POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR LOW AND HIGH LEVEL DISRUPTIVE MALAYSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Positive classroom management is crucial to achieve the efforts and rationale stated in the Malaysian National Education Philosophy (National Education Blueprint 2013-2025). This study focused on collecting qualitative data by identifying the frequency and the type of low- and high-level disruptive behaviours among students in Malaysian secondary schools. Moreover, it also focused on the current behaviour management strategies used by the teachers and their effectiveness with low- and high-level disruptors. And finally, the study proposed possible positive behaviour management strategies to better manage disruptive behaviours in classroom. The samples were 10 secondary school teachers chosen through the process of snowball sampling. Seven teachers were involved in the interview and three teachers were used for pilot study. Data was collected in the form of indepth one-on-one audio recorded interview via Zoom and Microsoft Teams. An interview protocol was created to assist the research to stay on track. The collected data was analysed via qualitative data analysis, inductive approach to thematic content analysis and field notes scribes as an alternative to transcription. The findings from the interviews suggested, teachers use both punitive strategies and positive behaviour management strategies to deal with low- and high-level disruptors. The selection of strategies and the effectiveness were based on the batch of students and the type of class. The majority used rewards, praises, communication or rapport building. Some seek the guidance of school authorities such as the discipline and counselling units for uncontrollable behaviours only.

Keywords:

positive behaviour management strategies, disruptive behaviours, secondary school students, classroom management, educational psychology

INTRODUCTION

Classroom setup has been a crucial component in the learning environment as it supported both teaching and learning. According to Monash.edu (2021), the physical atmosphere of the classroom was necessary to enhance the teaching-learning process and prevent behaviour issues. A positive learning environment allowed learners to acquire new skills, which highlighted the significance of classroom management in education. This was especially important in 21st-century education where learning environments had become more complex, influenced by learners' characteristics and broader cultural and psychological factors (Monash.edu, 2021). Classroom management was closely tied to students' learning outcomes. Effective classroom management required teachers to implement specific strategies. Without them, poor classroom management could negatively affect students' academic growth (Calstatela.edu, 2021).

The Malaysian National Education Philosophy (National Education Blueprint 2013–2025) emphasised producing balanced individuals. Teachers, aside from parents, played a vital role in realising this goal by shaping students' potential. For students to meet the aspirations of the education system, teachers needed to manage classrooms effectively (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2022). As classrooms become more complex and diverse, effective teachers must foster communication, respect, and engagement (Evans & Lester, 2021). However, disruptive behaviours such as defiance and aggression still often impede teaching and strain teacher authority (Reinke et al., 2021; Mazwati et al., 2016). Peer influence also contributes to the spread of disruptive behaviours,

affecting classroom harmony and academic performance (Osher et al., 2022). Disruptive behaviours are context-dependent and can be shaped by societal values, school-family conflicts, and peer pressure (Fakhruddin, 2018). These behaviours range from low-level disruptions like talking or inattentiveness to high-level issues like aggression or violence (Yang & Chen, 2022). Teachers continue to observe behaviours such as excessive talking, wandering, and yelling (Krishnansamy et al., 2019), with peer pressure sometimes escalating into more serious offences like theft or violence (Chow et al., 2023).

Disruptive behaviour has been defined under four categories: interference with teaching, infringement on others' rights, physical or psychological harm, and property destruction (Fakhruddin, 2018). In 2017, the Ministry of Education monitored 402 schools with known disciplinary problems, with 311 having serious issues and 91 classified as 'hotspots' (Chow et al., 2023). These statistics raise concerns about the effectiveness of current disciplinary approaches. Scholars have questioned whether punitive measures comply with the principles outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Balasingam et al., 2019). Although many teachers rely on punitive methods, they often do so without structured guidance or reinforcement strategies (Mazwati et al., 2016). Despite recognising the ineffectiveness of these methods, teachers continue to use them due to lack of formal training and professional support (Simonsen et al., 2023).

Past studies (e.g., Shen, 2024; Mazwati et al., 2016) showed that teachers' strategies were ineffective, often due to lack of formal training. Many applied the same punitive methods once used on them. Despite realising their ineffectiveness, these were the only tools they knew. Furthermore, corrective measures and harsh punishment were still prevalent in Malaysian secondary schools.

Teachers often felt unrecognised and anxious, yet classroom disruption was not impossible to manage. By identifying accurate strategies, teachers could improve classroom control and student outcomes. The study intended to be a helpful resource for both new and experienced teachers, encouraging a positive approach to behaviour management.

However, the study was not without limitations. Conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, it faced restrictions due to the Movement Control Order. School closures limited the sample size and the ability to conduct classroom observations. Initially, the researcher intended to involve principals, discipline teachers, and school counsellors from schools in Kajang and Bangi, but these plans had to be modified. The study avoided analysing virtual classrooms, focusing strictly on physical classroom experiences, as the two contexts presented different behavioural patterns. Literature from 2020–2021 was also minimal, further constraining the research scope. Despite these challenges, the study maintained its relevance by focusing on teachers lived experiences with disruptive behaviour in Malaysian secondary school classrooms.

Hence, this paper aimed to address the gap by exploring why existing strategies remained ineffective and by proposing evidence-based positive behaviour strategies for managing both low and high-level disruptions. Moreover, to investigate the behaviour management strategies employed by secondary school teachers and their effectiveness in handling disruptive behaviours. It also sought to suggest positive strategies to better support teachers. The paper focused on qualitative data collection from secondary schools in Malaysia, particularly in Selangor, identifying the frequency and type of disruptions, evaluating current strategies, and recommending better alternatives.

This paper was guided by five objectives: to identify the frequency of low and high-level disruptive behaviours; to identify the types of these behaviours; to investigate current strategies used by teachers; to assess their effectiveness; and to propose positive strategies. The corresponding research questions explored how often these behaviours occurred, their types, the strategies used to manage them, how teachers evaluated their effectiveness, and what additional support might help them manage disruptive students.

The theoretical foundation for this study was drawn from Behavioural Learning Theory, which played a major role in managing classrooms with proper discipline and supporting student learning. This theory focused on the interaction between students and teachers and viewed behaviour as something that could be taught and influenced by external factors. According to Ng et al. (2021),

behaviour was shaped by both innate and inherited factors, and teacher behaviour played a significant role in influencing how students behaved in the classroom. Early behaviourists such as Skinner, Pavlov, Canter, and Watson believed that human behaviour was shaped through the use of rewards and punishments (Bandura, 2001). This theory asserted that individuals learned to repeat or avoid certain behaviours based on observed outcomes and the experiences of others.

In line with the goals and structure of this research, the theory selected to underpin the study was Lee and Marlene Canter's Assertive Discipline Theory (1989). This theory was chosen because it aligned closely with the study's five research objectives and research questions. Assertive Discipline focused on the ability of teachers to act and communicate with students in a calm, controlled, and structured environment (Lee & Marlene Canter, 1989). It was based on the idea that students' misbehaviour often stemmed from unmet needs and desires, and it was the responsibility of the teacher to set clear expectations and limits (Charles & Senter, 2005). Teachers were encouraged to develop a systematic discipline plan and to discuss these expectations and the consequences of behavioural actions with students at the beginning of the academic year (Karasova et al., 2023)

The Assertive Discipline model promoted a humanistic approach to classroom management. It encouraged teachers to maintain a positive and productive learning environment by using specific strategies to address and prevent misbehaviour. The model incorporated a combination of rules, rewards, reinforcements, and consequences (Canter, 2001). Teachers who adopted this model were expected to communicate clearly with students, reinforce positive behaviours, and apply appropriate consequences when necessary. This ensured that both teachers' and students' rights were respected in the classroom, allowing for fair treatment and effective learning (Shen, 2024)

Aliakbari and Bozorgmanesh (2015) described assertive teachers as those who were well-organised, clear about classroom strategies, maintained strong teacher-student relationships, and enforced reward-and-consequence systems consistently (Sultansal et al., 2025). Assertive teachers clearly expressed their expectations, gained positive responses from students, and treated all students fairly. In contrast, less assertive teachers often lacked clarity, appeared indecisive, and struggled to communicate their needs to students. While the Canters initially focused on strong leadership from teachers, they later emphasised mutual respect and the importance of positive recognition, which helped students build constructive relationships with their teachers (Sultansal et al., 2025)

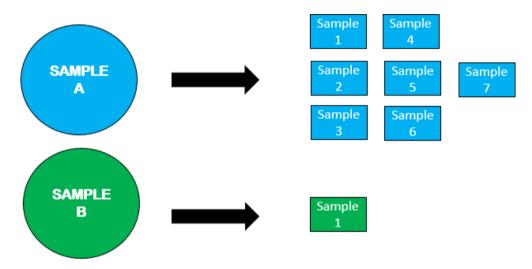
As highlighted by Thilagaratnam et al. (2021), the major concept of Assertive Discipline revolved around the teacher-student relationship. It stressed that both parties had rights and responsibilities within the classroom setting. According to the theory, students had the right to communicate with their teachers and resolve problems in a supportive environment. Assertive Discipline aimed to balance teacher authority with student engagement, leading to a more structured and respectful classroom culture. The application of this theory in the study was intended to address the specific challenges faced by teachers dealing with low and high-level disruptive behaviours, and to support the development of positive behaviour management strategies in Malaysian secondary school classrooms.

METHODOLOGY

This study attempted to investigate the current behaviour management strategies employed by secondary school teachers when handling both low and high-level disruptive behaviours and their effectiveness in reducing the repetition of such behaviours. Furthermore, the study aimed to assist pre- and in-service secondary school teachers by suggesting evidence-based positive behaviour management strategies. A qualitative research design was employed, using in-depth one-on-one audio interviews. According to Almasi et.al., 2021, qualitative research offered a holistic approach that allowed the researcher to explore social scenarios from the participant's point of view. This approach was suitable as it enabled the researcher to understand the frequency and type of disruptive

behaviours, evaluate current strategies, and propose improvements based on lived experiences. The decision to use qualitative methods was supported by Karasova et al., 2023 who asserted that respondents could openly share their thoughts and feelings, resulting in a deeper understanding that could not be captured through closed-question surveys.

The study used non-probability snowball sampling. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and limited networking, snowball sampling helped the researcher identify 10 secondary school teachers as participants. This included seven for the main interviews and three for the pilot study. The sample was recommended by previous participants, consistent with the nature of snowball sampling.



The participants were experienced in-service teachers from both public and private secondary schools in Selangor. Their experience ranged from 12 to 33 years across subjects such as English, Moral Studies, Life Skills, Science, and Mathematics. The in-service status of the participants helped the study stay relevant and grounded in current classroom realities (Almasi et.al., 2021).

Due to the Malaysian lockdown/stay at home law during the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and Microsoft Teams. These platforms were selected based on participants' availability and work-from-home schedules. The mode of audio interviews was chosen to respect participants' privacy. The instrument used was a set of five interview questions with multiple sub-questions aligned with the research questions and objectives. Structured questions were used for objectives one to three, and semi-structured ones for objectives four and five. According to amhinternational.com, (2021), structured interviews were suitable when a comprehensive list of questions existed, while semi-structured interviews allowed for deeper probing into participants' thoughts and feelings. Interview protocols and analytical techniques were followed to elicit detailed responses. The interviews were conducted in both English and Malay, with code-mixing and switching where necessary to accommodate participants' preferences and proficiency levels.

The study also used document analysis as a secondary instrument. Public documents included print and electronic journals, online articles, and books. Private documents included syllabi, teaching files, and student evaluation scores. These documents supported a deeper understanding of the context and were selected using guiding principles to ensure relevance. Structured and semi-structured interview data were analysed using qualitative data analysis techniques. The main method was an inductive approach to thematic content analysis. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998), this method involved identifying, examining, and interpreting patterns and themes within the data. Field note scribes were used as an alternative to full transcription to save time and reduce cost.

Reliability and validity were key considerations. Moreno (2021) defined reliability as the consistency of results over time and their accurate representation of the population. Kirk and Miller (1986) identified reliability in qualitative research as involving repeated measurement consistency, stability over time, and internal agreement. Validity referred to how well the research measured what it was intended to measure. Wainer and Braun (1998) discussed construct validity, while Ng et al., (2021) emphasized the importance of the concept and hypothesis that shaped data collection and analysis. To ensure validity and reliability, a panel of four experts from various academic institutions and professional backgrounds was consulted. The panel reviewed and refined the interview questions to ensure alignment with research objectives. Feedback was provided through written and audio comments, which were summarised and documented.

A pilot study was conducted with three participants: two from a public school in Ampang and one from a private school in Puchong. The pilot study was conducted over three days, from 13th to 15th August 2021. It consisted of three stages: pre-interview, during interview, and post-interview. The pilot interviews helped refine the structure, clarity, and appropriateness of the questions. Adjustments were made to simplify complex terms, focus the questions, and eliminate irrelevant content. The final version of the interview guide was improved and validated based on these insights. This methodology chapter provided a detailed account of the research design, sampling, instrumentation, data collection, analysis, and validation procedures that underpinned this qualitative study.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The findings from the study provided valuable insights into how in-service secondary school teachers managed disruptive behaviours in their classrooms. Through in-depth interviews, teachers revealed the frequency and types of disruptive behaviours they encountered, their strategies for addressing them, and how they assessed the effectiveness of those strategies. The results showed that low-level disruptive behaviours were far more common than high-level ones. All seven teachers interviewed acknowledged experiencing low-level disruptions such as excessive talking, refusal to complete tasks, and inattentiveness. Most reported these behaviours occurred either "sometimes" or frequently, with some indicating they faced them on a daily basis. On the other hand, high-level disruptions such as verbal aggression, defiance, or acts that posed physical danger occurred less frequently. Only one teacher mentioned experiencing high-level behaviours more regularly, while the rest stated they encountered such incidents rarely.

The findings were consistent with existing research by Sørlie and Ogden (2014) which indicated a decreasing trend in low-level disruptive behaviours, as noted in (Shindler, 2021; Ødegård (2017). Teachers recognised that disruptive behaviours were influenced by multiple factors, including students' home environment, peer influence, and the teacher-student relationship. Despite the challenges, most teachers believed that these behaviours could be controlled and reduced with the right strategies. Teachers expressed confidence that with experience, they had learned how to anticipate, understand, and respond to such behaviours more effectively. Some mentioned that experience played a major role in their ability to manage disruptions, suggesting that less experienced teachers might struggle without proper support and exposure.

Teachers were asked to describe the types of disruptive behaviours they classified as low and high level. Low-level disruptions were commonly associated with speaking out of turn, lack of attention, incomplete homework, or moving around the classroom unnecessarily. High-level disruptions, although less frequent, included instances of verbal aggression, talking back to the teacher, and direct challenges to authority. One teacher mentioned that some students displayed a complete disregard for rules, while another described a situation where a student used inappropriate language and refused to participate in classroom activities. The nature of high-level disruptions varied

from school to school, depending on student demographics, school culture, and community background.

When asked how they managed these behaviours, teachers shared a wide range of strategies. For low-level disruptions, they often relied on verbal communication, gentle reminders, and positive reinforcement. Many used motivational phrases, praise, and encouragement to redirect students' attention and behaviour. For high-level behaviours, teachers placed greater emphasis on building a relationship with the student. Strategies included showing empathy, listening to the student's perspective, using a calm tone of voice, and offering second chances. Several teachers highlighted that avoiding harsh tones or sarcasm was essential in de-escalating confrontations and maintaining mutual respect.

In some cases, teachers also adopted a reflective approach, choosing to evaluate their own teaching methods and classroom expectations to ensure they were being fair and inclusive. They acknowledged that misbehaviour sometimes stemmed from misunderstandings, personal issues, or lack of engagement. Hence, part of the strategy involved understanding the root cause and addressing it appropriately. Communication, understanding, and mutual trust were considered vital tools in reducing classroom disruptions.

To determine the effectiveness of the strategies used, most teachers depended on observation. They monitored students' behavioural changes over time and looked for signs of improvement in engagement, task completion, and classroom participation. Teachers noted that low-level behaviours typically improved within a short time frame, usually between one to two months. High-level behaviours, however, required more time and consistent effort, sometimes taking up to a year to show visible change. One teacher emphasised the importance of consistency in applying consequences and following through with discipline plans. Another teacher highlighted how some students responded positively once they felt cared for, suggesting that emotional support could significantly influence behavioural improvement.

The study also found that teachers generally preferred non-punitive strategies over punitive ones. Most of the participants stated that punishments such as scolding, sending students out of class, or public embarrassment were no longer effective. Instead, teachers used more constructive methods, such as giving students roles and responsibilities, involving them in discussions, and offering rewards or incentives. These methods not only improved classroom behaviour but also fostered a sense of belonging and accountability among students. Teachers believed that when students felt seen, heard, and respected, they were less likely to disrupt the class.

Furthermore, the findings supported the application of Assertive Discipline Theory by Canter, which formed the theoretical foundation of the study. The theory emphasised the need for teachers to be assertive, not aggressive or passive when managing behaviour. Teachers who were clear about their expectations, consistent in their actions, and respectful toward students tended to manage classrooms more effectively. This approach allowed students to understand boundaries while feeling respected and supported.

The discussion in Chapter Five reaffirmed that positive behaviour management strategies were more effective in promoting long-term behavioural change. Teachers shared that harsh punishments often led to resentment, rebellion, or further disengagement. In contrast, when teachers treated students with empathy and fairness, students were more willing to listen, comply, and take responsibility for their actions. The emphasis on communication, respect, and consistency aligned with best practices recommended in educational psychology and behaviour management literature.

Teachers also reflected on their need for more structured support and training in behaviour management. While most had learned through experience, they expressed a desire for workshops, professional development, and peer sharing sessions to enhance their skills. This was especially important for novice teachers who lacked the confidence or exposure to manage serious disruptions. Teachers acknowledged that school support systems, including counselling services and administrative backing, played a crucial role in managing behaviour effectively.

Several teachers highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence and patience in managing difficult student behaviours. They explained that not every behavioural issue required disciplinary action. In some cases, simply talking to the student privately or providing a listening ear made a significant difference. One teacher shared that when she listened empathetically to a student who regularly disrupted class, she discovered that the student was facing challenges at home. After showing understanding and offering extra support, the student's behaviour gradually improved. This supported the idea that misbehaviour could often be a reflection of external stressors rather than deliberate defiance.

The findings also pointed to the critical role of school leadership in supporting teachers' efforts. Teachers who felt backed by their principals and disciplinary teams reported higher confidence in implementing classroom strategies. In contrast, teachers who lacked administrative support expressed feelings of frustration, as their efforts were sometimes undermined. This suggested that positive behaviour management was not solely the teacher's responsibility but required a whole-school approach. Some teachers mentioned that peer collaboration also played an important role. When teachers shared their experiences and strategies with colleagues, they felt less isolated and more equipped to handle challenges. This peer support contributed to the collective improvement of discipline practices within the school.

Teachers also noted that establishing classroom expectations early in the academic year helped prevent misbehaviour. By setting clear rules and consistently enforcing them, students were more likely to understand boundaries and respect classroom norms. This proactive approach aligned with Canter's Assertive Discipline model, which advocated for setting expectations from the beginning and discussing the consequences of breaking rules with students in advance. Teachers agreed that consistency was key, students responded best when rules were applied fairly and uniformly, without favouritism or unpredictability.

Another significant point from the discussion was the use of positive reinforcement to encourage good behaviour. Teachers shared that they regularly acknowledged students who followed rules, participated actively, or showed improvement in their conduct. This could be through verbal praise, small tokens, or simple gestures of recognition. One teacher stated that public acknowledgment of a usually disruptive student's effort made the student feel proud and motivated to behave better. This reflected a shift from a punishment-driven model to one that emphasised recognition and encouragement. Teachers believed that reinforcing positive behaviour was more sustainable and effective in promoting long-term change.

While the use of positive strategies was widely accepted, teachers did express some limitations. A few noted that certain students, particularly those with long-standing behavioural issues or complex backgrounds, were less responsive to typical strategies. These students often required tailored interventions involving parents, counsellors, or external professionals. In such cases, classroom-based strategies alone were insufficient. This highlighted the importance of a collaborative support system involving various stakeholders in the education ecosystem.

Despite the limitations faced, including time constraints, large class sizes, and lack of specialised training, the teachers remained committed to improving their practice. Many expressed a sense of fulfilment when their efforts resulted in noticeable behavioural improvements. They described successful behaviour management not just as the reduction of disruptions but as the creation of a safe, respectful, and engaging environment where students could thrive.

In summary, the findings and discussion revealed that positive behaviour management was an evolving practice shaped by teachers' experiences, personal philosophies, and contextual realities. Communication, empathy, consistency, and school support were crucial elements in ensuring the effectiveness of strategies. The study affirmed that while challenges persisted, teachers possessed the insight and adaptability to manage them. The Assertive Discipline Theory continued to provide a valuable framework for structuring classroom management, with its emphasis on clear expectations, mutual respect, and balanced authority. These insights could inform future training, policies, and

support systems aimed at equipping teachers to handle disruptive behaviour in a constructive and confident manner.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study revisited the five research objectives, all of which focused on understanding and improving behaviour management strategies in Malaysian secondary school classrooms. The study aimed to identify the frequency and types of low and high-level disruptive behaviours, explore the strategies teachers used to manage them, evaluate their effectiveness, and propose positive behaviour management techniques. This qualitative study was conducted using snowball sampling and involved interviews with secondary school teachers from one public school in Ampang and one private school in Puchong, Selangor. Prior to the main data collection, a pilot study involving three participants was carried out to test the reliability of the interview questions. Additionally, a panel of four experts reviewed and validated the interview protocol to ensure alignment with the research objectives.

The interviews, conducted over the span of one week, were audio-recorded and analysed using an inductive approach to thematic content analysis. Field notes were used in place of full transcriptions to increase efficiency. Through these interviews, teachers shared their experiences and perceptions about the frequency and severity of disruptive behaviours, ranging from minor disturbances such as talking out of turn to more serious issues like verbal defiance. Most participants reported that low-level disruptions occurred "sometimes" or daily, while high-level disruptions were rare. These findings were consistent with previous literature suggesting that the prevalence of low-level misbehaviour remains a significant concern in secondary education settings.

The study found that teachers used both punitive and positive strategies to address disruptions in their classrooms. However, positive strategies such as communication, praise, and building rapport were generally preferred due to their effectiveness in reducing misbehaviour over time. Teachers observed that good classes responded well to both types of strategies, while weaker classes tended to respond better to positive approaches. Importantly, teachers measured the success of their strategies through observation. Behavioural improvements typically became noticeable within one to two months for low-level disruptions and up to four months or more for high-level disruptions, depending on the student.

The findings also supported the application of the Assertive Discipline model by Canter, which provided the theoretical underpinning for this study. Teachers aligned with the model's emphasis on setting clear expectations and maintaining consistent communication with students. Many relied on praise, rewards, and calm interactions to manage classroom behaviours, while only turning to school discipline or counselling units when dealing with more severe or uncontrollable behaviour.

In summary, the study successfully achieved its objectives by identifying patterns in classroom behaviour, understanding teacher strategies, and offering practical, evidence-based recommendations. The results showed that positive behaviour management strategies were not only effective but also preferred by most teachers for fostering a respectful and engaging learning environment. These insights could benefit both pre-service and in-service teachers in developing informed approaches to behaviour management tailored to the Malaysian secondary school context.

AUTHORS BIOGRAPHY

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