all the time, unfairly blaming students, picking on kids, and being rude, to stimulate student resistance and subsequent misbehavior.

The present study has shown pupils to attribute to teachers a significantly greater responsibility for pupil misbehavior than that they attribute to parents. (p. 93).

It is of interest to note that in an earlier Israeli study which also examined factors seen to be causing student misbehavior, it was reported that although students placed their teachers’ attitude the second most important cause of student misbehavior, teachers ranked it as 20 out of 26 (Guttmann, 1982).

The impetus for the research discussed in this paper came after the publication of a study of the relationship between classroom discipline and student responsibility and misbehavior in Australia (Lewis, 2001). As a result of that publication, academics in a number of countries contacted the author with requests to replicate the study in their respective national settings. Two additional settings were ultimately selected. These were China and Israel. Australia is a typically western country, China is a typically oriental country and Israel is approximately half western and half oriental. Consequently, the use of these three cultural settings provided the opportunity for some robust comparisons. Further, since the academics from these settings who expressed interest in undertaking the research were senior, very experienced, and involved in teacher training for many years, the issue of classroom discipline, and the research design of the previous research appeared to have valency in both countries.

In summary, there were two main foci for the research. First it permitted a comparison of the extent of usage of various discipline strategies in three significantly different national settings. Secondly, the relationship between student misbehavior and classroom discipline could be examined in each setting. In conducting this research, it was acknowledged that there are likely to be cultural differences associated with styles of discipline. For example, differences of opinion between Chinese and other Americans (Mitchel,

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