

A Documentary Analysis of the Government's Circulars on Positive Behavior Enhancement Strategies

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Abstract

This paper analyses the concept of positive behavior and strategies for promoting positive behavior in a country that has a centralized educational system, namely Malaysia. The analysis covers 91 circulars (official government documents) that were distributed to schools over a period of 40 years (from 1969 to 2011). The analysis uses a content analysis approach. The results suggest that the concept of positive behavior revolves around discipline and obedience. The term 'good discipline' is frequently used referring to the concept of positive behavior. Perpetration, aggressive and gang behavior are considered to be negative. The Government has tended to emphasize in promoting discipline and positive behavior: (1) strategies for bonding social capital and bridging social capital, and (2) discouraging negative behaviors using punitive approach, positive and negative reinforcement. This paper proposes the framework for promoting positive behavior and the implications for classroom management.

Keywords: positive behaviour, strategies, social capital, circular, education policy

1. Introduction

Past educational studies on positive behavior seem to focus on problem behavior (Carroll, Houghton, Khan, & Tan, 2008; Cothran and Kulinna, 2007) and coping strategies (McClure & May, 2011; Morin & Battalio, 2004) rather than on the conceptualization of positive behavior. The concept of positive and negative are contextual, subjective and have a close link with socio-cultural norms (Awang, 2010). This informs why certain behavior is acceptable in a certain culture but rejected in another. Indeed, strategies recommended by governments and used by teachers may differ from one country to another. Relatively little research has been carried out on positive behavior enhancement in a Malaysian context, as much focus has been put on disciplinary issues rather than positive behavior.

1.1 Positive Behaviour Enhancement

Although many theories and approaches for promoting positive behavior are suggested in the past, it is still unclear how it links with suggestions made by governments. Despite the fact that government directives may inform practice, there are relatively few past studies that have focused on government perspectives regarding positive behavior. The most relevant research on government perspectives was carried out by Duhaney (1999). However, that study focused on the subject of inclusion, not positive behavior enhancement.

1.2 Social Capital

Social capital posits that social networks are valuable (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000) as it provides better social cohesion, support and societal wellbeing. According to Putnam (2000), bonding social capital refers to inward-looking network such as having social and psychological support for community members, whereas bridging social capital refers to outward-looking network which might be able to generate broader identities and reciprocity. In this paper, bonding social capital refers to strategies for developing a sense of belonging to a school (2006), including social relationships and connections within a school compound, whereas bridging social capital refers to a formal connection between a school and non-school agencies, such as

the local community, government bodies, parents and non-government organizations.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This paper aims to analyze the concepts of positive and negative behavior as stipulated in the circulars and identify the positive behavior enhancement strategies suggested by the Malaysian Government.

1.4 Context of the Study

The Malaysian Government puts a great deal of emphasis on positive behavior among young people, as the country has set a target to achieve the status of being a developed country by 2020. One of the challenges to achieve that vision is “establishing a fully moral and ethical society, whose citizens are strong in religious and spiritual values and imbued with the highest of ethical standards” (Mahathir, 1991, p. 2). As this challenge might be met through proper educational systems and implementations, an understanding of the Government’s perspectives on possible strategies for promoting positive behavior is vital. Malaysia has a centralized education system where most schools are managed and maintained by one ministry. A centralized educational system is one where education is managed and maintained by the central government, which “decides the content of curriculum, controls the budget, is responsible for employment, the building of educational facilities, discipline policies, etc.” (Brennen, 2002).

2. Method

The content analysis of this study covers 91 circulars published by the Ministry of Education Malaysia between 1969 and 2011. The selection criteria included mention of disciplinary matters, positive behavior, the roles of professionals, and the learning environment. Using pre-designated instruments (Duhaney, 1999), the analysis was carried out by the first author and another independent coder (an education officer with almost 10 years teaching experience). It involved the following steps: reading the documents, analyzing the documents and categorizing the information which was related to the theme, with a detailed discussion on the content of each circular (Duhaney, 1999). The concepts of positive and negative behavior, as well as strategies for promoting positive behavior and discouraging negative behavior were focused on. Inter-rater reliability scores indicate that both coders agreed on most items.

3. Results

Out of 483 circulars distributed, 19% (n=91) were found to be relevant. Terminology related to undisciplined pupils is frequently used in the circulars, which in this paper are referred to as negative behaviors.

Negative pupil behavior identified from the analysis (n=13) including playing truant, being antisocial, arguing, being arrogant to teachers, raising sensitive issues to provoke others, making noise in the mosque, bringing a weapon to school, beating and threatening a teacher, illegally publishing articles in media, vandalizing and stealing school property, smoking in a school compound, drinking alcohol, having illegal reading materials, involvement in gang culture, becoming a member of an illegal association, playing computer or electronic games, and using a mobile phone in school. The term gangsterism was used to describe gang activity such as that associated with black metal, skinheads, and punk. Subjective inappropriate behavior (n=8) mentioned in the circulars included rudely arguing with teachers, raising sensitive issues, and provoking others.

The terms ‘well-behaved’, ‘obedience’, and ‘good discipline’ were used in the circulars (n=9) to describe the concept of positive behavior. One circular highlighted the importance of showing respectful behavior in mosques. Some circulars reminded pupils to wear proper school attire (n=9). Female Muslim pupils were encouraged, but not compelled, to wear a scarf. Active participation was considered to be positive (n=12). Studious behavior was categorized as positive (n=4). Having a firm belief in and devotion to God (n=3) and being thankful were also positive.

3.1 Strategies for Promoting Positive Behavior

Results indicated that each circular contains several strategies. Themes that emerged from the analysis included pupil involvement (n=25), partnerships (n=18), interpersonal relationships (n=21), intervention and awareness (n=8), physical punishment (n=10), exclusion (n=11), and the remaining circulars mentioned aspects pertaining to disciplinary policy, the role of professionals, and outdoor education guidelines (n=26).

3.1.1 Engagement in Extracurricular Activities

Twenty-five circulars emphasized the importance of extra-curricular activities for promoting self-esteem, improving behavior and good discipline (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1995a, 2007). Active participation in sports, adolescent cadets, martial arts, photography clubs and recreational activities may be able to promote positive attitudes and behavior in pupils (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1995c). The Malay martial art known

as Silat has been approved by the Ministry of Education Malaysia as an extra-curricular activity (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1997c). In response to social problems among the youth, the Government has introduced the anti-crime club (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1999c, 2006). Although the Government emphasizes the importance of these activities for developing positive behavior, the perceptions of professionals and pupils regarding this matter are still unclear.

3.1.2 Partnership

All schools are reminded to have a good relationship with other stakeholders (n=18). This can be divided into three forms: home-school partnership, inter-agencies partnership, and inter-school partnership.

The home-school partnership refers to parental involvement in school activities. The Government highlights the need of a good partnership via a Parent Teacher Association (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2004). Parents should be informed if their child is playing truant or breaching any school regulations (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1998c, 1998d, 1999b, 2009b). However, less attention is given to how parents should be informed when their child shows behavior that is perceived as positive by teachers in schools. Previous empirical research in Malaysia suggests that parental involvement should extend from home-based activities to school-based activities (Jennifer, Sharifah, Zakaria, and Fooi, 2001). It seems that there is a gap in understanding how parents and teachers should work together in order to develop positive school ethos.

The schools are suggested to discuss with educational experts the designing, planning and conducting of attractive school activities (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1999a). All schools are requested to have a good network with local authorities including the local council and Royal Malaysian Police so as to disengage pupils from dangerous activities (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1998a, 1998b, 2001).

Holding a campaign and exhibition about crime prevention has been suggested as a useful program for positive behavior development (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1998c). The Government also recommends that all schools organize academic visits to hospices and child care facilities as a way of promoting helpful behavior in pupils (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2009a). If problems occur due to poverty, the school should contact the welfare department for further assistance. However, there is not enough evidence to suggest that schools in Malaysia have implemented this suggestion.

The Government realizes that the difficulties of pupils from Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools to adapt with the national secondary school may lead to behavioral issues. Therefore, the Government recommends school initiatives including primary-secondary school collaborations and partnerships (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1971, 2005) to overcome this issue. It can be argued that the issue of transition seems to be an inter-agency effort rather than something that is discussed and solved at a higher level.

3.1.3 Inter-personal Relationship

Good inter-personal relationships within/between teachers and pupils is viewed as one of the most important strategies (n=21). Integration among multi-ethnic pupils is necessary and vital (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2005). A campaign about the negative impact of gangster activities might improve pupil discipline (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1998b, 1998c, 1998d, 2000a, 2000b). Schools are suggested to organize cleanliness programs to promote a sense of belonging to a school and responsibility (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1981, 1989, 1996b, 1997b).

3.1.4 Intervention and Awareness Programs

The Government believes that organizing special intervention and awareness programs is likely to increase pupils' motivation (n=8). These include study skills workshops and summer camps that promote positive behavior (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1996a, 1999a). Although the Government believes that such programs are able to promote discipline, no suggestion is given by the Government about training and workshops for teachers on the development of motivational skills.

3.2 Strategies for Discouraging Negative Behavior

Themes that emerged from the analysis included corporal punishment and exclusion.

3.2.1 Corporal Punishment

Results revealed that corporal punishment is recommended to discourage negative behavior (n=10). However, the school professionals must abide with a code for the practice of physical punishment (which is applied to boys only). The view is that punishment prevents negative behavior and does not harm the pupils. Detailed offences and punishment have to be recorded by teachers accurately. It must be conducted in a closed room with another teacher as a witness (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1995b, 1996c, 1997a, 1998e, 2003). However, it is unclear

the extent to which the punishment is carried out in school which informs the need a further research.

3.2.2 Exclusion

Pupils who continuously breach school regulations ($n=11$) can be excluded. A maximum of 14 days suspension is applied to pupils after the third time they receive corporal punishment (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1997a). School expulsion is applied to pupils who continue to breach school rules and regulations after they have been given corporal punishment five times. It can be argued that some pupils may seek this punishment as a technique to be away from school.

4. Discussion

Over the last 40 years, the Government has placed great emphasis on improving pupil behavior. However, results show that the concept of negative behavior is clearer than that of positive behavior. The term ‘discipline’ is frequently used in circulars and it seems to have a direct link with positive behavior discussed in this paper. Findings suggest that the concepts of positive and negative behavior are also linked to the concepts of obedience and national aspiration.

Any behavior that is against school regulations is considered to be negative. However, there is a lack of evidence to show how the voices of teachers and pupils were taken into account when developing these behavioral expectations.

By understanding positive behavior enhancement strategies, one can see that the Government is recommending two main strategies, namely encouraging positive behavior (perhaps unconsciously as they use the term ‘discipline’ rather than positive behavior) and discouraging negative behavior (more consciously). The Government encourages schools to conduct various types of extra-curricular activities as a way of promoting positive behavior, which is considered to be a strategy for bonding social capital in this paper. Motivating pupils and providing counseling sessions are the other strategies that have been recommended as effective strategies to develop positive attachment of pupils to school.

Home-school partnership, inter-agencies partnership and school-local authority partnership are strategies suggested by the Government to promote a positive school environment, which are considered to be strategies for bridging social capital. By integrating the concepts of bonding and bridging social capital, the Government can enhance positive behavior in secondary schools, as Table 1 summarizes.

Table 1. The authors’ framework for promoting positive behavior

Encouraging behavior / discipline	positive promoting	Bonding social capital	Involvement in school activities
			Interpersonal relationships
			Responsiveness
			Motivation programs
		Bridging social capital	Home-school partnership
Discouraging behavior	negative		Inter-agencies partnership
		Punitive approach	Corporal punishment
			Suspension
			Dismissal
		Intervention and awareness program	Guidance and counseling
			Workshop

The Government might not be aware of this framework and it might have developed by trial and error over the years. Some of the circulars may be distributed in response to behavioral issues occurring in schools. Therefore, there has to be a more considered and evidence-based approach to managing behavior in schools.

Findings suggest that more focus is frequently given to discouraging negative behavior, which is in contrast with previous empirical research that suggests that increasing focus on positive behavior enhancement tends to reduce negative behavior (Jindal-Snape, 2004). Therefore, we suggest that teachers should give priority on promoting positive behavior by bonding and bridging social capital rather than focusing on strategies to discourage negative behavior. Proportionately, the government has suggested more programs on promoting positive behavior rather

than discouraging negative behavior. Since the government often highlighted the importance of self-discipline in pupils, teachers should educate pupils about their rights and responsibilities. Teachers and pupils should know that their behavior has a consequence and they should be responsible with their actions. However, there is insufficient data to show how teachers' and pupils' voice were taken into account in formulating the Government circulars.

Future research should include all relevant policy documents as this analysis was based on circulars that were available on an official website. Although the current analysis provided us with a good insight into the discourse, it might have limited the extent to which we could see a particular trend or the clustering of particular directives at any particular time. Direct interviews with policy makers should be conducted in order to understand the ideologies that underpin the design of education policies.

Future research should also focus on how these policies are translated into practice. School professionals might have their own beliefs about these policies if they come from different ethnic groups, various religious backgrounds and different academic levels. Further research is required into corporal punishment, as it is stated as one of the disciplinary means used in Malaysia. By integrating these variables in empirical research, a better understanding could be achieved as to how positive behavior enhancement should be practiced in secondary schools. Furthermore, it may provide an insight into the practicality and effectiveness of the strategies suggested.

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