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Discipline Problems in Schools: Teachers' Perception

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INTRODUCTION

Discipline in schools has always been a major concern for teachers and educators, especially when there has been indications that the problem is getting worse rather than improving. In 1985, a report entitled "Teachers' Perception of the State of Discipline in Singapore Schools" published by the Singapore Teachers Union, provided empirical evidence that the state of discipline in schools at that time gave no cause for real concern. Exactly 10 years later, the Singapore Teachers' Union conducted another survey and the findings revealed in the second report entitled "Discipline in Singapore Schools", seem to indicate that the situation has worsened.

In this second survey, slightly more than half of the 261 respondents (59.8 per cent) were of the opinion that discipline problems in their schools were getting worse. However, one cannot help noticing that the 1995 survey had a 'biased' sample in that the majority of the respondents (about 88 per cent) were teachers in charge of discipline in their respective schools. As discipline masters and discipline mistresses, they were likely to see the pupils 'at their worst' as most of the discipline cases would be referred to them. Should their experiences with discipline problems and their views on disciplinary measures be taken as representative of that of the teacher population as a whole? This, and many other issues, prompted the authors to conduct a survey to find answers to the following questions:

- What are the most commonly encountered discipline problems in the schools and how different is the picture between primary and secondary schools and across types of schools?

- In the teachers' perception, how serious is the problem of discipline in their respective schools? Are there gender differences in their views? Does teaching experience affect their views?

- What, in the views of the teachers, are reasonable and effective measures in handling discipline problems in schools?

- Are there age and gender differences in the teacher's opinion on the use of the cane in discipline? Do their views vary according to the number of years of teaching experience?

- What, in the views of the teachers, are effective preventive measures to reduce discipline problems in schools?

THE SAMPLE

The sample comprised 84 males teachers (29.5 per cent) and 201 female teachers (70.5 per cent), totalling 285 teachers. Their age ranged from less than 30 years old (14.3 per cent) to more than 50 years old (8.8 per cent) with about equal numbers in the age bracket between 31 and 40 years old (39.0 per cent) and between 41 and 50 years old (37.9 per cent). A great percentage of the sample had taught in schools for more than 20 years old (35.8 per cent). At the other end of the scale, 10.2 per cent had fewer than 5 years of teaching experience. The majority had taught for 6 to 15 years (44.2 per cent). Slightly more than half of the sample (56.8 per cent) were teaching in primary schools and a small percentage (2.8 per cent) were teaching in junior colleges. With regard to the type of schools they were teaching in, the majority were teaching in government schools (77.5 per cent) and the second biggest group was from government aided schools (15.8 per cent). Overall, the sample covered 100 secondary schools, 80 primary schools, and two junior colleges.

NATURE OF DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED

To get a picture of the types of discipline problems occurring in the schools, the teachers were asked to respond to a given list of 20 behavioural problems and indicate on a 4-point scale how often they had encountered these. As the list provided was not exhaustive, to complete the picture, the teachers were asked to identify other types of behavioural problems they had encountered that were not listed in the questionnaire.

Table 1 shows the ranking of the 20 discipline problems by their mean score. The most common problems are "telling lies", "late for class school", "disruptive behaviour in class" , "vandalism", "using abusive language", "truancy", "theft", and "bullying". Table 2 shows the additional problems to be "not doing homework", "defiance towards teachers", "not bringing books to school", "inappropriate attire/appearance", "negative attitude towards study", and "shoplifting".

Table 1: Ranking of Discipline Problems Encountered
N = 285

Ranking	Problem	Mean Score
1	Telling lies	2.82
2	Late for class/school	2.79
3	Disruptive behaviour in class	2.77
4	Vandalism	2.38
5	Using abusive language	2.33
6	Truancy	2.32
7	Theft	2.29
8	Bullying	2.15
9	Smoking	1.97
10	Physical violence	1.97
11	Cheating in tests/exams	1.92
12	Running away from home	1.84
13	Extortion	1.75
14	Gangsterism	1.71
15	Suicidal attempts	1.31
16	Molesting girls	1.31
17	Teenage pregnancy	1.19
18	Alcohol drinking	1.19
19	Drug taking	1.18
20	Abortion	1.12

Piecing together the input from the teachers in the sample, the picture that emerged did not look much different from the one revealed by the 1995 STU survey which showed the more frequently encountered discipline problems to be "late for school", "minor vandalism", "not doing work", "not bringing books to class", "inattention", "using foul

language", "rudeness to teachers", "truancy", "stealing" and "smoking" etc. (Singapore Techers Union 1995).

Table 2: Discipline Problems in Schools: Teachers' Perception

Ranking	Description of Problem	Frequency
1	Not doing homework	45
2	Defiance towards teachers	37
3	Not bringing books to school	14
4	Inappropriate attire/appearance	14
5	Negative attitude towards study	13
6	Shoplifting	10
7	Absenteeism/skipping classes	8
8	Late submission of school work	7
9	Sleeping in class	7
10	Boy/girl relationship	7
11	Daydreaming in class	6
12	Gambling	6
13	Fighting/quarrelling in school	6
14	Forging parent's signature	3
15	Littering	3
16	Latchkey children	3
17	Copying homework	3
18	Loitering	2

Comparing with the situation in Western countries, discipline problems in Singapore schools are probably similar but definitely less serious, especially when it comes to physical violence. In the Elton Report on school discipline published in the United Kingdom in 1992, it is observed that teachers in British schools always have to battle against "inattention, idleness, irresponsibility, vandalism, bullying, fighting, defiance, truancy, impertinence and personal assault". (Wheldall ed. 1992). In another observation, American schools are described as "a battleground where major confrontations and minor skirmishes occur daily" (Curwin & Mendler 1988). However, this does not mean that we can afford to be complacent. The handling of school discipline problems is still a matter of concern for educators in Singapore.

To investigate further how different the pattern of discipline problems is between the age groups, a comparison was made between the ranking of the top 15 most frequently encountered problems in secondary schools and in primary schools. The findings as presented in Table 3 show significant differences in nine of the behavioural problems as ascertained by t-tests. Whilst problems like "telling lies" and "lateness" are equally common in primary schools as well as in secondary schools, significant differences are found in nine problem areas, that is, "disruptive behaviour", "cheating", "vandalism", "smoking" "abusive language", "theft", "bullying", "gangsterism", and "suicidal attempts". These behavioural problems are more likely to occur in secondary schools than in primary schools.

Table 3: Top 15 Discipline Problems in Schools

Ranking	Primary N = 160		Secondary N = 115	
	Problem	Mean Score	Problem	Mean Score
1	Telling lies	2.85	Lateness	3.13
2	Disruptive	2.77	Telling lies	2.79
3	Lateness	2.54	Disruptive	2.78 *
4	Abusive language	2.21	Cheating	2.64 ***
5	Vandalism	2.18	Vandalism	2.63 *
6	Bullying	2.13	Smoking	2.62 ***
7	Theft	2.10	Abusive language	2.50 *
8	Truancy	2.08	Theft	2.39 *
9	Violence	1.91	Running away	2.22
10	Cheating	1.77	Bullying	2.20 ***
11	Running away	1.57	Gangsterism	2.17 ***
12	Extortion	1.51	Cheating	2.16
13	Smoking	1.49	Extortion	2.09
14	Gangsterism	1.37	Violence	2.08
15	Molesting	1.27	Suicidal attempts	1.49 ***

$*p < 0.05$
$***p < 0.005$

An attempt was also made to compare the pattern of discipline problems across the three types of schools, that is, government schools, government-aided schools and SAP schools where the pupil population

comprised mainly high achievers. The results show that for all three types of schools, the most frequently encountered discipline problems are "lateness", "telling lies" and "disruptive behaviour". Whilst "abusive language" ranks quite high in all three types of schools, "truancy" and "vandalism" are more serious in government schools and government-aided schools but rank low in SAP schools. The problem of "smoking" is more likely to occur in government and government-aided schools, but not in SAP schools. Such findings seem to indicate that overall, disciplinary problems are similar in all three school types but vary in the degree of seriousness.

How serious is the problem?

Since one of the main objectives of the survey was to assess the state of discipline in schools, the teachers were asked to rate the seriousness of discipline problems in their schools based on a 3-point scale (1 = Not Serious; 2 = Quite Serious and 3 = Very Serious). The majority of the teachers (62.5 per cent) felt that the extent of discipline problems in their schools was not serious. Slightly over one-third of the sample thought it was quite serious and a mere 2.8 per cent chose the "very serious" response. This seems to indicate that the general situation in the schools is not too bad after all.

Checking out the assumption that gender and years of teaching experience may have a bearing on the teachers' perception of discipline problems in schools, analysis of variance was carried out. The results of t-test showed no significant differences between the gender groups in their perception. ANOVA procedures, however, showed some significant differences between the less experienced and the more experienced teachers.

Based on a 3-point scale, the average rating of the whole sample was 1.37. The least experienced group (< 5 years) had the highest mean score of 1.61 and the mean score decreased with increasing years of teaching experience. The group of teachers who had taught more than 20 years in schools rated the seriousness of discipline problems at the mean score of 1.22. This is expected as classroom management techniques are not something one can learn from the textbooks or merely by attending lectures. Confidence in classroom management and skills in handling discipline problems come with practice and experience.

Table 4: Discipline Problems in Schools

Comparison by School Type

Ranking	Government Schools N = 221		Government-Aided Schools N = 45		SAP Schools N = 12	
	Problem	Mean	Problem	Mean	Problem	Mean
1	Lateness	2.85	Telling lies	2.78	Telling lies	3.00
2	Telling lies	2.83	Disruptive	2.75	Disruptive	2.75
3	Disruptive	2.80	Lateness	2.56	Lateness	2.50
4	Vandalism	2.41	Vandalism	2.31	Abusive language	2.25
5	Abusive language	2.37	Abusive language	2.24	Cheating	2.25
6	Truancy	2.34	Truancy	2.34	Theft	2.17
7	Theft	2.33	Theft	2.09	Bullying	2.00
8	Bullying	2.18	Bullying	2.02	Truancy	2.00
9	Violence	2.04	Cheating	1.98	Vandalism	2.00
10	Smoking	2.04	Smoking	1.89	Violence	1.75

Possible Causes For The Problems

When asked to identify possible causes for the behavioural problems encountered, the respondents were quick to attribute these to unconducive home environment, negative peer pressure, and poor parenting. Lack of parental guidance/supervision is the most frequently cited reason. It is felt that more often than not, the children are either left on their own (latchkey children) or left in the care of maids. Some teachers believe that some of the parents themselves are poor models. When it comes to disciplining misbehaved pupils, they are either indifferent or overprotective, making it difficult for the schools. The next to be blamed are adverse influences of the media promoting materialistic values. Affluence is also seen as having a negative effect on the children. When the children have too much money, too much freedom and too little supervision, their motivation drops and their studies take a back seat. However, some of the respondents recognize that as teachers, they themselves could have caused some of the problems because of "poor classroom management" and "boring lessons". They believe that pupils would misbehave when the teacher is either too lax or too strict, when the lessons are poorly taught or when what is taught is beyond their ability.

Effective Measures In Handling Discipline Problems

The teachers' views vary when asked to suggest 'reasonable' and 'effective' measures to deal with discipline problems in school. Although 'detention' is the most preferred disciplinary measure suggested for "lateness", 'counselling' is by far the most popular approach for the teachers and is recommended for all kinds of behavioural problems. It is disturbing, however, to note that 'caning' is seen as an effective disciplinary measure and is recommended for all the behavioural problems except "lateness". Further confirmation of the teachers' preference for the cane as a disciplinary tool is revealed in their response to the question "Do you approve of the use of the cane in schools?" An overwhelming majority of 86.5 per cent approve the use of the cane and give reasons such as:

- to deter others from repeating similar offenses;

- to remind the pupils of the experience of pain and discomfort;

- to curb undesirable behaviour;

- to make the pupils aware of the consequences of the offence and the authority in charge;

- to instill fear; and

- to make the pupil a better person.

It is interesting to note that analysis of variance using the t-tests shows absolutely no significant differences between the gender groups. Comparison between the primary teachers and secondary school teachers also shows no significant differences in their responses. In addition, it seems experience in teaching has not influenced the teachers' thinking in one way or the other. Whether experienced or not, the majority of the teachers are in favour of using the cane in the classroom. One can surmise from such results that regardless of gender, age, number of years of teaching experience and the age groups they teach, the majority of the teachers in the sample are in favour of caning to curb discipline problems in schools. Considering that teachers are not allowed to use corporal punishment on their pupils in Singapore schools, the picture revealed is a rather disturbing one. Is the cane really the answer to curbing discipline problems in schools?

Corporal punishment in schools has long been abolished in countries such as the United States, Canada and Australia, and lately, in Hong Kong. This move was prompted by the importance placed on self-discipline, the belief that the primary responsibility for behaviour belongs to the individual. In fact, Balson (1992) reports that when corporal punishment was first abolished in Australian schools in the early 1980s, many teachers felt inadequate in handling classroom discipline as they no longer had a 'last resort'. Many replaced the strap with the time-out room. Some schools developed a hierarchy of punishment ranging from a mild rebuke, to detention, to suspension and finally expulsion. Only in recent years have alternative methods been considered and explored in handling discipline problems.

PREVENTION OF DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS

As prevention is always better than cure, the teachers' views on preventive measures to reduce discipline problems in schools were sought. A total of 14 suggestions were made, including laying ground rules, having full-time counsellors in the schools, strengthening the

Moral Education and Pastoral Care programmes to inculcate values, and conducting parenting workshops.

The teachers realize that inculcating a sense of loyalty to the school and raising the self-esteem of the pupils are more constructive approaches to preventing discipline problems. They suggest pro-active and positive strategies such as public acknowledgement of good behaviour and home visits to forge a strong home-school partnership. To tackle the problem of latchkey children, the teachers advocate the provision of before and after school care for the children.

Discipline is more than keeping order and following rules. In fact, the best kind of discipline is self-discipline which is based on a sense of responsibility, consideration for others and self-respect. However, before a pupil can feel responsible for his own behaviours, he must first develop a sense of belonging. Only when a pupil feels that he is a part of the class and of the school will he develop a sense of responsibility. So the starting point of good discipline in schools is a positive teacher-pupil relationship in which there is mutual respect and a sense of shared responsibility.

Of course effective classroom management is essential to preventing discipline problems in class. If the teacher can present the lesson well, capture the full attention of the pupils and engage them in productive work, there will be fewer opportunities for the pupils to misbehave. Good & Brophy (1994) suggest four basic principles in effective classroom management:

- Pupils are likely to follow rules that they understand and accept. This explains why it is important to involve the pupils in setting ground rules for the class. If they have a hand in drawing up the rules, they are more likely to abide by them.

- Discipline problems are minimized when pupils are regularly engaged in meaningful activities geared to their interest and aptitude. This highlights the importance of careful lesson planning, keeping the interest and ability of the pupils in mind.

- Classroom management should be approached with an eye towards establishing a productive learning environment, rather than from a negative viewpoint stressing control of misbehaviour.

The teacher's goal is to develop inner self-control in pupils, not merely to exert control over them.

Jones (1984) also emphasizes that successful behaviour management and disciplinary practices in a school require a school-wide policy and commitment. A well-conceptualized, sensitively implemented programme involving administrators, classroom teachers and parents can create a conducive learning environment, improve pupil achievement, and reduce disruptive behaviour.

CONCLUSION

Although a rather small-scale study, the survey on teachers' perception of school discipline has revealed some interesting findings. The good news seems to be that the state of discipline in Singapore schools is not as bad as it has been made out to be. However, the wide acceptance amongst the teachers of the use of the cane as an effective tool in curbing discipline problems in schools has raised some concern. Almost 90 per cent of the teachers in the sample, young and old, male or female, inexperienced or experienced and regardless of the age groups they were teaching, have held up the cane as the answer to almost all types of discipline problems. In their desire to establish order in the classroom, they may have overlooked the proactive and instructional function of discipline and over-emphasized the remedial and punitive aspects.

Currently in educational circles worldwide, there has been a movement to abolish corporal punishment in schools and to explore developmental and preventive approaches to handling discipline problems. Classroom management techniques recommended by Kounin in the 1970s such as 'withitness' and 'overlapping', are examples of classroom management as motivation and problem prevention. The "Positive Teaching Project" carried out in England in the 1980s is another example of developmental approach to handling school discipline. This model emphasizes the mutuality and reciprocity of behaviour in teacher-learner interactions and seeks to assist pupils to assume a greater degree of control over their own learning (Wheldall 1992). With the current emphasis in Singapore on creative teaching and independent learning, the time is now ripe to re-look into Singapore classrooms to explore alternative and constructive approaches to handling discipline problems in schools.

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