Teacher Leadership and Bullying Management: A Study of School Discipline in SJKC and SJKT Schools in Kuala Pilah District

Gomathi Chelliah

SJKT Lobak, Jalan Manickavasagam

70200 Seremban, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

Roshafiza Hassan (Corresponding author)

Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia

43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract

Bullying remains a prevalent issue in schools, affecting students across various backgrounds. While much focus has been placed on the victims and perpetrators, the role of teacher leadership in managing such discipline issues is critical yet under-explored. This study investigates how teacher leadership contributes to the management of bullying in Chinese (SJKC) and Tamil (SJKT) National Type Schools in the Kuala Pilah District. Using a qualitative approach, 10 teachers were interviewed using snowball sampling to gain insights into their leadership strategies and their role in student discipline. Findings suggest that teacher leadership, including reinforcement and punishment strategies, plays a vital role in curbing bullying and improving overall school discipline. The study highlights the importance of teacher intervention and leadership in maintaining school order and fostering a safer environment for students.

Keywords: Bullying, Teacher Leadership, Reinforcement, Punishment, National Type School

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduce the Problem

Bullying in schools is a complex social issue that has gained significant attention due to its long-term impacts on both victims and perpetrators. Bullying is often defined as repeated aggressive behavior that involves a power imbalance, as discussed by Shelley et al. (2021), leading to physical or psychological harm. Previous studies, such as Mangadar (2012), emphasized the role of teachers in mitigating bullying through firm disciplinary actions. However, the growing complexity of student behavior due to digital influences has exacerbated the challenge (Mok, 2012). Contemporary research calls for a nuanced approach that includes the emotional intelligence of educators and their leadership capabilities (Borowiec et al., 2022).

Bullying can be defined as a pattern of behavior characterized by repeated acts of aggression or intimidation, either physical or psychological, directed against a victim. Bullying is the act of intimidating others who are weaker to assert dominance and compel them to comply with the bully's commands (Waseem & Nickerson, 2024; Sainz & Mart ń-Moya, 2023; Mangadar, 2012). Bullying is a morally unacceptable behavior that can inflict distress and instill dread in its victims. The term 'bullying' was also defined by Shelley and his colleagues (2021) as a typical action involving two individuals, namely the perpetrator and the target. Bullying can result in detrimental health consequences, including disordered eating patterns, weight disturbances, physical harm, long-lasting damage, and even fatality. Bullying can lead to detrimental consequences, including social isolation, difficulties in establishing social relationships, compromised academic performance, and mental health issues.

Teachers encounter disciplinary challenges, including instances of bullying among troublesome pupils, due to ongoing transformations in the field of education (Warnick & Scribner, 2020; Alter et al., 2013; Mok, 2012). Bullying among elementary school pupils is a manifestation of the impact of digital technology and media on the development of their personality and conduct, leading to aggression and lack of control. Thus, bullying is regarded as a significant menace to the development of favorable socialization within the community, particularly at the local level. This circumstance contradicts the fundamental principles of Eastern culture, which is renowned for its emphasis on courteous behavior and the value it places on respecting others, regardless of age, social level, economic standing, ethnicity, religion, traditional beliefs, and skin colour.

Nowadays, teachers must possess the necessary understanding and experience to handle student discipline effectively. Their experiences enable them to effectively manage and address shifts in students' attitudes and behaviors that contribute to instances of bullying. Mangadar (2012) asserts that the symptoms of bullying can be effectively addressed if teachers fulfill their obligations diligently, which includes adopting a resolute yet judicious approach to handling such symptoms. However, according to Borowiec et al. (2022), it is crucial to instill positive values in kids both within and outside the classroom in order to shape their character and prevent them from engaging in bullying. Teachers can employ

several strategies to address the issue of widespread bullying, including adopting a resolute demeanor, instilling positive ideals in their teaching and learning practices, and closely supervising and managing student behavior.

Teachers are crucial in effectively addressing the increasing number of bullying situations. According to Cascardi et al. (2014), school administrators and policymakers must prioritize examining knowledge, attitude, and teacher response in addressing the issue of student bullying discipline. Teachers' leadership in regulating student behavior and discipline displays their knowledge, attitudes, and answers. Teachers possessing the requisite leadership qualities will effectively handle student punishment and foster responsible behavior, ensuring adherence to school rules and regulations consistently. Teacher leadership has a direct impact on enhancing their academic and co-curricular accomplishments.

Teacher leadership, as noted by Cascardi et al. (2014), involves not only enforcing rules but also serving as role models who can influence student behavior positively. Research study by Sabramani et al., 2021 suggest that teachers who demonstrate empathy and moral leadership can significantly reduce bullying incidents. These findings align with the operant conditioning theory, which posits that behavior can be shaped through reinforcement and punishment, a model that many schools in Malaysia, particularly in the SJKC and SJKT systems, follow. However, the literature lacks critical exploration of how teacher leadership specifically affects bullying management in ethnic-based school systems, a gap this study seeks to fill.

This study aims to investigate the impact of teacher leadership on the administration of disciplinary measures for bullying incidents in educational institutions. The function of leadership will be determined by observing the teachers' implementation of operant conditioning techniques when addressing bullying incidents. Furthermore, this study also explores recommended strategies to enhance the administration of disciplinary actions against bullying.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach focuses on teachers from Chinese National Type Schools (SJKC) and Tamil National Type Schools (SJKT) in Kuala Pilah District, Negeri Sembilan. Using snowball sampling, 10 teachers were selected as participants, ensuring a variety of experiences and leadership roles.

They willingly consented to serve as study informants. The 'snowball' sampling method was employed for sample selection because it can precisely determine the nature of informants (Parker et al., 2019).

The semi-structured interview methodology encompasses three primary themes:

        i. The issue of student bullying

        ii. The implementation of operant conditioning approaches;

        iii. The impact of operant conditioning on bullying behavior within school

institutions

Upon finishing the transcription, the researcher, in a show of respect for the participant's role, provided the informant with a copy of the text for them to review and verify the accuracy of the conversation based on the information obtained during the interview. The informants were given permission to rectify any inaccurate information and then sign the respondent's confirmation form in conformity with the interview transcript.

2.1 Data Collection Process

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth insights into teacher leadership and bullying management. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was recorded and transcribed for analysis. Interview questions were designed to explore the teacher's understanding of bullying, disciplinary strategies, and leadership practices.

2.2 Instrument Scoring and Validation

The interview protocol was reviewed by three educational leadership experts to ensure content validity. The instrument underwent pilot testing to improve clarity. Reliability was ensured through member checking, where participants reviewed their transcripts for accuracy.

2.3 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software to code and identify recurring patterns. Themes were categorized under leadership strategies, teacher-student interaction, and bullying management.

2.4 Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the district's education office. Informed consent was collected from all participants, with assurances of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Informants' Background

This section exhibits the results of the study according to the informants' background, gender, age, teaching experience and subject of teaching. A total of 10 informants were involved in this study.

Table 1. Informants Background

School	Number of Informant	Gender	Age	Teaching Experience	Subject Teaching
A (SJKT)	2	Female	40	≥ 10 years	English Language
		Female	40	≥ 10 years	Mathematics
B (SJKT)	2	Female	50	20 years	Tamil Language
		Female	50	20 years	Tamil Language
C (SJKC)	3	Female	38	12 years	Chinese Language
		Male	35	8 years	Chinese Language
		Male	37	10 years	Malay Language
D (SJKC)	2	Female	44	≥ 15 years	English Language
		Male	52	≥ 15 years	History
E (SJKC)	1	Male	57	≥ 30 years	Mathematics

According to the data presented in Table 1, it was found that the two individuals providing information are teachers at school A, which is classified as a Tamil National Type School (SJKT). Both of these informants are middle-aged female educators. Each teaches English and Mathematics students and serves as a non-option teacher for both courses. They have been employed at this educational institution for over ten years. Two informants are from School B, specifically SJKT. These female teachers have served at the school for 20 years and are in their 50s, making them among the longest-serving teachers. Both of these informants are teachers of Tamil language courses, and one is an excellent Tamil language teacher. In addition, these informants possess extensive expertise in managing disciplinary matters inside their educational institutions. One of the informants formerly occupied a role as a disciplinary teacher.

The informants in the third group (C) consist of three teachers employed at a Chinese National Type School (SJKC). There is one female informant and two male informants. According to the female informant, she recently completed the National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL) interview. She intends to enroll in the program if she is chosen. All informants from this school consented to disclose their ages. Specifically, the female informant was 38 years old, the first male informant was 35 years, and the second male informant was 37 years of age. Informants (1) are Chinese language option teachers, both female and male, who have been teaching the subject from their initial placement in the school. Informants (2) are male teachers who primarily teach Malay as the main subject.

The fourth group of informants (D) consists of two teachers who work at a Chinese National Type School (SJKC). The informant includes a 44-year-old female teacher and a male teacher who is approximately 52 years old. Both of these individuals teach English and History. They possess over 15 years of school tenure and have extensive expertise in handling disciplinary matters inside their school. The final informant is a male teacher from Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina (SJKC) and has been assigned to a group or school (E). He is 57 years old and enjoys over three decades of teaching expertise. He has also held a position as a discipline teacher for 14 years and has much experience managing discipline problems in his school.

3.2 The Role of Teacher Leadership in Managing Bullying Discipline Among Students at SJKC and SJKT in the Kuala Pilah District

Most of the responses indicate that teacher leadership effectively addresses the issue of bullying discipline by engaging students and teachers in activities and programs implemented inside schools. An informant claimed educational institutions must implement suitable initiatives to address and manage bullying cases effectively. Respondents indicated that teacher leadership is crucial in overseeing anti-bullying initiatives. Nevertheless, specific responses indicate that teachers' views on leadership are constrained when it comes to addressing and handling particular cases of bullying. Several informants provided examples of how leadership can address the issue of bullying in schools, such as developing a comprehensive anti-bullying strategy. Informants said that organizing an awareness program could benefit the anti-bullying effort. A responder stated that teachers, as leaders, may effectively guide students by their actions and behavior.

Teacher leadership in dealing with the issue of bullying at school is often described as characterized by tolerance, responsibility, and consideration. Informants also perceive leadership as qualities that have the potential to motivate and influence both teachers and students. It is evident from their statement that teachers who possess leadership qualities can serve as a source of motivation for students. Furthermore, other responses argue that possessing strong leadership qualities enables teachers to effectively serve as facilitators in various circumstances, particularly in promoting and assisting anti-bullying initiatives and events within the school environment. Moreover, leadership traits can bring together and unite members of the team. The study's findings indicate that most respondents believe that students engaged in bullying can transform when teachers undertake the role of successful leaders. Informants assert that students observe and emulate the teacher's demeanor as a source of inspiration for positive transformation. According to an informant, students are impacted by the ethical conduct exhibited by the teacher. Most informants claimed that the teacher's leadership can serve as an exemplar or role model for students and act as a deterrent against violent behavior.

Furthermore, the study's findings highlight the crucial significance of communication. A teacher who possesses strong leadership skills will effectively communicate with students. Two informants assert that effective communication is crucial in shaping students' behavior and addressing bullying issues. They emphasize that students observe and emulate the teacher's communication style, which significantly manages past and potential bullying incidents. Effective communication can mitigate disciplinary measures toward students, such as physical punishment, beatings, and caning. Informants concur that teachers serve as role models for students. Furthermore, the presence of highly disciplined teacher behavior is a crucial element that might effectively mitigate student violence in the context of school bullying. This positive activity has the potential to cultivate positive behavior among children.

3.3 The Impact of Teacher Leadership on Operant Conditioning Behavior in Addressing Student Bullying at SJKC and SJKT in the Kuala Pilah District

The first question explores the impact of operant conditioning on a student who has recently engaged in bullying behavior, when a teacher takes charge of guiding the student. Two informants elucidated the process by which students started to adapt to the new practice. One informant reported that students are becoming accustomed to new procedures, while another informant stated that students are still in the process of adjusting to them. Another informant provided a more precise elucidation, namely, the initiation of the process of conforming to established norms, which is further corroborated by the assertion of commencing the adaptation to new practices by another informant. According to an informant, it can be characterized as a process of modifying one's conduct. A different source elucidated the process by which students started to embrace the reinforcement provided by the teacher. The informant has mentioned that the student is conscious of the fact that his behaviors are incorrect.

As a leader, it is imperative for the teacher to be aware of the students' emotional state following the implementation of operant conditioning. The majority of the informants reported that they ascertained the students' emotions through careful observation. Most participants recommended using casual observation and interview techniques to assess the emotions of students. Other participant claimed that he gauges the emotions of children by engaging in casual discussions.

According to one informant, reinforcement should be carried out on a daily basis. Furthermore, participants also indicated that implementing innovative methods of reinforcement can guarantee sustained impacts. Additional reactions, such as a wider range of reinforcement methods and more engaging approaches, highlight the necessity for more innovative reinforcement techniques to guarantee lasting impacts. Two notable approaches examine the notion of graded reinforcement and shift towards intrinsic reinforcement, which might guarantee lasting impacts. One informant indicated that the reinforcement was primarily intrinsic, whereas another informant leaned towards a more gradual shift towards intrinsic reinforcement.

Only a single informant provided a "maybe" response when asked if rewards and punishments eventually get tedious for pupils. Additional sources provided a negative response. When questioned about alternatives to the concept of reinforcement, different responses were provided. The majority of informants highlight the development of students' cognitive processes. For instance, one informant expressed the concept as "application of critical thinking" whereas another informant expressed it as "applying critical thinking". A source elucidated that educators ought to cultivate the capacity for rational reasoning. Furthermore, participants also provided answers such as "religious education" and "application of spiritual aspects." Two sources also mentioned leadership. Simultaneously, there is a corresponding reaction pertaining to counseling services, which involves providing guidance or counseling. Most participants also emphasized the significance of instilling positive values through the leadership qualities demonstrated by teachers.

The findings highlight that teachers who employed positive reinforcement strategies alongside punishment observed a decline in bullying cases. Informants from SJKC schools particularly noted the success of using operant conditioning, which aligns with Borowiec et al. (2022), who found that reinforcement plays a critical role in modifying behavior. Moreover, teachers highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence in leadership, echoing findings from Shelley et al. (2021) on the role of empathy in effective bullying management.

However, some challenges were noted, particularly the need for more comprehensive training on leadership for teachers, which was identified as a limitation by Sabramani et al. (2021). Teachers who lacked leadership skills struggled to manage bullying effectively, which points to the need for professional development programs focusing on leadership and behavior management.

4. Implications

Discipline issues among school students are a significant issue that needs to be focused on by all parties. This issue is because students are the young generation who will inherit and lead the country. Day by day, discipline problems among students are increasing. For example, a study shows there is an increase in the problem of bullying discipline among students at school (Sabramani et al., 2021). This study also shows that the causes of this problem are due to personal factors and the environment, such as the influence of peers, parents, and society. In order to overcome this problem, the students involved will be given a counseling session and warned not to repeat the act. Nevertheless, the results show that the actions taken by the relevant parties still need to be more effective. Therefore, more careful planning must be studied to prevent this problem from becoming more serious (Borowiec et al., 2022).

The results of this study also show that all parties, especially teachers, hope that every punishment or advice given to the students involved can positively impact the student to change into a better person, beneficial to the nation, religion and country. The school also hopes there will be continuous improvement in the school system, primarily to deal with the problem of bullying discipline in the future. Through the proposed measures, it is hoped that the problem of bullying discipline can be curbed and that the number of cases that occur decreases yearly. Implementing a superior identity in students through exemplary leadership shown by teachers is expected to help them make decisions wisely and control themselves from getting caught up in other social symptoms.

A teacher with leadership charisma is a valuable asset to the school because contemporary demands require teachers who can change and build the direction of the school from the existing level to a higher standard (Dewi, 2021; Dickerson, 2012). Therefore, teachers need to identify the leadership characteristics that exist in themselves and the management style that needs to be adapted based on the situation students face at school. This study also helps teachers identify the leadership process in managing discipline in SJKC and SJKT in the Kuala Pilah district. Good leadership among teachers at SJKC and SJKT can encourage other school members to realize the importance of improving professionalism and commitment to work at school. Therefore, teachers should be involved in the decision-making process at the administrative level so that they are all exposed to the characteristics of leadership and realize

that disciplinary problems that occur in schools are a shared responsibility.

The implications of this study suggest that teacher leadership is a crucial factor in managing bullying, with potential for shaping school policies. However, the study is limited by its focus on a small, homogenous sample, which may not be representative of all schools. Future research could explore comparative studies across different regions and school types.

These findings also highlight the need for professional development programs that enhance teacher leadership skills specifically in the context of addressing bullying and fostering inclusive school cultures (Waseem & Nickerson, 2024; Sainz & Martń-Moya, 2023). Policymakers and school administrators could use this evidence to design targeted interventions that empower teachers to take proactive roles in preventing and mitigating bullying.

Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of integrating teacher leadership training into pre-service and in-service education, ensuring that educators are equipped with the skills to identify, address, and resolve bullying incidents effectively. Expanding the study to include diverse student populations, such as those from rural, urban, or multicultural settings, could yield deeper insights into how teacher leadership practices adapt to different environments.

Future research could also explore the perspectives of students, parents, and other school stakeholders to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of teacher leadership in bullying prevention. Longitudinal studies might examine how sustained teacher leadership initiatives impact school bullying rates and overall school climate over time.

By broadening the scope of research and application, this study has the potential to influence not only educational practices but also wider societal attitudes toward creating safer and more supportive learning environments for all students.

5. Conclusion

Managing student behavior in schools is a challenging and crucial responsibility. The level of discipline exhibited by students in a school can significantly impact their progress and overall performance. Teachers' capacity to effectively and efficiently address student misconduct and keep it at a low level, as demonstrated via their leadership, is a crucial indicator of their proficiency in disciplinary management. Additionally, achieving outstanding academic performance is mandatory. Consequently, it is imperative to prioritize disciplinary management as equally important to other facets of school administration.

Efficiently monitoring student discipline within the school organization is crucial for establishing a solid and successful school discipline system. This responsibility relies on all teachers, who must work together to ensure its success. The school administration must build an effective discipline management system according to the Malaysian Ministry of Education regulations. Teachers must comprehend and subsequently uphold the established disciplinary regulations, as stated by Mok in 2012. Teachers in leadership roles must demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility and unwavering dedication when enforcing school disciplinary policies.

In addition, teachers should possess the necessary skills in dealing with student disciplinary issues and maintain a professional demeanor when confronted with pressure related to such matters (Cascardi et al., 2014). The skills ensure that their actions are not driven by emotions that could compromise their professionalism. Teachers serving as leaders to children in school must possess a respectable personality both within and outside of the educational setting in order to serve as role models for their students effectively. Implementing leadership by example has the potential to mitigate the increasing incidence of disciplinary issues among current pupils. Teachers in school may inspire children with noble values that can aid in mitigating disciplinary issues among students.

Furthermore, children can receive positive reinforcement through verbal means by providing them with encouragement, praise, and appreciation for their efforts and achievements (Hardy & McLeod, 2020). This form of positive reinforcement has been found to be an essential and effective strategy for supporting young children's use of desired behaviors. Positive reinforcement in non-verbal form includes gestures such as hugs, smiles, providing calmness time, giving presents or awards, assigning marks, sitting in close contact with students, engaging in activities with students, offering several options, and emphasizing their positive behavior. Providing positive reinforcement to students instills a sense of value and attention.

Teachers should seriously consider teacher leadership practices in their efforts to face the challenges of discipline management in schools. This study explains that the level of disciplinary management competence among primary school teachers in SJKC and SJKT in the Kuala Pilah district impacts school excellence. High discipline values instilled in students can produce human capital that will be useful to the country one day. Teachers who think positively are more likely to improve the quality of work by increasing the level of existing knowledge and skills.

Teachers play a key role in keeping student behavior problems under control. A good teacher's leadership can produce different dimensions from the student's point of view regardless of their background. This statement coincides with the concept brought by Gomula (2019), which states, "You cannot teach children to behave better by making them feel worse. When children feel better, they behave better." Strictly speaking, teachers can make students feel safe and sound through pedagogical knowledge mastered by teachers from an early stage.

Acknowledgments

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