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THE PERCEPTIONS OF ADOLESCENTS TOWARDS DIFFERENT DISCIPLINE PROGRAMMES IN SINGAPORE SCHOOLS

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Abstract: This paper presents findings of a preliminary pilot study that was undertaken to examine what the perceptions of adolescents are, with regards to 3 different methods of disciplinary measures, namely peer mediation, responsible thinking, and corporal punishment, that are being carried out presently, in Singapore schools. This study intends to find out whether these discipline measures are being perceived to be effective approaches in addressing discipline problems by the adolescents. Using 3 short vignettes and a survey with rating scales, the subjects of this study, which comprised 30 secondary three girls and 35 secondary three boys, responded to the statements in the survey. Their perceptions towards each disciplinary measure were analysed.

Findings of the study revealed only significant differences between the mean score for the corporal punishment disciplinary measure and that of the other 2 disciplinary measures namely peer mediation and responsible thinking. However, no significant difference was found between the mean scores of the peer mediation disciplinary measure and that of the responsible thinking disciplinary measure.

Introduction
Singapore has seen an increase in the number of youth offenders in recent years from a mere number of 983 juveniles arrested in 1984 to a staggering number of 2 242 cases of juvenile arrests in 1999 (Chua, 1999). The rise in delinquency is not only causing uneasiness among the relevant authorities and the public here but it's also the attitudes of today's delinquents that are a cause of worry for the school authorities. Apparently, police officers have observed that some delinquents do not seem to show any sign of remorse when apprehended for their deviant acts. Instead they displayed defiance and in some cases, even demanded for their rights to a lawyer (Vasoo, 1999). Most of these are teenagers of school-going age and some are in fact, still attending schools.

If these teenagers are still regularly attending schools, what, then, are schools doing to reduce recidivism? How can schools be proactive in preventing more teenagers from getting into trouble with the law? Presently, different secondary schools in Singapore have developed their own programmes in discipline, depending on the profile of their students. Pastoral Care and Career Guidance (PCCG) is the overall proactive discipline-related programme that the Ministry of Education has recommended to all secondary schools in Singapore. Different schools have further initiated their own discipline programmes besides conducting PCCG classes, one of which is the Peer Mediation
Programme. The latter is a school-based programme that makes use of trained students to help offenders and their victims (both from the same school) resolve their disputes.

The School Community
Besides the family, the school is the next closest type of social community for an adolescent. An ex-offender is likely to experience some form of social alienation from his peers or even teachers. They will probably ostracise him after having known his past behaviour. This is what is known as retributive justice where the offender feels alienated. This alienation is a type of stigmatisation that will eventually lead to the offender being drawn towards others whom he finds similarities with, and as a result a criminal subculture group is formed. Thus there is a greater need for schools to refrain from labelling or ostracising adolescents who have committed offences (McCold & Watchel, 1997). After having gone through disciplinary action administered by the school authorities, the offender would have experienced some form of shaming from significant others in his immediate academic environment which would probably includes his teachers and his peers. Next, it is the school's responsibility to help him re-build new relationships with his teachers and non-deviant peers. In order for re-integration to be take place and be effective, the school community must ensure that at all levels, the ex-offender must feel accepted despite what he has done before and slowly gets re-integrated back into the school community (Pranis, 1997). According to research in this field, there must exist a network of interdependencies among the different individuals in the school community before the offender can experience any sense of belonging or loyalty to the in which he attends (Braithwaite, 1989). Research also shows that the more connected the offender feels he is with different members of the school community, the more likely he would restrain himself from behaviours that are unacceptable by the community (Pranis, 1997). As the offender continues to maintain this 'connectedness' with his community, his social identity also undergoes changes, from one that is deviant in nature to one that is more prosocial and positive.

Social Identity Theory
The social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner in 1979), comprised of three central ideas: categorisation, identification and comparison. The idea of categorisation rests on the familiar premise of how we classify objects around us in order to make sense of them. Likewise, we mentally "organise" people and ourselves into groups in order to understand the social environment around us. The type of categories or groups that we belong to help give a definition of ourselves. Also, by belonging to a particular group, we behave in a manner that is appropriate to the norms of that group. For the adolescents, being in a group gives them a sense of who they are and how they should behave in relation to the social environment around them.

Identification is the second idea in Tajfel and Turner social identity theory that refers to the fact that we identify ourselves with the group that we belong to. The idea of identification is made up of two parts: personal identity and social identity. The personal identity of the adolescent basically refers to what he is and what he perceives himself to be, as an individual. This could include his personal traits, his assessment of himself and his values. On the other hand, the adolescent's social identity is formed in terms of his
social position with his other friends who are in the same group as him. In the case of delinquency, deviant behaviours resulting in violence could be considered rational and acceptable to the adolescent simply because all the members of his group are involved in it. (Oakes, Halsam & Turner, 1994).

The third idea that involves comparing ourselves with others around us is the notion of social comparison. The idea of comparison revolves around the need for the adolescent to form a positive self-concept of himself by evaluating and comparing himself with others who are similar to him in many ways. Likewise in a group, the adolescents would choose to compare themselves with other groups in ways that would only reflect positively on themselves, even in the case of deviant groups (Social Identity). The group is also seen to be salient by these adolescents in the process of positive comparison. Therefore, sometimes, an adolescent will choose to move out of his group when his identification with the group becomes inadequate through his own negative evaluations or when the beliefs and norms of the group are perceived as weakened and eroded (Tajfel, 1982). In this case, the offender probably found that an inconsistency in norms or beliefs has arisen between the group and him and he feels compelled to move out of the group. If he doesn't move out, he is likely to feel shame. An adolescent is thus unlikely to feel any kind of shame or disgrace if he has compared himself favourably with the group that he is in.

**Reintegrative Shaming**

There are, according to research (Braithwaite, 1989) 2 kinds of shaming. One is stigmatic, which carries similar implications of publicly labelling the offender as someone evil or bad, because of his act of misbehaviour towards others. Stigmatic shaming also connotes the meaning of out-casting the offender and further breaks down the moral bonds and relationships between his community and him (Sherman & Strang, 1997). Often times, the consequence of stigmatisation pushes the offender into the company of other teenagers with similar identities to his, causing him to seek support from them. Such groups actually form the criminal subcultures of a society where the offender's deviant ways are further reinforced. Through stigmatisation, the family or the school are indirectly increasing the attraction of subcultural groups which show support for the crime and ultimately the social bonds between the offender and the school or the family will be weakened (Braithwaite, 1989).

On the other hand, reintegrative shaming, which operates on strengthening the bonds, in this case, between the school and offender, offers the offender the alternative to be reintegrated back into the school as honest and trustworthy members of the community. In reintegrative shaming, the offender is first corrected and following that, the community (which is the school) will help the offender to establish his new and positive identity with the school. In reintegrative shaming, it is the offence and not the offender that is being condemned (Sherman & Strang, 1997). The offender is essentially still seen as a good person despite his wrongdoing that is viewed as bad. In peer mediation, the offenders are usually being asked to attend the arbitration session by their teachers although sometimes they volunteer to go on the mediation programme on their own. How reintegrative shaming hopes to work through the peer mediation programme is that, after the conflict between the two offenders have been resolved, the school should communicate the
message to the offenders that they are still cherished and loved by their peers and teachers. The school should, as a community, try to reintegrate the offenders back into the school community instead of ostracising them, which will then lead to stigmatisation (Braithwaite, 1989).

Once the offender perceives himself as part of the school community and gradually, he will also identify with what it represents. Gradually, as mentioned in the social identity theory above, the norms and beliefs of his previous social group will slowly be weakened and eroded. Soon, the adolescent will also evaluate his past group in a negative light as he compares them with his present group that is seen as positive. From his perspective, the social strength of his past social group has weakened and the group has become less salient to him. Eventually, the offender will have taken on a new social identity with behaviours that are aligned to the new group that he identifies with, which are pro-social rather than deviant in nature.

**Peer Mediation**

In recent years, the Singapore Juvenile Court has seen an increased emphasis in the usage of a judicial procedure known as the Restorative Justice Model. Restorative Justice, as the term implies, seeks to restore victims of crime for the loss they have experienced, to move towards a more victim-sensitive criminal justice system, and to offer to offenders the opportunity to reintegrate back into the society (Judicare, 1998).

Under the idea of restorative justice, there are different programmes to help facilitate the rehabilitation of young offenders. One such programme is the Peer Mediation Programme which is a type of conflict resolution programme that helps individuals in dispute to try and come up with a solution to the problem themselves (National Institute for Dispute Resolution, 1994). It was a programme that was introduced to 4 pilot schools in Singapore in 1997 (Straits' Times, 1997). Peer mediation is a programme initiated by the Juvenile Court which aims at reducing disciplinary problems in schools by teaching the students skills that will help them resolve their disputes with each other peaceably. This is done to pre-empt the dispute/conflict from escalating into a behaviour which might require the attention of the police or the courts. It is a process in which a trained student mediator acts as a moderator for resolving conflicts and disputes among students. He/she will help their schoolmates identify the problems behind their conflict and try to work out some solutions together. In some cases, adolescents feel more comfortable bringing their dispute to a peer rather than to someone in authority (Teacher talk, 1996).

In peer mediation, the disputers will also be taught the appropriate social skills in resolving conflicts and differences while going through the mediation process. This is because through peer mediation of disputes, these students develop anger-management skills as well as the ability to exercise self-control, self-respect, empathy for and teamwork with others. In terms of group culture, these students will also learn the dynamics of inter-group relations in knowing how to respect others as individuals or as group members. Besides resolving conflicts, peer mediation can be seen as an effort on the part of the school community to help the juvenile, who has experienced a loss of social integration with his family, build up social bonds with his peers and teachers

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(Braithwaite, 1989). By doing the latter, the school also helps the offenders to cultivate a spirit of belongingness to the school and to act responsibly in the school community. Peer mediation actually helps students to accept the consequences of their own behaviour and subsequently, to stand accountable to the school community for the deviant acts they get into (National Institute for Dispute Resolution, 1994).

For principals and teachers of the schools, mediation also provides them with an alternative way of resolving conflicts among students rather than employing traditional methods of discipline such as expulsions, suspensions, and court intervention (Colorado School Mediation Project).

**Responsible Thinking Process (RTP)**

This discipline programme by Edward E. Ford, was developed specially for schools to teach students who were continuously disruptive in class/school to think through what they were doing in relation to the rules of the class/school. This model of discipline is based on the theory of Perception Control which states that people will change their actions to make the perceptions of their environment conform, if what they perceive is different from what they actually want. According to this theory, people are constantly trying to control their perceptions. In other words, we are always comparing the ways we want things to be, with the ways we perceive them to be. If both our wants and our perceptions are compatible, then we are satisfied. However, if the reverse occurs, then we will either change our wants or act on the factors that will change the way we perceive (Ford, 1997).

In Singapore, the Responsible Thinking Process has been adopted as a discipline model by 15 secondary since 1999. What the disruptive students are being taught in RTP is that they learn how to deal with the perceptions they are trying to control, in an effective way. They are required to come up with their own plan of solving their behavioural problem using a set of guided questions. There is also a RTP co-ordinator appointed by the school who will assist the student with the drawing up of his plan in a special room. In the meantime, all their classes are being suspended until they come up with a plan that will help them get their way back into the classroom. If the student continues to fail to comply, he would have to get his parents to help him "negotiate" his way back into the RTP. Once the offender has successfully negotiated, he would have to once again, come up with a plan of solving his behavioural problem.

**Method**

The sample of this pilot study comprised of subjects (both male and female) from 2 different schools. Altogether there were 62 subjects for the study. They are all 15 years to 17 years of age and from the Normal Academic/Technical Stream. They were chosen because quite a number of them have displayed acts of misbehaviour which led to the breaking of school rules.

The data for the study was collected in terms of the responses made by the subjects to a questionnaire. The subjects were first given a list of 3 different vignettes to read, with each containing a scenario of one of the three discipline programmes stated earlier. The
sequence of the vignettes was also presented to the students in no particular fixed order to prevent the effects of ordering. Using the scenarios from the vignettes, the subjects were required to score their opinions against statements made of each discipline programme found in the different vignettes. They were supposed to rate their opinions from a scale of 1 to 6 (1-strongly disagree, 6-strongly agree). There were altogether 14 statements and each subject was supposed to rate the discipline programme accordingly to each of these statements.

**Findings and Discussion**

The scores for each of the three discipline programmes were then collated for the 14 statements and their mean scores were compared using ANOVA. The results indicated there were no significant difference found between the mean scores of the peer mediation discipline programme and the responsible thinking process. Even in terms of gender, no significant difference was found between the above two discipline programmes regardless of whether they were boys or girls. This finding could be attributed to the fact that the mediator used in the vignette was a prefect. The latter is perceived by the subjects as someone who is from a different category with a different social identity. Despite the prefect being from a social category group that symbolises more positive norms in a school context, the subjects would still be unwilling to assume his category as their own because of in-group bias. What the latter implies is that, to the offender, the prefect is not seen as an individual with his own personal identity, but as a member of an outgroup with its own social identity. The prefect is perceived in terms of his social category rather as an individual. Research has found that even though the prefect’s personal identity may have some similarities with that of the subject’s, the latter would still favour their own ingroup members who might be less similar to them than the prefect. In addition, the prefect also lacks the salience for the subjects to positively compare the prefect group over their own group favourably. Although they may not compare favourably with the prefect group on certain dimensions, the subjects would compare themselves on other dimensions such as masculinity, physical fitness or even being more ‘street smart’.

However, the results indicated that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the corporal punishment method and the peer mediation programme (F=120.35, p<.05). Similarly, a significant difference was found between the corporal punishment method of discipline and the responsible thinking process mean scores (F=91.63, p<.05). Even in terms of gender, significant differences were also found in either gender between the traditional method of discipline and the other two programmes. Such a finding reinforces what past research has shown that corporal punishment actually creates barriers between the offender and the punisher, putting the discipline master as the one with power and the ability to cause injury (Braithwaite, 1989). Other studies have also shown that corporal punishment is often perceived by offenders as a sanctioning measure which is experienced as unjust and victimising. A study which reflected the latter showed that sanctions actually increase delinquency rather than reduce it (Thomas & Bishop, 1984).

**Implications**
One possible reason as to why no significant difference was found between the peer mediation programme and the responsible thinking process mean scores could be attributed to the fact that a prefect was being used as the mediator in the vignette. The suggestion here is that instead of using prefects or students from other social categories, the mediator could be someone whose social category is somewhat similar to the subjects, such as an ex-gang member or someone from their class who is rather popular and well-liked by them. This is because a prefect is perceived by the offender as someone who is of a different social identity from them, thereby making it difficult for the offenders to identify with him (the prefect). On the other hand, if the mediator is seen as someone whom the offenders can identify with, someone whom they can find similarities in, they would probably be more receptive and thus may attempt to amend their deviant ways. So far, a few schools that have adopted the peer mediation programme have selected and trained students other than prefects or school counsellors, as mediators for this programme.

The low mean score obtained for the traditional method of discipline shows both its unpopularity among students as well as its ineffectiveness in curbing youth from offending. As explained above, corporal punishment does not only stop youth offenders but actually pushes them into further acts of deviancy. The implication here is that corporal punishment carries with it the negative effects of stigmatisation that the respective school authorities should be made aware of. Therefore, as much as possible, it is advocated that schools which are adamant about carrying out corporal punishment as a form of discipline should also look into reintegrative measures in restoring the delinquent back into the school community after the necessary punishment has been meted out.

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