

HOTSPOT SCHOOLS: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINARY PROBLEMS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

School disciplinary problem has been on the rise over the past few years. New evidence continues to show that the involvement among students in disciplinary problems is a cause for concern. It is worrisome as disciplinary problems are often associated with delinquent behaviors. Driven by this interest, the study examines teachers' perceptions, types and measures in dealing with school disciplinary problems in Malaysia. This study is warranted by the fact that little is known about teachers' perception of hotspot schools, let alone their inputs in policy formulation. A structured questionnaire was developed, and a total of 113 useable questionnaires were received from school teachers in Klang, Selangor. Based on the study's findings, 87.4 percent agree that the hotspot issue is rampant, and 75.7 percent believe that schools have practical approaches in dealing with the problem. More than 80 percent considered that coming late to school, sleeping in class, truancy, incomplete homework, and bringing prohibited items such as gadgets are the most experienced disciplinary problems at schools. The paper provides critical insight into hotspot school issues and highlights the prominent role play by teachers in mitigating school disciplinary problems in Malaysia.

Keywords: Teacher, hotspot school, delinquent behavior, disciplinary problems, discipline-related, drug-issue-related.

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Introduction

In 2017, the Ministry of Education (MOE) announced two categories of Hotspot School, with 402 schools that were identified under Category 1 (discipline-related) and Category 3 (drug-issue-related). 'Hotspot School' is a term used by the government to refer to schools with high cases of disciplinary and drug problems (New Straits Time, 2017). The rise of school disciplinary problems may have had a more significant impact as these issues are often associated with students' involvement in truancy, gangsterism, drugs, smoking, and many more. This situation worsens as the percentage of school students being involved in juvenile delinquency has increased at an alarming rate (Samuel Yesuiah, 2017). Following the announcement, the Ministry of Education reaffirms the need to effectively develop proper mechanisms to deal with the problems. The news on hotspot school signals the need for the authorities and schools to develop corrective and preventive actions in dealing with disciplinary problems in schools.

The issue plaguing hotspot school has been identified as one of the main challenges in the Malaysian educational system. According to a report published by the Department of Social Welfare, most of the crime conducted by these youngsters are related to property related crimes and drug use. As of 2017, 1632 cases involving students, of which 542 were violent crimes, and 1090 were property crimes. The highest number of arrests was recorded among teens aged between 16 and 18 (The Star, 2017). The report shows the prevalence of delinquent behaviors among students since the number of cases tends to increase every year. This situation is expected to worsen over the next few years if effective action to mitigate the problem is measly done.

Therefore, this article aims to analyze the issue from the teachers' perspective and propose measures in dealing with disciplinary problems in the school. The study also focuses on the types and identifies common disciplinary problems experienced among teachers in schools. Teachers act as important 'gatekeepers' who can help to mitigate the problem. As such understanding teachers' perspectives in this context would enable educational leaders, schools, and parents to uncover a range of strategies in dealing with school disciplinary problems in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Hotspot school

Hotspot School' is a term used by the government to refer to schools with high cases of disciplinary and drug problems (New Straits Time, 2017). The hotspot school comes in two categories: (1) category one is related to disciplinary problems, and (2) category three is related to drug problems. The list was based on the high number of misdemeanor and disciplinary problems among students, as reported in the Students Discipline System (SSDM) (Malay Mail, 2017).

School disciplinary problems in Malaysia

In total, there were 311 schools under disciplinary category 1 and 91 schools under disciplinary Category 3 with 95,046 and 16,849 secondary and primary school students involved, respectively (Mohd, 2017; Mohsen, 2017). The types of schools included in the list are vocational college, public secondary school, public primary school, and private school. Table 1 shows the numbers of hotspot school according to the state and federal territory in Malaysia.

Table 1: List of Hotspot School in Malaysia according to State and Federal Territory

State/Federal Territory	Category	Category	Total
	1	2	
Selangor	63	9	76
Johor	62	1	63
Negeri Sembilan	35	5	40
Pahang	30	7	37
Penang	28	9	37
Kelantan	19	12	31
Perak	23	7	30
WP. Kuala Lumpur	-	22	22
Melaka	17	3	20
Perlis	6	5	11
Kedah	7	3	10
Terengganu	3	7	10
Sarawak	9	1	10
WP. Labuan	3	-	3
WP. Putrajaya	2	-	2

Source: Mohd, 2017

One of the common types of disciplinary problems is bullying. As of 2017, there were 2795 bullying-related cases reported (Pillay, 2018). There are two forms of bullying; a verbal and physical bully. Verbal bullying includes swearing, calling nasty names, hurting others' feelings, and physical bullying refers to fighting and hurting others (i.e., pushing, hitting, kicking, slapping). Verbal bullying is the most frequent form of bullying in schools. It is mainly contributed by revenge, which leads to a never-ending cycle of vicious behaviors among students (Yahaya, Ramli, Hashim, Ibrahim & Rahman, 2009).

Much has been written about school disciplinary problems (i.e., Nelson, 2002; Yahya et al., 2009b; Kudirat, Nsiong, Abayomi, Felicia & Leonard, 2010; Atieno, 2014; Ali, Dada, Isiaka & Salmon, 2014; Ismail & Kususanto, 2015; Lee, Rathakrishnan, Mohamed & Mohamad, 2017), especially on causes and factors that lead to students' involvement in school disciplinary problems (Yahya et al., 2009; Yahaya, Gooh & Maalip, 2014; Tai et al., 2018). Most studies associated disciplinary problems with school environment (Ali et al., 2014), peer pressure (Mansor, Sanasi, Mohd Nor, & Nasir, 2017; Jinot, 2018), social expectation (Mohideen, Khairul Anuar, Abdul Latiff, Ridzuan, & Kamarudin, 2016) and social media (Mansoret al., 2017). These factors indeed explain variances in students' behaviors. Nonetheless, the disciplinary problem is also conditioned by family stability (Yahya et al., 2014) and low socio-economic background (Tai et al., 2018). According to Tai et al (2018), poverty is among the major factors attributing to a family crisis. Living in poverty often left the children unattended. Most of these children ended up working at an early age, mixing with the wrong group of peers, and eventually commit street crimes to satisfy their needs. They turn to their friends for help when they hardly trust their family members (Jinot, 2018; Yahaya et al., 2014).

Besides parents, teachers are also known as the 'gatekeeper' and the most trusted agent in school. Teacher shoulders great responsibility not only to educate but also to deal with disciplinary problems in school. Re-establishing program for misbehavior students is a demanding task, despite the existing workload. However, their efforts are gone in vain when attempts to alter students' misdemeanor seems ineffective. Teachers would succumb to disciplinary strains among students when

school programs or regulative measures are undertaken failed to alter misbehavior students (Razak, 2013).

School, in general, subscribes to direct and indirect disciplinary measures. The direct method is implemented using regulations and punishment, while the indirect method is through the school curriculum. The responsibility of managing discipline relies not only on teachers but also on the whole school system, especially the headmaster and the disciplinary teachers. For that reason, every school has disciplinary teachers who specifically handle any issues related to discipline.

Commonly, every secondary and primary school also has Prefects Boards to help teachers and disciplinary teachers enforce school discipline (Razak, 2013). Disciplinary rules at schools are enforced based on regulations set by the Ministry since 1956. These include School Societies Regulation, School Discipline Regulation, Regulation on Expulsion of School Children, School Uniform Regulation, Regulation on Hair Styles, Prohibition on Smoking Cigarettes Regulation, Drug Abuse Regulation, School Hostel Regulation, and Regulation on Serious Breach of Discipline and General Regulations. These regulations help teachers and schools to have proper guidelines in managing the students (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 1985). On the other hand, indirect measures enable schools to develop an effective school curriculum program that focuses on developing students' attitudes, interests, feelings, value judgment, and spirit (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 1985; Razak, 2013).

Methodology

Research approach

This study was designed to examine teachers' perceptions, types, and mechanisms in dealing with school disciplinary problems. The scope of the study was explored quantitatively using a survey questionnaire. A close-ended question was used to gather information from respondents. This technique allows the researcher to collect data efficiently for a descriptive study and less expensive (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013).

Research instrument

The quantitative instrument consists of four sections: demographic data, types of disciplinary problems, teachers' perceptions of school disciplinary problems, and mechanisms in dealing with school disciplinary problems. The questionnaires were adapted and adopted from Nelson (2002) and Atieno (2014). All questionnaire items were score on a five-point Likert scaling ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree and dichotomous scaling (1) Yes, and (2) No. The study employed purposive sampling, and the questionnaire was self-administered to allow the researcher to interact directly with participants.

Sample and sampling

The survey was conducted at schools in Klang, Selangor. Selangor is the state that has the highest number of hotspot schools. There are 67 schools in category one (disciplinary problem) and nine schools in category three (drug issue). There are ten District Education Offices (DEO) in Selangor, with DEO Klang having the highest number of hotspot schools. The researcher focuses only on hotspot schools in Klang, which consists of 15 public schools. The MOE and State Education Department (SED) Selangor have only approved four schools.

Table 2: Population breakdowns of the three hotspot schools in Klang, Selangor

No.	Hotspot School	Number of teachers
1.	SekolahMenengahKebangsaanA	106
2.	SekolahMenengahKebangsaanB	100
3.	SekolahMenengahKebangsaanC	115
	<i>Total</i>	<i>321</i>

Approximately the total population of respondents in the four schools is 437 teachers. However, one school refused to participate in the study due to unknown reasons. Therefore, the total number of the population has been reduced to approximately 321 teachers. Questionnaires were distributed according to the population frame, but only 113 questionnaires were returned. A survey with uncompleted items was eliminated, resulting in a total of 111 useable questionnaires. Table 2 presents the breakdown of the population of the three-selected hotspot school in Klang, Selangor.

Analysis technique

Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS IBM 22. Descriptive statistical analysis is presented in frequency and percentage to examine teachers' perceptions of the school disciplinary problems and type of disciplinary problem in Malaysia. To give better insights on teachers' perceptions, the five-point Likert scaling was grouped into three components: disagree, neutral, and agree. The percentage of scale 1 (strongly disagree) and scale 2 (disagree) were computed together to represent disagree responses. Similarly, the percentage for scale 4 (agree) and scale 5 (disagree) were also combined to represent agree responses.

For data analysis, the primary data is supplemented with secondary data. The researcher retrieved the secondary data from newspapers, scholarly journal articles, government and school websites, books, and unpublished thesis. The secondary data helped the researcher to understand more about the research context and gave clear insight on the issue. Document analysis is used to analyse secondary data. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is a qualitative research method, which require a researcher to interpret and assess documents related to the assessment topic. This analysis of secondary data, such as schools' black book, schools' disciplinary reports and other forms of documents, supplemented the quantitative analysis.

Findings

Teachers' perceptions of disciplinary problems

School disciplinary problem is a pervasive social problem involving students in school. In Malaysia's case, the school disciplinary problem usually involves misbehavior among students, absenteeism, smoking, theft, and drug-related issues. The hotspot schools' announcement was greeted with much disappointment, and teachers accepted the news with a pinch of salt. Immense pressure was felt among teachers after the announcement on hotspot school was made by the Ministry. The uphill battle faced among teachers in managing the school disciplinary problem is endless. Their unbeatable commitment was long known way before the announcement of hotspot schools was made.

Table 3 shows teachers' perceptions of disciplinary problems among school students. 87.4 percent agreed that Malaysia's school disciplinary problem is rampant and worrisome, and 48.6 percent perceived this issue as incurable. Despite the increasing number of cases, 75.7 percent of confidence schools have a better solution, with 83.8 percent believe teachers have their techniques and strategies to overcome this problem. As an educator, the teacher serves many other essential roles beyond the classroom. In this context, they play an essential role in finding ways to curb schools' disciplinary problems.

Table 3: Teachers' Perceptions on disciplinary problems among students

Teachers' Perceptions	Frequency and Percentage for level of Agreement/ Disagreement		
	Strongly+ Disagree	Neutral	Strongly+ Agree
Disciplinary problems among students are very worrisome	14 (12.6%)	-	97 (87.4%)
Disciplinary problems among students are never ending problems with endless/hopeless solutions	44 (39.6%)	13 (11.7%)	54 (48.6%)
Schools have effective approaches in curbing the disciplinary problems among students	13 (11.7%)	14 (12.6%)	84 (75.7%)
Each teacher has their own technique in overcoming students' disciplinary problems	10 (9.0%)	8 (7.2%)	93 (83.8%)
Teachers are becoming more aware and careful in managing students involved in disciplinary problems	-	4 (3.6%)	107 (96.4%)
Students with disciplinary problems are mostly low in their academic performance	25 (22.5%)	11 (9.9%)	75 (67.6%)

Types of disciplinary problems

Following the announcement, the ministry categorized disciplinary problems into two broad categories: (1) disciplinary-related problem, and (2) drug-related problems. The breakdown of disciplinary problems is further investigated. Table 4 shows 16 types of misbehavior that could be considered disciplinary problems. These include habitual latecomers, sleeping in class, using abusive words, not completing homework, truancy, smoking, theft, threatening students and teachers, bullying, and

fornication. More than 80 percent considered that coming late to school, sleeping in class while teaching is taking place, truancy, incomplete homework, and bringing prohibited items such as mobile phones and gadgets are commonly reported disciplinary problems in schools. It is followed by smoking (60.4%) and theft (55%).

Table 4: Types of Disciplinary Problems Among School Students

Types of Disciplinary Problems	Yes (Frequency & Percentage)	No (Frequency & Percentage)
Students always come late to school	105 (94.6%)	6 (5.4%)
Students sleep during the learning and teaching process in class	102 (91.9%)	9 (8.1%)
Students use harsh/insulting words with teachers and other students	83 (74.8%)	28 (25.2%)
Students do not finish their schoolwork	105 (94.6%)	6 (5.4%)
Students play truancy in class and schools	102 (91.9%)	9 (8.1%)
Students do not abide by the schools' code in terms of school uniforms	89 (80.2%)	22 (19.8%)
Students do not bring their textbook and exercise books to school	100 (90.1%)	11 (9.9%)
Students slip away from school during class session	80 (72.1%)	31 (27.9%)
Students bring mobile phones and gadgets to school	103 (92.8%)	8 (7.2%)
Students take drugs inside school compound	20 (18%)	91 (82%)
Students smoke cigarettes inside school compound	67 (60.4%)	44 (39.6%)
Students are caught to be involved in theft in school	61 (55%)	50 (45%)
Students assault/ threaten teachers or schools administrators or classmates	43 (38.7%)	68 (61.3%)
Students are caught fighting in school compound	84 (75.7%)	27 (24.3%)
Students bring prohibited items to school	77 (69.4%)	34 (30.6%)
Students are caught in having love affairs and doing prohibited things like kissing and fornication	74 (66.7%)	37 (33.3%)

On the other hand, assaulting behaviors (38.7%) and drugs (18%) are the less perceptible disciplinary problems in their schools. This is somehow opposite to the report made by the mass media that disciplinary problems are always associated with students caught bullying and doing drugs. A similar observation was done by SadikandYalcin (2018). As reported in their study, students' misbehavior for not fulfilling their responsibilities, rudeness, and not being interested in the course are the

most experienced disciplinary problems at schools. It is an eye-opening revelation as the current research findings identified varieties of disciplinary problems that were not discussed in other related studies (Kimani, 2013).

Mechanisms in dealing with disciplinary issues

Next, 98 percent choose counseling and guidance sessions as the most appropriate measure on disciplinary measures and religious activities; 92.8 percent follow this. Meanwhile, 82 percent perceived that an existing mentor-mentee program should continue, and more curricular activities need to be conducted to ensure students' engagement in school (84.7%). Other established measures that could be useful in dealing with disciplinary students are reward system to encourage students to demonstrate good behavior (87.4%), community activities (76.6%), and the least chosen measure is physical punishment like canning (59.5%). Table 5 presents a list of measures that could be employed in dealing with disciplinary students.

Table 5: Mechanisms in Dealing with Disciplinary Issues

Mechanism	Yes (Frequency & Percentage)	No (Frequency & Percentage)
Counseling and guidance session	109 (98.2%)	2 (1.8%)
Establish a mentor-mentee session between teachers and students	91 (82%)	20 (18%)
Additional curricular activities like ' <i>gotong-royong</i> ', group activities (sports) and more	94 (84.7%)	17 (15.3%)
Humanity activities in or outside of schools	85 (76.6%)	26 (23.4%)
Religious activities like religious camp, religious talk, and more	103 (92.8%)	8 (7.2%)
Physical punishment like canning, squatting, running or standing under the scorching hot sun	66 (59.5%)	45 (40.5%)
Reward with gifts to establish good attitude among students	97 (87.4%)	14 (12.6%)

Teachers perceived that such approaches as counseling, religious activities, and offering rewards to students are more effective than physical punishment. Teachers are prone to employ less punitive measures like counseling, religious activities, and rewards to students in dealing with problematic students rather than using physical punishment as an option. Indeed, the physical punishment is not seen as favorable and

the best resort. Research by Ali et al. (2014) and Ekpenyong and Ekpenyong (2015) corroborates these findings. Accordingly, stiff punishments such as smacking and expulsion do not deal with students with disciplinary school problems. In Malaysia, caning is the least preferred approach, although some accepted cane as a form of discipline or 'tough love' (Balakrishnan, 2019). However, using caning to discipline misbehaved students is morally acceptable but legally complicated; hence students are protected under a myriad of laws, and teachers may have to face charges for physical assault.

Existing and new proposed approaches in dealing with hotspot school

The ministry, schools, and local authorities agreed that counseling and rehabilitation programs are critical in managing schools' disciplinary problems. At the national level, programs such as the Youth with Vision program under the National Blue Ocean Strategy, collaboration with the Malaysian Crime Prevention Foundation (MCPF), the National Anti-Drugs Agency, and the National Union of the Teaching Profession were introduced (Malay Mail, 2017).

State education departments, together with district education offices and schools, are committed to taking more proactive actions at the state level. Several measures have been in place. Among those are forming a special task force to control the issue, community programs, and counseling programs in schools (Shahar, 2017). The ministry also had taken a proactive step to enhance security by installing CCTV at highly risks schools. It would enable police to monitor school surrounding from time to time. Currently, the ministry has installed more than 100 CCTVs in schools around the country (Kannan, 2018).

On drug-related problems, schools, through collaboration with the National Anti-Drugs Agency (NADA), continue to implement rehabilitation programs in prisons and Henry Gurney School. NADA is one of the agencies committed to assisting schools in rehabilitation programs (Abd Manap, 2017). '*Sayanggi Hidup Elak Derita Selamanya*' (SHIELDS) and '*Program Intelek Asuhan Rohani*' (PINTAR) are among programs held with NADA. Another example of a collaborative program was held by Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Labuan together with The Royal Malaysian

Police, NADA, WP Labuan Health Department, Teachers' Parent Association (PIBG), and the *Kampung Gersik Saguking*. They have formed hotspot school task force and organized programs such as talk on crimes, discipline, health, drugs, patrolling around targeted areas, urine tests, and few others (Jabatan Pendidikan Wilayah Persekutuan Labuan, 2017). Notably, some measures are applied for selected schools only, especially those located in the high crime area. Therefore, to effectively solve the problem, more holistic and standardized policy actions need to be established.

Discussion

Calling for more proactive actions in dealing with school disciplinary problems in schools is a timely move. However, managing schools' disciplinary problems without much input from teachers would be negligibly unpromising. It is beyond doubt that teachers are always committed to providing assistance and support for students, especially those involved in disciplinary problems. As such, their opinions matter for us better to understand the issue from the teachers' perspective.

The intensity of the problem is distressing. More than 80 percent of the teachers agreed that the problem seems to be beyond the control, and more proactive measures are required. The increasing number of disciplinary cases among students signified the ineffectiveness of existing school regulations. Instead of reactive, more proactive measures are expected to be in place. The school environment has changed, and more integrative measures involving ministry, state, schools, and community need to be strategized.

On the same note, more attention needs to be devoted to a petty form of disciplinary problems as many students demonstrate misdemeanor or behavior that we should be worried about; instead of focusing on drug-related issues only. Teachers perceived truancy, bullying, sleeping in class as equally serious disciplinary problems as drug issue. As such, exaggerating students' involvement in drug-related problems would be misleading without giving adequate attention to other types of disciplinary-related problems.

On disciplinary measures, counseling, reward, and religious activities were the most effective measures in dealing with school disciplinary problems. 98.2 percent choose counseling and guidance session as the best resort, emphasizing important role play by counseling teachers at school. Accordingly, students' current ratio to school counselors in secondary school is 500:1, whereas it is 350:1 in primary schools (Rajaendram, 2019). More counselors are needed at schools to attend disciplinary cases, and such need becomes apparent with the rising number of students experiencing mental health issues. Adequate resources must be ensured, which often included intensive training for school teachers, especially counselors.

A soft approach is preferred among teachers in dealing with school disciplinary problems. Though the soft approach is harder than it looks, it is better compared to canning. In Malaysia's case, this is the least preferred approach, although some accepted cane as a form of discipline or 'tough love' (Balakrishnan, 2019). However, using canning to discipline misbehaved students is morally acceptable but legally complicated; hence they are protected under a myriad of laws. Teachers may have to face charges for physical assault.

Taking all aspects into account, managing school disciplinary problems invariably required more deliberative actions. It is not the sole responsibility of teachers, but it is a collaborative effort of all stakeholders. The future of the younger generation needs to be safeguarded, and the step begins now.

Conclusion

Growing pressure on teachers has mounted after the news on hotspot schools was revealed. Despite teachers' apprehension, one has to acknowledge that the disciplinary problems among students are prevalence in Malaysia. Increasing pattern of students' involvement in school disciplinary problems would eventually cause a massive loss for the country, especially in the development of human capital. However, labeling schools under a hotspot category is not a good move. More needs to be done. Effective policy is viable if the reality of the issue can be accurately addressed by gauging patterns, factors, and solutions to disciplinary problems in schools.

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