Teachers' experiences of effective strategies for managing classroom misbehavior in Hong Kong

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Effective strategies control student behavior while nurturing responsibility.
- A trustworthy relationship cultivates students' positive behavioral changes.
- Instructional engagement thwarts misbehavior.
- Effective strategies integrate discipline, guidance and teaching elements.
- Deeply-rooted Confucian values are reflected in Hong Kong classroom management.

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ABSTRACT

This study interviewed twelve teachers to examine their perceptions of effective strategies for managing classroom misbehavior in Hong Kong. Results showed seven effective strategies (rules-setting, hinting, directive statements, punishment, after class talks, relationship building, and instructional engagement) to (i) control student behavior while nurturing students' responsibility for managing one's behavior, (ii) forge a good relationship conducive to cultivating student trust and positive behavioral changes, and (iii) engage the students in learning which in turn thwarts misbehavior. The findings reflected the deeply-rooted Chinese Confucian values, and highlighted an integration of discipline, guidance and teaching strategies for effective classroom management.

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1. Introduction

Classroom misbehavior is defined as unruly behavior which upsets classroom order and hampers teaching and learning (Houghton, Wheldall, & Merrett, 1988; Little, 2005; Thompson, 2009; Wheldall & Merrett, 1988). It is also regarded as disruptive behavior that breaks the rules (e.g., truancy, violence) or violates the implicit norms or expectations of classroom behavior (e.g., non-attentiveness, clowning), requiring teacher intervention (Sun & Shek, 2012a, 2012b). Students are more likely to engage in misbehavior when teachers are less able to manage disruptive behavior, recognize student characteristics and needs, maintain teacher–student relationships and communication, apply teaching processes and motivation, set up classroom rules and apply them, and arrange classroom environments and physical structure (Kayikci, 2009). Therefore, teachers' classroom management strategies are closely linked to student behavior (Allen, 2010). According to Little and Akin-Little (2008), effective classroom discipline and management includes strategies that are "not merely responding effectively when problems occur, but also preventing problems from occurring by creating environments that encourage learning and appropriate behavior" (p. 227). Several commonly-used strategies and their effectiveness are reviewed below.

1.1. Strategies for managing misbehavior

1.1.1. Punishment

Studies have shown that a high percentage of teachers use punishment and reprimand, with the main purposes of deterrence and control (e.g., Lewis, Romi, Qui, & Katz, 2005), particularly when dealing with severely disruptive misbehavior (Bibou-Nakou, Kiosseoglou, & Stogiannidou, 2000; Castello, Gotzens, Badia, &

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Genovard, 2010; Kulinna, 2007—2008). While punishment can have an immediate effect by impeding student disruptive behavior, it has been argued that punishment can hardly reduce the likelihood of the recurrence of such behavior in the long-run (Wong, 2004), because it inhibits the responsibility of each student to manage their own behavior (Roache & Lewis, 2011). Cameron (2006) also noted that the benefits of using punishment may be offset by its negative impacts on the teacher—student relationship, learning, and student psychological well-being, which further increase behavioral and academic problems. Furthermore, punishment only suppresses the problem behavior for a short time, and can hardly address the students' underlying needs and the root causes of the manifestations of misbehavior (Dreikurs, 2004). When compared with punishment, "planned ignoring" (extinction of social attention) was perceived to be more effective for handling minor disruptive and attention-seeking behavior (such as playing the clown) (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2000; Broussard & Northup, 1997).

1.1.2. Praise

Praise and social recognition are positive reinforcers of good behavior (Skinner, 1938), and a high percentage of teachers have reported using this positive approach in managing student behavior (Ding, Li, Li, & Kulm, 2010; Little & Akin-Little, 2008). Some studies demonstrated that when teachers used more behavioral praise and less reprimand, classroom disruptive behavior was reduced (Myers, Simonsen, & Sugai, 2011; Reinke, Herman, & Stormont, 2012; Reinke, Lewis-Palmer, & Merrell, 2008). For elementary students, utilizing peer recognition is another promising strategy. For instance, in the "tootling" intervention where Grade 3 students were asked to recognize and reinforce each other's positive behavior, Cihak, Kirk, and Boon (2009) found that the students displayed more prosocial behavior, less disruptive behavior and better relationships. However, it was argued that using praise solely was not an effective approach (Pfiffner, Rosen, & O'Leary, 1985), unless there were explicit rules plus a system for reinforcing appropriate behavior and responding to classroom disruption (Canter & Canter, 2001; Little & Akin-Little, 2008). Moreover, praise should be given as positive and constructive feedback, with a ratio of 4:1 positive to negative feedback for supporting students' positive behavior and learning (Trussell, 2008).

1.1.3. Hinting

Non-verbal to verbal discipline strategies, such as looking, naming and questioning (Zuckerman, 2007), which are referred to "hinting" methods, were reported to have disciplinary function by both teachers and students (Zeki, 2009). According to the teacher behavior continuum (Canter & Canter, 2001), teacher control is minimized while student responsibility for controlling one's own behavior is maximized when teachers give minimal modality cues. Therefore, hinting was found to be effective for guiding students to regulate their own behavior in accordance with classroom norms, as well as maintaining good teacher—student relationships which further facilitated student cooperation and engagement (Lewis, 2001; Roache & Lewis, 2011).

1.1.4. Behavioral control and teacher care

Besides setting up clear expectations and consequences at the early stage, students also rated highly, as an effective classroom management strategy, having good teacher—student relationships that were signified by care and respect (Cothran, Kulinna, & Garrahy, 2003). Research showed that a classroom characterized by both teacher care and behavioral control significantly enhanced student engagement and satisfaction with school, and reduced classroom misbehavior (Nie & Lau, 2009). Particularly, teacher care

was found to enhance teacher—student relationships, and thus facilitate students' liking school, endorsing classroom rules, and autonomy in behaving accordingly, and ultimately reducing classroom misbehavior and disruption. Actually, teacher care is a kind of personal quality pertinent in guiding student development (Hui & Lo, 1997). Hence, these studies indicated that discipline together with care facilitates students' internalization of the rules and rule-biding behavior.

1.1.5. After class talks

Talking and discussing their behavior with misbehaving students privately after class was found to be another effective strategy for enhancing student responsibility for regulating their own behavior and making positive changes after they understand the impact of their behavior on others (Lewis, 2001; Roache & Lewis, 2011; Zuckerman, 2007). It implied a private conversation should be constructive in guiding a student to reflect on his or her own problems, develop prosocial skills and values, and choose to behave in socially acceptable ways. Teachers pointed out that talking to individual pupils after class was more effective with upper grade students (Ding et al., 2010).

1.1.6. Instructional interactions

Based on observational findings (Ratcliff, Jones, Costner, Savage-Davis, & Hunt, 2010), students were more engaged in learning and less likely to misbehave when teachers had more interaction with their students regarding instructional matters. In contrast, students misbehaved more frequently if teachers had fewer interactions with them, and the misbehavior increased when teachers retreated in frustration after failing to control student misbehavior. Djigic and Stojiljkovic (2011) also found that an interactionist classroom management style, rather than an interventionist or non-interventionist style, was positively related to teachers' and students' satisfaction with the classroom climate and the students' achievements in school. Moreover, some research initiatives demonstrated that proactive strategies (i.e., improving instructional methods, increasing engagement in classroom activity) worked well with behavioral control strategies (i.e., formulating behavioral expectations, reinforcing positive performance) in promoting student positive behavior and academic competence, while at the same time reducing discipline problems (Anderson & Kincaid, 2005; Luiselli, Putman, Handler, & Feinberg, 2005; Reinke et al., 2012).

1.1.7. Referral

Referring disruptive students to professionally trained personnel (such as counselors, social workers and psychologists) for consultation is common in schools where this back-up system is explicit for supporting teachers and students. Research findings showed that there were more referrals for aggressive behavior in younger students, whereas there were more for noncompliance and disrespectful behavior in middle school students (Kaufman et al., 2010; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997). Research findings also pointed out that teachers having less confidence in managing student behavior, or having insufficient professional skills in guiding students with severe behavioral problems (such as hyperactivity or delinquency) were more likely to refer students to other school personnel (Arbuckle & Little, 2004; Martin, Linfoot, & Stephenson, 1999). In short, referral is a school-level support for teachers, to help manage student misbehavior, though its effectiveness in helping disruptive students needs to be supported by multiple evidence, such as the recidivism rate, behavioral assessments and systematic observation.