

# **Title: Teachers' Decision-making in Four Directed Strategies of Classroom Control: A Case Study in a Private Secondary School in Subang, Selangor**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this case study is to uncover teachers' of classroom control and personal involvement decision-making. Contextually, the main problem existed in the private school because teachers were frequently transferring discipline cases to the Head of Discipline (HOD) for matters that could be solved at the personal level. In addition, the HOD's time and personal space to manage serious discipline cases were interrupted by minor matters that deserved lesser attention. Qualitative methods were used in data collection that included purposive sampling, questionnaires and voiced-recorded interviews. Results indicated that teachers are found to apply four-directed strategies in classroom control that are: (a) self-directed; (b) student-directed; (c) organizational-directed; and (d) situation-directed. The extent of personal involvement in decision-making is limited by a list of unfavorable conditions and obstacles that threatening to their professional reputation.

**Keywords.** Classroom management strategies; Organizational decision-making; Personal decision-making

## **Introduction**

The issue of teachers mistreating students captured numerous nationwide attentions in local newspapers and other electronic media. The Ministry of Education (MOEM) have also issued Professional Circulars 7/1995 [3] and 10/2001 [4], that prohibits teachers from using excessive force for disciplining, while conversely, remind teachers to not abdicate their responsibilities to discipline students. In the area of school leadership, there is a lack of local studies on how teachers behave as decision-makers in a strictly controlled environment [5]. For a private school, the threat of liability remains from parents and stakeholder of the school in the areas where teachers are barred by the school management from disciplining their students unlawfully [7]. To explain the contextual environment of the private school, the socio-economic background of students came from higher income families and thus enabled them to be enrolled into to a premium paying education institution. Historically, parents were prone to intervene with discipline management policies and practices because they viewed themselves as stakeholders (or customers) of the school. Private school is viewed as a better option to provide a better environment for learning, while some parents wanted to protect their children from any unfair punishment due to previous unpleasant experiences in other schools. Subsequently, they are prone to involve actively and influence school policies to prevent their children from facing any social embarrassment or unwelcomed psychological effects due to disciplining [9].

## **Problems statement**

The main problem existed in the private school because teachers were frequently transferring discipline cases to the Head of Discipline (HOD) for matters that could be decided at the personal level. As a result, the HOD's time and personal space to manage serious discipline cases were interrupted by minor matters that deserved lesser attention. In essence, the researcher has uncovered an organizational problem that is contextual to the researched organization. Therefore, there is a need to uncover teachers' classroom control strategies, and explain how they apply their strategies in classroom control when physical punishments are prohibited by the school management. In addition, the researcher seeks to uncover the unfavorable conditions and obstacles as an opportunity to explain the factors that inhibit teachers' involvement in organizational decision-making.

## **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of the case study to uncover and explain teachers' strategies to deal with discipline problems in a bureaucratic environment, while simultaneously look into their obstacles and conditions towards personal involvement in decision-making.

## **Objectives of Research**

The objectives of this case study are:

1. To uncover teachers' classroom control strategies in a context where physical punishments are prohibited by the school management.
2. To explain how teachers apply classroom control strategies in a context where physical punishments are prohibited by the school management.
3. To uncover unfavorable conditions and obstacles to personal involvement in decision-making.

## **Research Questions**

Subsequently, the research questions were crafted as follows:

1. What are teachers' classroom control strategies in a context where physical punishments are prohibited in the organization?
2. How do teachers apply their strategies in classroom control where physical punishments are prohibited by the school management?
3. What are the unfavorable conditions and obstacles that inhibit personal involvement in decision-making?

## **Methodology**

In terms of research design, qualitative methods [2] were used for this study that involved purposive sampling, open ended questionnaire, interviews and triangulation. For the researcher, the Head of Discipline (HOD) was the key personnel to approach for the study. Due to his previous encounters and experience with teachers in the school, the Head of Discipline was invited to identify other teachers as respondents. The process of selection through purposive sampling enabled the researcher to gather information on their personal participation in decision-making. A decision-making questionnaire was also developed to capture data pertaining to the objectives of the study, with a myriad of questions that are open ended in nature. Eventually, fifteen respondents completed the whole process of data collection that included face-to-face and voiced recorded interviews. All data were then transcribed, coded and analyzed with the qualitative software (ATLAS.ti) for findings.

## **Results and Discussions**

For the researched organization, teachers were found to apply four-directed strategies in classroom control. These four-directed strategies are: (a) self-directed; (b) student-directed; (c) organizational-directed; and (d) situation-directed. Self-directed strategies are all kinds of tactics that are used to educate, correct and prevent oneself from disciplining students unethically and ineffectively. Student-directed strategies are all kinds of tactics administered on students to educate and correct their misbehaviors. In addition, teachers also use mild punishment on students to prevent them from repeating the same mistakes. Organizational-directed strategies consist of tactics to comply with school management orders, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and teachers' code of ethics. Situation-directed strategies are tactics used to control, reduce or eliminate discipline situations from escalation and re-occurrence. Table 1 elaborates on the purpose of each directed strategies and presents the data findings that were coded from the response of

the interviewees. In total, there are 34 tactics listed among the four directed strategies that teachers apply in classroom control.

**Table 1.** Classroom Control Strategies among Fifteen Respondents

Strategies	Tactics	Purposes
Self-directed	1. Approachable to students	<u>For Education</u>
	2. Avoid being emotional	To improve on personal strengths (such as skills, leadership styles and problem solving) in classroom management
	3. Aware of students' behaviors and temperaments	
	4. Build good teacher-student relationship	
	5. Do not stereotype students on their past	<u>For Prevention</u>
	6. Eagerly investigates	To avoid from overreaction and punishing students unjustly
	7. Flexible with different behaviors	
	8. Prefers correction over punishment	<u>For Correction</u>
	9. Prefers to reason than to enforce	To improve on personal weakness through self-reflection
	10. Rationalize on students' patterns of behaviors	
	11. Resourceful to relate to students	
	12. Sensitive and aware of socio-cultural differences	
	13. Strict to get things done	
	14. Strict when discipline problems occur	
Student-directed	15. Allocates time for students to reflect and apologize	<u>For Education</u>
	16. Allows students to explain	To teach and cultivate students towards good behaviors
	17. Demands compliance to school rules	
	18. Execute mild punishment	<u>For Correction</u>
	19. Explain rationale before punishment	To highlight students' mistakes and guide them to change
	20. Focus on building students' trust	
	21. Intolerant towards repeated mistakes	
	22. Lenient towards childish behaviors	<u>For Prevention</u>
	23. Refers to counselor	To curb students' misbehaviors from deteriorating and re-occurring in the future
	24. Reminds students on behaviors	
	25. Scolds students publicly	<u>For Punishment</u>
	26. Show temperaments to students	To enforce change through autocratic styles of classroom leadership
Situation-directed	27. Anticipate risks and threats	<u>For Education</u>
	28. Contain problem from escalating further	To manage discipline situations according to importance and urgency
	29. Prioritize on urgent matters	<u>For Correction</u>
		To foresee risks and manage uncertainties
		<u>For Prevention</u>
		To control situations from deteriorating and to evaluate them reoccurring

Organizational-directed	30. Collaborate with other teachers	<u>For Education</u>
	31. Improve collegiality among subordinates	To manage discipline problems within personal roles and scope of SOPs
	32. Influence to improve on SOPs	
	33. Rely strictly on SOPs for decision-making	<u>For Prevention</u>
	34. Transfer to Head of Discipline (HOD)	To depend on SOPs for protection when responding to familiar/unfamiliar discipline problems.
		<u>For Correction</u>
		To improve collegiality and influence organizational change towards effectiveness and efficiency through personal opinions, consensus or collaborations.

*Note: Student-directed punishments such as Writing incident-reports, Corporal punishment, Suspensions, Expulsion, Detention and Public apology are part of Standard Operating Procedures and not considered as personal tactics.*

In relation to using self-directed strategies for the purpose of education, correction and prevention, one respondent highlighted,

“Normally, I would be strict to ensure that students would understand my lessons, so that the teaching and learning processes are not interrupted”.

As for another respondent, she highlighted the need to use student-directed strategies for education, prevention and correction,

“I always give students a chance to explain themselves and before making my conclusion. I give them the benefit of doubt and to remind them that they have to be responsible to what they say or do.”

In aspects of situation-directed strategies, another respondent highlighted the purpose of correcting and preventing discipline problems from escalation.

“If every discipline problem is to be reported to the management, I feel that a trivial discipline case could worsen by the time a solution is determined”.

As for organizational-directed strategies for the purpose of education, prevention and correction, another teacher highlighted,

“I prefer the school to enforce more punishments other than just reprimanding so that students can really change from their mistakes”.

Subsequently, the researcher realized that teachers have the choice to personally involve in decision-making if organizational conditions are favorable and obstacles are not threatening to their professional reputation. *Social Cognitive Theory* [1] and *Law of Effect* [8] argued that when conditions are favorable and obstacles are lesser, teachers are more likely to personally involve in decision-making to counter students' discipline problems in the classrooms. Table 2 shows the list of unfavorable conditions that teacher respondents felt that inhibit further involvement in decision-making.

**Table 2.** Favorable and Unfavorable Conditions to Personal Decision-making

Aspects	Favorable conditions	Unfavorable conditions
Alternative to solution	Present	Exhausted
Consultation with others	If occurred	If did not occur
Compliance to SOPs	When fully complied	When not fully complied
Discipline problem	Less serious	Serious
Experience	High	Low
Familiarity with problem	Yes	No
Limited by existing roles	No	Yes
Outcome of decision	If likely positive	If likely negative
Parental involvement	No	Yes
Personal judgment	Able	Unable
Principal empowerment	If granted	If not granted
Solutions at hand	Yes	No
To fulfill personal responsibility	Yes	No
To portray personal competency	Yes	No
To portray personal credibility	Yes	No
Trained and prepared	Yes	No
Wanting to involve	Yes	No

*Note: Favorable and unfavorable conditions identified through data coding and limited to a total of fifteen respondents.*

Lastly, findings from this case study contributed and supported on a lack of local evidence to explain why some teachers prefer to transfer discipline case to other personnel-in-charge habitually. Among the prominent factors that motivated transfers are personal conveniences, to reduced risks/mistakes and more freedom to concentrate on to their daily personal professional practice. All mentioned responses were analyzed into six major obstacles as seen in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Respondents' Obstacles in Personal Decision-Making

Type of obstacles	Reasons
Parental involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers were cautious when communicating with parents</li> <li>Parents were confused with many SOPs</li> <li>Parents were fed with one-sided story from their children</li> <li>Parents lacked counsel to understand situation</li> <li>Parents lacked respect for teachers</li> <li>Parents not totally honest with child's discipline history</li> <li>Parents felt entitled as a client</li> <li>Parents were defensive and overly protective of their child</li> <li>Parents complained and complicated discipline matters</li> </ul>
Pre-existing work culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers had difficult to assimilate with teachers from different backgrounds</li> <li>Teachers had different expectations and consistencies to discipline problems</li> <li>Teachers had differing opinions on work expectations</li> <li>Teachers do not like interruptions to personal work</li> <li>Teachers lack collaborations and discussions</li> <li>Teachers lack initiatives to intervene with trivial problems</li> <li>Teachers had resistance to change</li> <li>Teachers had difficulty to cope with leadership styles</li> </ul>

Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)		Difficulty to comply to rigid procedures Inconsistency and changing expectations Some procedures are irrelevant and needs to be reviewed Subjected to biasness when implemented Subjected to miscommunication and misinterpretation Decision may turned out to be unfavorable to management Lenience in screening and acceptance of students Involved many procedures Restricts personal involvement for decision-making SOPs is never a perfect guide for solutions
Socio-cultural difference	differ-	Teachers taking premature actions without considering socio-cultural differences Students resist to accommodate and assimilate due to different paradigm
Students with learning disabilities		Teacher enforcing punishment on these students without knowing the state of learning disorder
Teacher-student relationship	rela-	Teacher-student relationship subject to stereotyping and biasness Disciplining could affect existing relationships Lenience could invite more discipline problems

*Note: Reasons to obstacles of personal decision-making were identified through data coding and limited to a total of fifteen respondents.*

## Limitations of research

Due to the selective and small number of respondents, findings were not meant to be generalized over the whole population of teachers in the school. In order to gather data and win trust of respondents, the researcher had to be transparent with his intention and purpose of the research. Respondents had to be given the choice to withdrawal at their free will. Other precautions include the need to sharpen his communication skills as a participant observer, reduce personal error of personal judgment (or biases) through triangulation and seeking confirmation from respondents.

## Conclusion

This case study has enabled the researcher's to explore and uncover as many perspectives as possible due to the small number of respondents. In addition, the unfavorable conditions and obstacles associated with personal decision-making have also been highlighted. As an implication, it is important for the particular school management to encourage more participation in organizational decision-making. This can start with educating, managing and reducing the obstacles that could limit the extent of personal involvement among teachers, or help teachers overcome the fear of making personal mistakes through decision-making that could cause their reputation or profession. To avoid from disciplining students wrongly and to avoid threats from parents, they relied strictly on organizational SOPs to determine their roles, responsibilities and authority to intervene on students' discipline problem. However, this is not always the case when discipline problems become urgent, complicated and unpredictable, or when organizational guidelines are ambiguous and unwritten. Except for urgent situations, teachers would usually refer to their counterparts for decision-making. Otherwise, they have to refer to their experience, interpersonal and classroom management skills to intervene further in organizational decision-making.

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