
What works for teachers of students with emotional and behavioural difficulties in Hong Kong's special schools

Stella Chong, EdD

Assistant Professor

Department of Educational Psychology,
Counseling and Learning Needs

The Hong Kong Institute of Education
E-mail: sclau@ied.edu.hk

Mei Lan AU, PhD

Assistant Professor

Department of Curriculum and Instruction
The Hong Kong Institute of Education
E-mail: meilanau@ied.edu.hk

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Abstract

In Hong Kong, students with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) are generally shunned by teachers in mainstream schools both because of their misconduct and as a result of their disaffected attitude towards learning. Consequently, these students are generally placed in special schools. This paper is the first of its kind to report research findings in all seven EBD schools in Hong Kong. Focus group interviews were conducted to find out what were the most effective teaching approaches to meet the needs of these students. The present study found that there are general and distinctive approaches employed by teachers, some of which appear to be culturally oriented. This paper argues that teachers in Hong Kong tend to intertwine their cultural background and life experiences with commonsense logic in managing their disaffected students. It was also apparent from the study that the majority of their practices and epistemological knowledge are underpinned by some sound theoretical frameworks. Several implications are drawn from the findings.

Student disaffection in schools in Hong Kong and current special education training

Disaffected students, according to Hope (2007), are students who may not be able to achieve academically and thus resort to seeking negative attention through misbehaviour. In Hong Kong, students who demonstrate behavioural problems and severe disaffection in mainstream schools are largely segregated and placed in special schools. As early as 1948, the first centre for the placement of maladjusted students was established. These students were labeled as having emotional and behavioural difficulties. In Hong Kong there are seven such schools known as Schools for Social Development. According to

government statistics in 2006, there were 729 students in the seven schools with a total of 121 teachers (Ip, 2007). In their exploration of the reasons why some students were disaffected and had dropped out from school, Lau, Tsang and Kwok (2007) found that they had undergone a cumulative process over an extended period of time, prior to dropping out of school. The study found that a significant factor in their attitude towards school is whether students were able to be socially integrated into the school system; another determining factor is the quality of teaching.

Teaching quality is partially determined by the quality of training. Historically, graduate teachers in Hong Kong have minimal training in special needs; special education training was formerly provided under an in-service professional development paradigm in which teachers were required to have some experience in a special school before they were entitled to special education training. Pre-service teachers received very little special needs training until the launching of the integration programme, which took place in 1997. A recent study on the current condition of integration policy in primary schools indicated that about 62% of the teachers did not have any training in special education needs (SEN) and only about 27% of the teachers felt that they had the professional knowledge necessary for effectively meeting the needs of the 'integrators' (Tsiu *et al*, 2006). Since the 2005-2006 school year, the paucity of pedagogy focused on special education has been, to an extent, resolved by two main strategies: first, in the major teacher training institute, all pre-service students are required to take one core module on understanding and managing diversity. Students who wish to learn more in this area can take other electives. Secondly, from 2007-2008, the government has mandated that all schools need to have at least: 10% of their teachers complete the basic 30-hour training; at least three teachers per school to complete the advanced 90-hour training; and at least one

teacher per school to complete the 40-60 hour thematic training on certain types of SEN such as autism and specific learning difficulties (EMB, 2007). At present, the main teacher education institute is undertaking the enormous responsibility of providing professional development for all serving teachers in the hope of upgrading their knowledge of SEN and thereby influencing the quality of teaching.

Chong, Forlin and Au (2007) found that teachers untrained in SEN were largely unwilling to accept students with exceptional needs and were especially reluctant to include students who present with aggressive behavioural difficulties. Other studies showing an increase in the number of teachers suggest that increasing numbers of students are disaffected and at the same time display more behavioural and emotional problems (Didaskalou and Millward, 2001; Egelund and Hansen, 2000). The importance of teacher training is largely recognized as one of the main keys to changing attitudes and enhancing knowledge and skills (Sharma, Forlin, Loreman, and Earle, 2006). As teaching quality is one of the determining factors in students' motivation in school, the present study has focused on what works for special education teachers in meeting the needs of students in EBD schools.

Literature review: what teaching approaches work with students who have EBD?

Evan, Harden and Thomas (2004) did a systematic review of research between 1975 and 1999 on effective strategies in supporting pupils with EBD in mainstream primary schools. They found a dearth of high quality research on strategy effectiveness. Within the scope of their review, 28 out of 96 studies confirmed numerous strategies that produced some positive impacts on students' behaviour. These were based on a range of theoretical frameworks such as cognitive behaviour models and systemic models.

To change predictable chronic problem behaviour in schools, Tyler and Jones (2000) advocated using an eco-systemic approach. The main thrust of this approach is to positively reframe the problem behaviour, first through the teacher's reflections on their normal response and explanations of actions, and then through communicating it to the child. If the child's behaviour is such that it cannot be perceived positively, for example because of kicking others, then they recommended using a symptom prescription method which involves reflecting on one's normal responses and finding alternative ways for the behaviour to be expressed differently at another place or time. Underlying such an approach is the need for a change of attitude and perspective from the teacher that expresses genuine care and concern towards the child.

An extensive body of literature on managing severe emotional and behavioural difficulties of young children concentrates on the work of nurture groups (Bennathan and Boxall, 2000; Cooper and Whitebread, 2007; Doyle, 2004; Iszatt and Wasilewska, 1997; O'Connor and Colwell, 2002). These studies found that nurture groups can re-establish the missing link of attachment to significant others, which is essential for a child's later social and psychological development. With more robust social and psychological foundations, students are found to improve cognitively, socially, emotionally and academically. This ripple effect is noted by Noddings (1992) who asserts that trust and care are the cornerstones to the establishment of an instructional relationship.

In helping adolescents who are greatly disaffected in school, Edwards and Edwards (2006) found a promising approach in the UK-I-CAN programme (adapted from AMER-I-CAN), which brings about improvement in quality of work, effort, behaviour, attendance and life management skills. Such programmes are largely based on motivational theory, establishing in

students an internal locus of control. The programme's main features focus on shifting habits and attitudes, setting achievable goals, learning effective communication and problem-solving skills, making better decisions, understanding family relations, controlling emotions and handling finance.

Lyons and O'Connor (2006) argue that power is at the heart of the issue in challenging behaviour, and such kinds of behaviour are relative and context-based driven. They proposed an integrated approach to challenging behaviour in which it is necessary to look at the 'behaviour-in-context', that is, the interaction between the needs of an individual and the context (e.g., expectation of teacher and parents versus child). Behaviour that is dysfunctional in a specific context may be functional to the individual child. For example, an adolescent may openly challenge a teacher in the hope of gaining group identity or getting recognition of his masculinity before his peers. Both researchers believe that only through constructive interaction and negotiation will a mutually acceptable construct of behaviours emerge.

In sum, the above studies have presented several different approaches. The most fundamental is getting a child connected by establishing a trusting rapport. Secondly, motivating a child to learn requires instilling an internal locus of control. Thirdly, the importance of listening to the child and understanding the behaviour-in-context is paramount. And finally, changing one's attitude and reframing one's perspective in a positive light may have a desirable impact on children's behaviour.

Methodology

In order to find out what teaching approaches work most effectively with EBD school pupils in Hong Kong, this study involved all seven schools – five for boys and two for girls. All available teachers were placed in focus groups for

interview. They were divided into three main categories in each school (as suggested by the principals): subject teachers, teachers in charge of extra-curricular activities and disciplinary and guidance teachers. In all, 89 teachers were interviewed. A set of open-ended questions was provided to teachers via their principals prior to the interview. Informed consent was sought through meeting with the principals and teachers. All participants were given the right to choose not to participate in the study or to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity of the study were guaranteed. All interviews were taped and transcribed and content analysis and thematic coding were conducted. To ensure objectivity and reliability, each researcher reviewed the same transcript individually to draw out the content themes and then compare with one another. There was great consistency in the themes drawn from the data by the two researchers.

Findings

In the sample, about 53% of the teachers were male. The majority (61%) of the teachers fell within the age range of 30-49. Over three quarters of the teachers had between six to 25 years of teaching experience. Approximately 66% of them have had either some or else extensive special education training. The majority of the teachers (74%) indicated that they have a high to very high level of confidence in teaching their students.

Range of challenging behaviours exhibited in classrooms in schools for pupils with EBD in Hong Kong

The following gives an overview, based on teachers' reports, of the kinds of challenging behaviours identified in the seven EBD schools. They are coded and classified under five main behaviour clusters:

- 1 Aggressive behaviour: acting like they were the boss, arguing with peers and teachers, bullying, challenging teachers in a rude and impolite manner (e.g., I'm like this, so what!?), fighting, hurting others physically, and swearing
- 2 Disruptive behaviour: disrupting class lessons such as blurting out verbally and disturbing other students
- 3 Off-task behaviour: exhibiting a couldn't-care-less attitude, doing other things than what was asked, sleeping, running around in class
- 4 Social difficulties: being late or truanting. Refusing to attend lessons; to listen in class; to submit assignments. Tattle-telling, drug abuse after school or during weekends, drug trafficking, and stealing
- 5 Psychiatric problems: emotionally out of control, irrational talk, mood swings from low to high in a few minutes, and behaviour identified as schizophrenic.

One group of guidance and disciplinary teachers mentioned that they have a very clear structure comprising three levels that they employ to control students' misbehaviour. Level 1: teachers will assert their bottom line and start with a verbal warning; Level 2: points will be deducted; Level 3, other teachers will assist and intervene together. Although there are clear systemic procedures in place in all of the EBD schools in disciplining students, nonetheless, in some incidences, teachers still feel apprehensive and struggle with the dilemma of whether to continue to give chances or to use legal methods such as letting the police or the court handle the case in order to teach the student a serious lesson. Decisions of where and when to draw the line is one that teachers said they wrestled with from time to time.

Some teachers perceive violation of rules as an opportunity to educate and to bring the child back on task. Data show that some of the approaches teachers used are more generic while

others are more culturally oriented. Of the variety of strategies that teachers employed, some are clearly underpinned by theoretical models. For example, the most obvious underlying theoretical frameworks are the behavioural, psychotherapeutic and systemic models; others appear to be more culturally related.

Strategies based on a Behavioural Model

Behaviourists such as Skinner (1953) believe that most behaviours are learned, and that undesirable behaviour can be modified by manipulating external reinforcers and applying appropriate consequences to the targeted behaviour (Slavin, 2007; Webber, and Plotts, 2008). As this strategy is generally easy to apply and quick to obtain responses, many teachers tend to exploit such behaviour management approaches in school. The following are examples found in the seven researched schools.

Double-binding procedure

Some teachers use a token system as a double-binding procedure to modify troubled behaviour. One approach is a reward system to motivate students to continue improvements. The use of primary reinforcers such as food certificates and secondary reinforcers such as announcing good deeds in assembly, awarding of medals, sending a positive note home and gaining special privileges, such as inviting a teacher home for a meal, are reported by teachers as some of their strategies. A few teachers emphasized the importance of clearing weekly points that were deducted in order to minimize the punitive cumulative effects that demotivate students. For example, students are allowed to pay off their 'debts' in one day doing chores or extra work. This will allow them to have a fresh start each week. However, the above adding-subtracting process is pegged with a supplementary binding condition: students cannot exceed a certain number of deducted points and if they do, they

would lose the chance to further accumulate points for that week. This approach is believed to reinforce in students the idea that while doing well is cumulative, there is always a chance to start afresh should they fail.

Within this behavioural model, the provision of consequences or sanctions is emphasized. In Hong Kong, nearly all schools have in place a merit-demerit system. Usually there are two levels of demerits to illustrate the severity of the problem; for example, a 'small demerit' for mild infractions such as being late and a 'large demerit' for more serious behaviour such as fighting. In schools for pupils with EBD, teachers are more willing to use merits to cancel demerits, while this practice is not commonly practiced in mainstream schools. Other strategies that teachers use include having students do press ups or standing in a corner, excluding them from extra-curricular activities, delaying their return home on weekends and calling a meeting with parents about the behaviour of the individual. New students are generally given what one teacher calls a 'honeymoon' period for adjustment. However, the length of time depends upon individual circumstances. This same teacher said, 'Some need three days, while others may need three months.' In order to teach autonomy and responsibility, some teachers have their students chart their misbehaviour on a record sheet and then discuss the problem with them after school.

Minimum-charge approach

Students are required to meet teachers' expectations by doing at least a minimum amount of work. If they fail to do so, they will be charged. For instance, if a student sleeps in class, the teacher would estimate the amount of time he had slept and have him make up this time after school in order to fulfill his minimum responsibilities before he can return home.

Strategies drawing on a psychotherapeutic model

Based upon the work of Rogers (1942), this model is based on the argument that before students can attend to their learning, they need to resolve some underlying difficulties which may stem from distorted early childhood experiences (Salmon and Dover, 2007). The main emphasis is on teachers being able to build a warm and trusting relationship with the students, encouraging them to talk, to reflect, and to learn new skills such as social and stress management, in order that they can be empowered to manage their future more successfully.

One teacher said: 'We need to teach the bullied child how to be tough and to learn to say no.' Another teacher said she would teach the student to do deep breathing, allowing him to leave the situation in order to calm down or to isolate himself for a while. In handling students with hyperactivity, one teacher would allow them to go to the playground and run a few laps before attending lessons.

Surround-Surrender Approach

In building rapport with students, one teacher said she has to surround the child with such a close and trusting relationship that there is no other way for him to escape except to surrender to her. Making oneself available to listen to what students have to tell of their life experiences or why they get into trouble, or to initiate talks with them in a more relaxed time are other ways teachers build a close rapport with students. This can take place during teachers' free time, in recess or on lunch duty. Some teachers also feel the need to constantly observe students' body language in order to intervene before any serious problem occurs. Interventions can take different forms: they may simply look at the child in such a way as to signal him to stop; or verbally remind him of the school rules and the consequences of his behaviour; or encourage him to improve; or persuade him to quit using drugs; or tell him

directly that his behaviour is not acceptable; or give him a hand, letting the student know you care and want to work towards compromising with him. Another teacher said that she would give the child a positive reinforcer even if he is naughty in order to gain an opportunity to talk to him. Some teachers feel that they have to learn to endure, to empathise, to love, and to trust that students can improve. But above all, they feel the need to come to understand the students' situation from their perspective and feel strongly that allowing time is essential in molding students' behavioural and academic progress.

Sense of humour

Humour is recognized by a few teachers as one of the most effective tools in diffusing students' challenging behaviour, as it may catch them off guard and treat the problem in a non-threatening way. One teacher said, 'One time I saw a child crying bitterly in class. So I went over and said to him, 'Oh you are crying, but cry politely. Okay, cry for 10 seconds Two seconds left. Oh, time's up!' If the child did not stop, then I will say, 'Oh, it looks like you need some more time. Let me give you ten more seconds, but let it all out....' Sometimes, children simply stopped before the time was up.' While handling students' tattle-telling, one teacher said she would tell the students: 'First, you must be calm and have an appropriate attitude. Raise your hand, and if the teacher is free, like after I finished teaching...But whoever wants to report on another person, you must first tell me two positive things about him before informing me what you think he did to you.' Using her sense of humour and creative strategies, the teacher was able to shift students' negative attitudes towards one another.

Strategies based on a systemic (ecological) model

From the medical model of finding fault with the child to the social model of focusing on how societal factors may contribute to the learning

problems of children, social scientists are now beginning to shed light on how the education system or ecological environment may have a major role to play in children's disaffection. Emphasis has swung from looking closely at the child on a micro level to looking more widely at the macro-environment to explore solutions and address some fundamental underlying issues of social justice and equal opportunities within the school context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Uncovering what works for EBD schools from a systemic or ecological approach, data from the findings illuminated the following three major themes.

Trans-disciplinary Approach

Collaboration and help from all disciplines is frequently mentioned as vitally important in managing challenging behaviour. For example, teachers mentioned that when students are first admitted to school, it is of the utmost importance for the class teacher and social worker to debrief and clarify school rules and regulations with them. In order to help the child to settle and to feel that the environment is safe, peers are also enlisted to provide guidance, support and help to newcomers. When serious problems arise, administrators, teachers, social workers, welfare workers, psychologists, hostel staff and representatives from the Education Bureau will work concordantly to find solutions. For the six schools with hostel accommodation, there is an exchange message system which acts as a clearinghouse for school and hostel staff to discuss, reflect, and follow up cases daily in either setting. In severe or uncontrollable situations, police are called in to intervene. Although parents are frequently encouraged to be part of the problem-solving process, teachers noted that it is often hard to get parents' attention as many work long hours.

Systemic-structural approach

Apart from a trans-disciplinary approach to assist children with social, emotional and behavioural problems, staff recognized the significance of creating a caring school culture with clearly structured rules, regulations, policies and guidelines. Several guiding principles were highlighted: the importance of consistency in applying rules and principles; the principle of immediacy in handling problems; and the significance of being fair, firm but friendly to all students. Some schools run on a system in which there are two home room teachers and both are responsible for settling their students' problems. Team spirit is strong. As one teacher said, 'We always watch out for each other. If something happens to my class, the next door teacher will come to help and vice versa.' Much emphasis is placed on having a strong school mission, imparting the values of respecting others, self-respect, autonomy and independence in students.

Stop-gap pedagogical approach

On the whole, all schools for pupils with EBD follow the same curriculum guidelines as mainstream schools. Often teachers mentioned the significance of adapting and tailoring the curriculum, perhaps compressing some of the content and making lessons more interesting and relevant to their students' needs. For instance, some teachers will use reference books or library materials rather than textbooks. Other teachers emphasize the need for constant evaluation, re-teaching and providing remedial work.

Strategies based on a cultural model

There are other strategies that teachers mentioned which appear to be more culturally-oriented.

Experiential-competitive Approach

There is a Chinese saying: 'Walking 10,000 miles is better than reading 10,000 books' (Lau and Hau, 1999). First hand experience is greatly valued in Chinese culture; hands-on experiments and field trips are considered important educational tools, especially for students who are disaffected. Schools for pupils with EBD emphasize the significance of providing inter- and intra-school competitions in order to transform children from being individualistic to collaborative in their approach. They are also seen as useful in helping them to observe school rules and activity rules and in facilitating their understanding of the essence of sinking and swimming together in a team spirit, reflecting China's ethos of collectivism. Furthermore, teachers hope to use school competitions not only to change students' individual behaviour but to build a sense of worth and community. They note that students' participation in activities can be an affirming experience. As well through competition, teachers are able to teach students that to win or lose is simply part of life.

Generalization-internalization approach

Another Chinese saying goes like this: 'Teach subtly and one will grasp eventually.' (Lau and Hau, *ibid*). Some teachers mentioned that consistency in teaching is of paramount importance at all times and in all circumstances. They believe that such subtle influences will gradually impact on the student positively.

Learn from seniors

Respecting your elders and those senior to you is an ancient tradition within Chinese culture. Numerous teachers mentioned the importance of learning from their seniors and more experienced colleagues through their sharing of past experiences of managing difficult students. Simultaneously, they also used peers with greater seniority to mentor newcomers. The concept of filial piety stems from Confucius' philosophy that

seniors are to be respected and yet at the same time ought to be, in practice, good role models if they are to earn the respect of those younger than them.

Threat-bait approach (Lau and Hua, *ibid*)

For students who are initially uncooperative or uncontrollable, teachers will act tough, asserting their authority to threaten them and concurrently use baiting procedures such as catching-them-being-good and giving them positive acknowledgment in order to win them over. This approach is generally applied by secondary teachers to adolescents who have difficulties in respecting authority.

Discussion

Principle findings from this research show that teachers in schools for pupils with EBD are prepared to manage students who are socially, behaviourally, emotionally and academically challenging. They tend to bring together their theoretically based epistemological knowledge with commonsense logic stemming from cultural and life experiences. Since well over half of the teachers in the study were experienced teachers and had either moderate or else extensive special education training, it is not surprising that so many – nearly three quarters – felt confident in their teaching of students with EBD.

To a large extent, the strategies shared by teachers of what works for them are generic in nature. To some degree their approaches can be classified under the cultural model: the experiential-competitive approach and learning from seniors, for instance, which are also largely utilized by Western countries. What stood out among all of the strategies that were mentioned is the candour of some teachers in reporting that threat and bait was also part of their repertoire. Conceivably, this threat-bait approach is all too familiar to most teachers brought up in a Chinese family whose parents frequently use an

authoritarian style in raising their children. Often this resembles verbal threats of punishment for noncompliance, sometimes offered with tangible bait if children obey to their order or command. For example, to young children, some parents would say, ‘if you don’t study hard, then go out on the street and be a beggar. But if you study hard, I’ll give you this or that.’ Most Chinese parents have high expectations of their children to do well in school, in the belief that a good education leads to a bright future. Somehow this authoritarian style may loosen its grip once society becomes more and more influenced by western notions of democracy and human rights. It is no doubt a matter of time before educators and parents stop using force or coercive methods in handling children. Nevertheless, the tendency of returning to one’s cultural experiences and commonsense logic may still prevail in the last resort.

Data from the findings also show that most teachers in EBD schools recognized that in order to re-motivate disaffected students, they need to build a trusting relationship by way of a nurturing culture and school ethos. This resonates with Cooper and Whitebread (2007), Iszatt and Wasilewska (1997), Lau, Tsang and Kwok (2007), Noddings (1992) and O’Connor and Colwell’s (2002) studies, which show that being connected is significant to the beginning of an instructional relationship.

Implications

This current study provides evidence that pre-service teacher training should place more emphasis in pre-service teacher training on preparing all teachers to better understand and cater for children with diverse learning needs. Apart from providing basic or advanced levels of studies in special education needs, experience in working with these students, alongside mentoring by veteran teachers, are keys to quality teaching and learning in furthering the success of inclusive education.

The UNESCO World Economic Forum of 2008 recognized the importance of education for all through working in close partnership across different sectors in society (Draxler, 2008). In fact, this cross-sectoral collaboration in education has been of increasing interest internationally for the last decade or so. Apart from working collaboratively with different professionals within schools, within communities, across societies, and even internationally, it is paramount not to forget our other most important partner: our students. As they are part of the problem, they should be considered as part of the solution. Allowing them to be part of think tanks in school may not only help in resolving their own problems and those of the school, but also in empowering them to be part of the future think tanks of society. As students are likely to understand the thinking and feeling of their peers and youth culture more than administrators or teachers do, they may be more able to provide the kind of insights that adults have difficulty in fathoming. This is part of a process of shifting schools’ approaches from external control to building an internal locus of control in students by hearing more of their voices. Evidence from research has clearly established that it is only if students perceive that they are in control and able to determine their future that their motivation can be switched on (Edwards and Edwards, 2006).

The limitation of this study lies in the fact that only teachers were involved in reporting what works for them in managing students with emotional and behavioural difficulties. The study has not tapped into students’ perceptions of whether what teachers thought was effective tallied with their experiences. Further study involving the collection of data from pupils is certainly warranted in order to triangulate pupils’ perspectives with that of their teachers.

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