

# Professional Teachers' Strategies for Promoting Positive Behaviour in Schools

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## Abstract

This study aims to obtain descriptive information on strategies used to promote positive behaviour in the school context from professional teachers' perspectives based on background information. The professional teachers, who play important roles in schools, include principals, class teachers, physical education teachers, discipline teachers, and counselors. The study design employed the survey approach using questionnaire with close-ended questions involving 319 respondents who were selected randomly from 15 urban national secondary schools in Malaysia. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentage. Results indicated that the majority of professional teachers used five positive behaviour enhancement strategies, namely treating pupils with respect, co-operating with the government agencies, encouraging pupils to actively participate in school activities, using more praise than criticism in schools and guiding pupils to find a solution to modify their behavioural problems. The data analysis shows that there is a difference in terms of the frequency of strategy use from professional teachers' perspectives based on background information. It is recommended that designing teacher training curriculum and in-service training in relation to positive behaviour enhancement strategies should be updated and appropriate with the professional teachers' needs, and also be congruent with their background information.

**Keywords:** professional teachers, positive behaviour enhancement, encouragement, engagement

## 1. Background

Pupils with behavioural problems pose a challenge in teaching profession. Some of the problematic behaviour that has been frequently discussed in past researches includes disruptive, off-task and anti-social behaviour. These behaviours have negatively affected the teaching and learning processes. Although teachers have been trained to face these challenges professionally, literature review revealed that each country has its own preference. The use of corporal punishment for instance, is illegal in most developed countries, but it is lawful in most developing countries. Corporal punishment is legally allowed in Malaysia, but it must be well monitored by the school principals. The philosophy behind the punishment is to educate pupils, not to harm them. However, past studies on that subject showed that pupils who were caned felt humiliated and harmed. Previous studies also suggest that there is a tendency for using a cane if it is lawful. This informs that, the government policy on positive behaviour enhancement has influenced teacher's action at a school level. However, it should be noted that teachers as professional teachers have options whether or not to use certain strategies. Choice theory posits that adults have abilities to make decision on their behaviour. In this case, teacher's preference in carrying out strategies is vital. It determines the types of strategies used for promoting positive behaviour. Therefore, teachers are supposed to have specific management and pedagogical skills to deal with diverse groups of pupils. It is insufficient for teachers to just master in subject content as they also should be competent in pedagogical skills. In multicultural classroom, teachers also must be sensitive to diversity in classroom. These include the knowledge on pupils' cultural backgrounds, pupils' physical and intellectual abilities, class environment, past knowledge of pupils and pupils' psychological wellbeing. Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke and Curran (2004) suggest that teachers must be aware that pupils' cultural background is a foundation in determining the effectiveness of teaching and learning. They use the concept of Culturally Responsive Classroom Management explaining the importance of teachers' sensitivity towards diverse group of pupils. The implementation of Culturally Responsive Classroom Management is viewed to be an effective strategy for promoting positive

behaviour. However, there is unclear evidence in a Malaysian context to show the extent to which such elements were taken into account in managing classroom, as much focus is given to negative behaviour in pupils (i.e., disciplinary issues). Indeed, various strategies were recommended in the past studies for promoting positive behaviour.

## 2. Professional Teachers' Roles

Various strategies can be used for promoting positive behaviour in school. Effective interaction and communication are some of the suggested strategies. This approach emphasizes the importance of self-discipline and communication ability of students and teachers' immediate respond to students (Martin & Sugarman, 1993). Correspondingly, a study conducted by Chang et al. (2007) involving 1365 students in Hong Kong showed that students are able to express their emotions when teachers use positive communication. Wright, Cullum, and Schwab (2008) suggested that teacher should be tolerant when dealing with problematic pupils, which is the key element for encouraging positive behaviour.

Studies showed that socio-environment is the most influencing factor for pupils' behaviour. In a school context, developing positive school milieu is crucial. Therefore, some researchers see that a whole-school approach is vital. This approach posits that job satisfaction among teachers and pupils' happiness in schools create productive and conducive environment. On the same note, Cole (2003) suggested that teachers' understanding on the school mission, vision, codes of practice, routines, classroom rules and general rules of school will have positive implication towards school milieu. At a classroom level, teacher's competencies in managing classroom management effectively will create supportive classroom environment, consequently promotes pupil's happiness. As pupils are diverse and differ in terms of their abilities and attitudes, teachers' abilities to identify these differences will help teachers to use appropriate strategies for each pupil. Some disruptive pupils are actually having difficulties to adapt to the classroom environment. This explains the importance of specific management skills for teachers. One of the strategies to help a pupil with problematic behaviour is via serious discussion with the pupil (Olewus, 2003). This accounts for the importance of behaviour modification plan and action in a school context.

Behaviour modification is widely used in clinical psychology. The model posits that treatment should be given to the cause of the occurrence of the problem (antecedents), or to a person's behaviour (for instance, stopping someone from acting aggressively), or the effects of one's behaviour (consequences). It is known as the ABC model (Antecedents-Behaviour-Consequences). Some empirical studies showed that the implementation of ABC model has positive impact on pupils' behaviour (Kevin Filters, McKenna, Benedict, Horner, & Todd, 2007; Ross & Horner, 2009). However, there is a debate about the ethics of this model as it is associated with human rights issues especially in response to the question of "who's right to determine one's behaviour must change?"

The most common suggestions for promoting positive behaviour are the use of encouragement, reward and negative reinforcement. The basic principle of encouraging and rewarding approach is to motivate the pupils to be always well-behaved. Encouragement through praise and recognition is a method of intrinsic motivation, while the reward is an extrinsic motivation. Researchers have found that the use of praise and encouragement increases students' motivation to behave positively (Wheatley, West, Charlton, Sanders, & Taylor, 2009). On the other hand, negative reinforcement offers a different approach. It focuses on removing stimulus that creates inappropriate behaviour.

Another strategy used by professional teachers in some schools is physical punishment. It is controversial as scholars argued that punishment is not part of positive behaviour enhancement strategies. Most Western countries apart from 22 states in United States have banned physical punishment in the school system. Past empirical studies revealed that the use of physical punishment has a negative impact on students' emotions (Saunders & Goddard, 2008).

In a centralised education system like Malaysia, the government policy on positive behaviour enhancement has a strong relationship with the school management system. It also has influenced the school vision and mission which have a direct impact on school milieu. Distributing official documents and circulars to school is the common communication in Malaysia. Hundreds circulars were circulated to schools since the independence of Malaysia in 1957. A documentary analyses of the Malaysian government circulars revealed that at least, 483 circulars on various subjects have been distributed by the Ministry of Education of Malaysia to secondary schools for over the period of 40 years (1969-2011). Out of 483 policies, 91 of them were relevant to the positive behaviour enhancement (Awang, 2012). Analysis of these circulars revealed that the Malaysian government recommended the following strategies for promoting positive behaviour: involvement in school activities, interpersonal relationships, responsiveness, motivation programmes, home-school partnership and inter-agencies

partnership. Strategies for preventing negative behaviour include punitive approach (corporal punishment, suspension and dismissal) and intervention programmes such as counselling sessions and moral development workshop (Awang, Jindal-Snape & Barner, 2013). Although these strategies are more likely focusing on the whole-school level, they provide general principles of practical strategies that can be used by teachers at a classroom level.

### **3. The Objectives of the Study**

The study aims to examine a package of positive behaviour enhancement strategies used by professional teachers based on background information such as gender, ethnicity, roles, school location, age groups and teaching experience and education backgrounds. Accordingly, the study focuses on eight main strategies to promote positive behaviour in school as follow:

Strategy 1: treating pupils with respect;

Strategy 2: discussing with pupils their feelings towards any issues;

Strategy 3: co-operating with government agencies;

Strategy 4: encouraging leadership roles;

Strategy 5: praising pupils;

Strategy 6: guiding pupils to modify their problematic behaviour;

Strategy 7: allowing pupils to give an explanation when blamed for doing something wrong; and

Strategy 8: recording pupils' behavioural problems (systematically recording this information).

The current study surveyed strategies used by school professional teachers, based on their backgrounds information to promote positive behaviour in a school context.

### **4. Methodology**

This study employs the survey research design by using questionnaires to collect data from 15 urban national secondary schools in Malaysia. Participants were selected using stratified random sampling involving 13 principals, 21 counsellors, 205 class teachers, 28 discipline teachers and 52 physical education teachers. The female respondents (n=239) outnumbered the male respondents (n=80) involving in the research. A total number of 171 respondents were from inner-city schools and 148 were from outer-city schools. The majority of respondents were Malay. Out of 319 respondents, 244 Malay, 34 Chinese, 18 Indian, and 10 respondents were from various ethnic groups (unidentified). Prior to data collection, a pilot test was performed in one Malaysian community school. Accordingly, improvement was made to the items as recommended by the participants involved in the pilot test. The main data collection was then carried out in the selected schools assisted by in-service school teachers and counsellors. Data collected was analysed using frequency and percentage.

### **5. Results and Discussion**

The overall result regarding the implementation of positive behaviour enhancement strategies is quite positive and promising. Most professional teachers in this study reported that they always employed strategies for promoting positive behaviour in school. Table 1, illustrates that teachers always treat pupils with respect, co-operate with the government agencies, encourage pupils to actively participate in school activities, use more praise than criticism, and guide pupils to modify their behavioural problems. It can be asserted that most professional teachers in this study have applied knowledge gained from professional educational training which they attended. The findings of the previous researches suggest that professional teachers' satisfaction and high level of competencies are contributing factors to effective teaching practices (Duckworth, Quinn & Seligman, 2009; Scott, Swortzel & Taylor, 2005).

Table 1. Positive behaviour enhancement strategies based on respondents' perspectives

| Strategy (n=319)   | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| 1 Treat pupils with respect  | Always    |
| 2 Allow pupils to give their side of the story when blamed for doing something wrong | Sometimes |
| 3 Discuss with pupils their feelings towards any issues                              | Sometimes |
| 4 Co-operation with the government agencies  | Always    |
| 5 Encourage pupils to actively participate in school activities                      | Always    |
| 6 Use more praise than criticism in schools  | Always    |
| 7 Guide pupils to find a solution to modify their behavioural problems               | Always    |
| 8 Systematically record a pupil's behavioural problems                               | Sometimes |

Although results from this study indicate that there is a positive trend in the implementation of positive behaviour enhancement strategies, detailed analysis of demographic factors may produce different viewpoints. It is significant to consider demographic factors in data analysis as extensive past studies revealed that there is a close relationship between instructional strategies used in school with demographic variables. In a related study, Berry (2001) found that demographic factors including teaching experience and gender have a significant relationship with their attitudes towards working environment. Previous researches suggest that there is a significant relationship between the professional teachers' roles and preferred teaching strategies (Threton & Walter, 2009). Therefore, detailed results from the current study, based on demographic factors, are analysed and discussed at length.

### 5.1 Gender

Results show that although most professional teachers of both genders always carried out positive behaviour enhancement strategies, there is a discrepancy of response between genders. Many female professional teachers reported that they never co-operate with government agencies (Strategy 8) and record pupils' behavioural problems in a record book (Strategy 8). The most often strategies carried out by both genders are Strategy 1 treating pupils with respect, Strategy 7 allowing pupils to give an explanation when blamed for doing something wrong and Strategy 4 encouraging leadership roles. This is parallel with previous studies where results showed that disparities exist by gender in term of teaching strategies used in school (Huber & Schofield, 1998; Kelly, 2000). Gender differences among these groups may occur due to the different learning styles between genders (Lin, 2001). However, there is limited data in this study to examine the actual contributing factors to this discrepancy.

### 5.2 School Location

Results show that professional teachers from inner-city and outer-city schools reported that they had more or less similar practices. For instance, the majority of respondents of professional teachers from both school locations reported that they always treated pupils with respect (Strategy 1) and allowed pupils to give an explanation when blamed for doing something wrong (Strategy 7). More than half of professional teachers reported that they always praised pupils (Strategy 5) and provided guidance to modify behaviour (Strategy 6). This might be due to the centralised teacher education system where every teacher is educated using standard modules. The curriculum for teacher education in Malaysia is standardized in which all teachers have to pass the screening tests and examinations. Two ministries involved in teacher education in Malaysia are the Ministry of Education of Malaysia (via teacher training institutes) and the Ministry of Higher Education (through public universities). Past empirical studies showed that the only differences in teaching practices may occur in terms of the use of technology and modern computer in classroom (Kim & Bagaka, 2005).

### 5.3 Ethnicity

Most professional teachers from different ethnic backgrounds reported that they always treated pupils with respect, praised pupils, guided pupils to modify their problematic behaviour, and allowed pupils to give an explanation when doing something wrong. This means that teachers irrespective of their cultural backgrounds have a similar practice. However, there is irrelevant data from this study to explain factors associating with the teaching practice among diverse ethnic groups of teachers. It may be due to the teacher education curriculum that contains cultural responsive management elements (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke & Curran, 2004). Gay (2002) recommended that cultural elements have to be embedded in any curriculum design.

Detailed analysis revealed that the majority of Chinese professional teachers reported that they always treat pupils with respect (Strategy 1) compared to Malay and Indian. A gap was observed regarding the treating pupils with respect (Strategy 1), discussing with pupils their feelings towards any issues (Strategy 2), co-operation with government agencies (Strategy 3) and recording pupils' behavioural problems (Strategy 8). Most Chinese reported that they always discussed with pupils. On the other hand, most Malay (38%, n=131) reported that they sometimes carried out such a strategy. A higher percentage of Malay (30%, n=77) reported that they never co-operated with the government agencies (Strategy 3), compared to Chinese and Indian. These gaps show that there is a close link between teaching practices (in several aspects) with cultural elements. This confirms the findings of past studies on this subject where the result indicated that there is a close link between home environment, cultural elements and behaviour in school (Faitar, 2011).

#### *5.4 Roles*

Results from this study revealed that there are some similarities and discrepancies of practice based on the professional teachers' roles. The roles in this study refer to the designation of school professional teachers either principals, counsellors, class teachers, discipline teachers or physical education teachers. Results show that most principals reported that they always carried out all strategies, which is considered to be positive. It is important to have principals who are keen on positive approaches influencing the formation of productive learning environment. Many past studies suggest the importance of supportive school leaders for developing productive school environment (Awang, 2012; Phillips, 1997). Apart from discussing with pupils their feelings towards any issues (Strategy 2) and recording pupils' behavioural problems (Strategy 8), the majority of counsellors reported they always recorded pupils' behavioural problems followed by discipline teachers, principals, physical education teachers and class teachers. Results also show that almost all counsellors reported that they always had a discussion with pupils. This is not surprising as discussion is part of a counsellor's job. However, it is unusual when four counsellors reported that they sometimes had a discussion with pupils. Most class teachers and physical education teachers reported that they never had a discussion with pupils compared to others. Indeed, some of class teachers and physical education teachers stated that such strategy was not needed. These differences may have close link with the leadership styles among teachers based on their roles in school (Mudulina, 2012). Tatto (1998) believes that different teaching practices might have a close link with their roles in school and educational backgrounds.

#### *5.5 Education Backgrounds*

Result shows that professional teachers with higher education backgrounds reported to have carried out most strategies. Almost professional teachers who had a master's degree or PhD reported that, they always treated pupils with respect (Strategy 1), compared to those with a bachelor's degree and diploma or certificate of education. The majority of professional teachers with a bachelor's degree and diploma/certificate reported that they never co-operated with the government agencies (Strategy 3). Results from this study seem to support past studies on the association between educational backgrounds and teaching practices (Tatto, 1998). However, there is no narrative data in the current study to explain in details the extent to which their educational background has influenced their teaching practices. Although most teachers ordained higher degrees in education, there is unclear to show the relationship between teaching practices and leadership styles among them. Past study on this subject revealed that although head teachers were fully qualified, they have different preferences in terms of leadership styles (Mudulina, 2012).

#### *5.6 Age Groups and Teaching Experience*

Result shows that most professional teachers aged below 35 reported that they never co-operated with the government agencies, compared to older professional teachers. The majority of professional teachers aged over 36 reported that they always carried out such strategy. Data shows that as the age increased, the more professional teachers reported that they always encourage pupils to actively participate in school activities (Strategy 4). Result also reveals that apart from discussion with pupils their feelings towards any issue (Strategy 2), and systematically recording a pupils' behavioural problems in a record book (Strategy 8) most senior professional teachers reported that they always employed most strategies. The majority of professional teachers who had less than 15 years teaching experience reported that they never had co-operation with the government agencies. In fact, some professional teachers who had less teaching experience (15 years) stated that the strategy was not needed. The majority of professional teachers irrespective of the length of experience reported that they always treated pupils with respect (Strategy 1). Past study indicated that there is a significant relationship between school experience and teaching practices (Morgan & Hansen, 2008).

## 6. Implications, Recommendation and Conclusion

The current study highlights the importance of the use of positive behaviour enhancement strategies in school. As data from this study revealed only five strategies were frequently implemented in schools, further research should be carried out to look at the current teacher training module. In addition, to delve into the depth of the study, a qualitative study is recommended. Ironically, there are many circulars on positive behaviour enhancement which were distributed by the Ministry of education, but data from this study shows that most professional teachers are implementing the positive behaviour enhancement strategies. However, still there is a lot of room to promote the application of positive behaviour enhancement strategies. For example, pupils should be allowed to give their side of the story when blamed for doing something wrong. The teachers need to discuss pupils' feelings towards various issues with them. Furthermore, they need to systematically record pupils' behavioural problems.

This study also highlights the need for further exploration of the relationship between teacher training and teaching practices, as data showed that there might be a link between these variables. Exploratory study on this subject is crucial, as school professional teachers may have their own preference in carrying out strategies for promoting positive behaviour. They may have developed their own strategies that have been based on their own experience and knowledge on cultural background of pupils. By exploring their experience, a positive behaviour enhancement model that is based on Malaysian culture can be developed.

However, there is insufficient data from this study to relate the current results with the actual contributing factors. This highlights the need for qualitative study in future.

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