

Go Easy on Me: A Phenomenological Tale of Teachers Managing Challenging Student Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

This research studies the lived experiences of secondary teachers in managing challenging behaviors exhibited by students within the classroom in Mercedes District, Camarines Norte. Challenging behaviors, encompassing defiance, aggression, and disruptions, pose significant obstacles to the learning environment, impacting both teachers and students. This study is anchored on qualitative research design, specifically utilizing phenomenological inquiry. After a thorough analysis of the responses provided by the participants, the researchers were able to determine three (3) recurring themes of the various challenging behaviors that teachers encounter in the classroom; *Struggle to cheer you up* (Challenges in communication), *Struggle to teach you up* (Resistance to instruction and academic engagement) and, *Struggle to guide you up* (Disruptive and aggressive behaviors). This also discovered the strategies that teachers employ to address and manage said challenging behaviors such as promoting positive reinforcement, observing, listening, establishing a trusting relationship, and identifying, and maintaining a balance of empathy and firmness. The findings ended with a concrete recommendation to establish comprehensive educational support for teachers to help them address and remedy challenging behaviors with the most effective measures that resonate most effectively with students.

Keywords: challenging behavior; classroom management; behaviorism

Introduction

At its core, a teacher's role is to facilitate learning: to convey their mastery of a subject matter and effectively share their knowledge with students in an engaging manner appropriate to the level of understanding of the learners in their class. However, the duties of a teacher extend far beyond conducting lectures and evaluating examinations. Teachers must also provide enthusiastic support, offer invaluable guidance, attentively address classroom concerns, and uphold discipline. In other words, a teacher often finds themselves wearing many different hats and acting as a mentor, motivators, guidance counselors, or third parents to foster an environment not only of learning but also of understanding. Maintaining discipline in a class where students significantly outnumber the teacher is an arduous task, compounded further when met with displays of challenging behaviors from certain students.

In education, challenging behavior among students can pertain to repetitive behavior patterns or conduct that threatens to interfere with learning or engage in prosocial interactions between peers and adults (Patnaik et al., 2022). Common manifestations of challenging behavior among students include defiance or noncompliance, physical and verbal aggression, disruption, social withdrawal, and socially inappropriate behavior (Kuswardani & Paramita, 2023). Displays of unwanted behavior raise significant concerns as they may result in adverse outcomes such as impeding the learning experience or the student's right to learn, disrupting the teachers' right to teach, detracting valuable instruction time, exhausting the energy of the teacher and students alike, constituting to stress and ultimately resulting in a relationship of distrust between the teacher and the student (Patnaik et al., 2022). Addressing these challenges necessitates a nuanced approach that requires the teachers to balance empathy and firmness to maintain order in the class while consistently nurturing a positive atmosphere conducive to learning. This ensures that they build a good and meaningful relationship with the students while clearly outlining their expectations from the students. This skill demands patience, understanding, adaptability, and effective measures and strategies to help manage challenging behaviors.

While many factors can contribute to a student's negative behavior, teachers often have limited control over these external influences. As such, the onus of enforcing rules and maintaining discipline in the face of challenging behavior falls on the teacher's shoulders. They are responsible for ensuring that said behavior is appropriately addressed and that the rest of the class understands not to imitate it. On top of measures taken during unwanted disruptions, teachers also proactively establish clear guidelines and rules within the classroom to form boundaries and set expectations for conduct.

Understandably, dealing with recurring challenging behavior can be profoundly draining for teachers, often impacting their well-being and personal dispositions. Attrition, wearing away, and burnout are concepts often highlighted in literature about teachers, particularly those at the onset of their teaching career (Lindqvist, 2019). Teachers acknowledge classroom management as the most taxing aspect of their work, heightened by the lack of sufficient training and support they receive (Reinke et al., 2013). As such, teachers are often left to their own devices when developing effective strategies for managing challenging student behaviors. External support, if any, comes from colleagues within the same departments or school administrators sympathetic to their predicament. However, the lack of comprehensive training and support compounds the challenges teachers face in addressing and preventing disruptive behavior in the classroom.

Extensive research has been conducted on effective classroom management, primarily grounded in behavioral theory. (Simonsen, et al., 2008). Classic studies and modern classroom management resources emphasize that positive reinforcement of appropriate behavior effectively addresses challenging student behavior. Additionally, using straightforward commands, establishing clear classroom rules, and strategic responses to established rules violations are pivotal measures for achieving favorable outcomes in student behaviors (Owens, 2017). Studies also detail that teachers utilize measures that fall under either proactive or reactive strategies in dealing with challenging student behaviors. Proactive strategies prevent challenging behavior from arising in the classroom, while reactive strategies pertain to remedial or corrective measures and can be inherently harmful (Patnaik et al., 2022). During this study, teachers predominantly

implemented proactive strategies, emphasizing prevention over rectification. However, reactive strategies were also employed judiciously when circumstances demanded such interventions.

To contribute to the body of research probing this phenomenon, this research aims to explore the lived narratives of secondary teachers in managing challenging student behaviors in the classroom. As the problem of challenging behavior among students continues to persist, so does the need for updated accounts of effective measures to handle said behaviors. However, existing studies relevant to the topic focus on the root causes of these behaviors, naming home- and parent-related causes, social causes, or teacher-related causes as some of the most common, but do not delve enough into how the teachers approach these behaviors and how it impacts their well-being (Patnaik et al., 2022). In the actualization of this study, the researchers interviewed secondary teachers with teaching experiences ranging from 6 months to 30 years in several public high schools in Camarines Norte. The teachers identified the different forms of challenging behavior they have witnessed from students, the strategies they employed to address, prevent, and correct said behavior and their strategies for dealing with the stress and emotional toll associated with this aspect of their profession.

Statement of the Problem

This study explores the lived experiences of secondary school teachers in public high schools in Mercedes, Camarines Norte. This study aims to add to the collective research effort into classroom displays of challenging student behaviors, strategies to prevent said behavior, and measures to correct students' behavior. Considering the unique burden these challenging behaviors bring to teachers and the ever-growing need for effective strategies to maintain class discipline, further research on classroom management and dealing with challenging behaviors among students is needed (Owens, 2017).

A few overarching questions guiding the researchers in the culmination of this study include: (1) What are the various challenging behaviors that teachers encounter in the classroom?; (2) What strategies do teachers employ to address and manage these challenging behaviors?; and (3) What obstacles do teachers face in accessing educational support to address challenging student behavior? Through these questions, this study aims to contribute valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on teacher experiences, classroom management, and the most effective measures in dealing with challenging student behaviors.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded on the understanding that challenging student behaviors can significantly impact the teaching and learning process. It recognizes that teachers' perceptions and strategies in managing these behaviors are shaped by various factors, including their beliefs, experiences, and contextual factors within the educational setting.

The framework acknowledges that teachers' interpretations of challenging student behaviors are influenced by their subjective understanding of the underlying causes, motivations, and intentions behind these behaviors. It also recognizes that teachers employ various strategies

and approaches to manage and address these behaviors, which may be influenced by their knowledge, training, and personal teaching philosophies.

Theoretically, this study is anchored on the Theory of Behaviorism introduced by B.F. Skinner (1935) and the Theory on Positive Behavior Support (PBS) are collaborative and multidisciplinary approaches developed and promoted by various researchers and practitioners in education and behavior analysis.

Materials and Methods

This study is anchored on qualitative research design, specifically utilizing phenomenological inquiry. Phenomenology seeks to understand the essence of lived experiences and the meanings individuals assign to them. Through in-depth interviews and observations, this research captured the rich narratives and subjective interpretations of teachers who have encountered challenging student behaviors.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse group of experienced teachers who have faced challenging student behaviors to obtain data for this study. These interviews allowed each participant to share their narratives, reflections, and insights about their experiences in managing such behaviors. The interviews were conducted conversationally, allowing flexibility and depth in exploring the teachers' lived experiences.

Also, ethical considerations (See Appendix B) were consistently upheld throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants to ensure they knew and understood the research objectives, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants and ensuring that all personal information remained confidential. The researchers also ensured that the study adhered to institutional and ethical guidelines, ensuring the well-being and dignity of the participants.

The data collected through interviews were audio-recorded, with consent from the participants, and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts served as the primary data source for analysis.

Thematic analyses were employed to analyze the data. This involves systematically coding and categorizing the data and identifying patterns, themes, and connections within the dataset. The researchers immersed themselves in the data, seeking to understand the underlying meanings from accounts given by the teachers. Through this analysis, the researchers gained insights into the essence of the teachers' experiences, challenges, and strategies to manage challenging student behaviors.

The participants of this study are the secondary teachers in Mercedes District, Division of Camarines Norte, as purposely identified by the researchers. Inclusion and Exclusion criteria were employed to select the respondents fairly. The inclusion criteria include: (a) currently employed as a secondary teacher, (b) teaching in a public high school, and (c) teaching within the Mercedes District of Camarines Norte. *(Please see Appendix C for a sample interview guide)*

Results and Discussion

After a thorough analysis of the responses provided by the participants, the researchers were able to determine the various challenging behaviors that teachers encounter in the classroom, the strategies that teachers employ to address and manage said challenging behaviors, and identify obstacles that teachers face in accessing educational support to address these challenging student behaviors.

1. Challenging behaviors that teachers encounter in the classroom

Table 1. Challenging student behaviors

RECURRING THEMES	COLLECTIVE DESCRIPTION
<i>Struggle to cheer you up</i> (Challenges in Communication)	These pertain to the struggles hindering meaningful communication between the teacher and the students. These challenges include students' inhibitions caused by fear of judgment, low self-esteem, and social phobia that hinder their ability to initiate conversations, participate in group discussions, and engage in public speaking.
<i>Struggle to teach you up</i> (Resistance to instruction and academic engagement)	These particular behaviors directly impact the student's academic performance and learning capabilities. Challenging behaviors include resistance to instruction, lack of interest in school, and possessing the passively destructive " <i>bahala na habit</i> ".
<i>Struggle to guide you up</i> (Disruptive and aggressive behaviors)	These refer to classroom management-related behaviors of students that make it difficult for teachers to handle both the concerned student and the class, as a whole. These include the use of inappropriate language, bullying, and physically aggressive behavior.

Challenges in communication: Struggle to cheer you up

Most respondents' narratives highlighted the students' communication and social difficulties in the classroom. This includes students who demonstrate behaviors of social withdrawal, isolation, or even disengagement from classroom tasks. Findings on the respondents' narrative in this challenge theme discussed students' tendency to remain quiet, shy away from socializing, or show a lack of interest in joining in.

A respondent during the interview once shared, "*Masakit po sir tingnan na yung estudyante mo po ay ina-isolate ang sarili niya sa iba niyang kaklase*" (It is disheartening sir to witness my student isolating himself from the others). This shows the student's withdrawn

behavior by avoiding social interactions with classmates. When asked about the reasons behind these behaviors, most of the respondents said maybe of their family backgrounds, some are just afraid of being teased by their classmates or it is just how the student is. *“Meron po talaga tayo ma’am na studyante diba na kahit anong gawin natin, i-encourage pero ayaw po talaga nila” (We have students who are really very introverted however encouraging you are to them to interact with their classmates.)*

It is indeed true that the reasons why certain students show withdrawn behaviors and social anxieties are subjective and are dependent on individual circumstances. As complex as it is, understanding why students behave like these is influenced by various factors. As narrated by the respondents, students with low self-esteem and social phobia Individuals may have developed negative self-perceptions, often influenced by encountering failure, criticism, or bullying. These encounters have the potential to diminish their self-assurance and result in retreat as a way to protect themselves. Mathews et al. (2015) discuss that multiple factors can impede the socialization process, including children facing rejection from their classmates or voluntarily distancing themselves from social events, ultimately leaving them on the outskirts of their peer groups. A student's self-esteem can be significantly affected by the dynamics within their family and their home environment. Negative factors like lack of parental support, neglect, abuse, or overly high expectations from parents can all play a role in causing feelings of inadequacy and withdrawal (Dehaghani et al., 2015).

Resistance to instruction and academic engagement: Struggle to teach you up

Academic underachievement refers to students who consistently perform below their potential or fail to meet expected academic standards. This can manifest in a lack of motivation, poor study habits, incomplete assignments, or a lack of engagement in classroom activities. Academic underachievement may stem from various factors, including learning difficulties, lack of support, or disengagement with the curriculum.

“Meron po na parang pumapasok lang para sa attendance meron naman po hindi gumawaga ng mga learning tasks” (there are students who only come to school for the attendance and there are others who do not do their learning tasks). According to the respondents, occasional resistance to instruction, lack of interest in the class, poor study habits, and the “bahala na” habit are some of the students’ challenging behaviors. Accordingly, lack of confidence in their abilities and misalignment in their learning styles are reasons students occasionally resist instructions based on the respondents’ narratives. Brookfield (2006) identifies reasons why students resist education, including poor self-image, fear of the unknown, disjunction between learning and teaching styles, irrelevance of the learning activity, inappropriate level of required learning, and students’ dislike of teachers.

Disruptive and aggressive behaviors: Struggle to guide you up

According to the respondents, these behaviors are the most physically exhausting of all challenging behaviors of the students. This includes verbal and physical aggression, bullying, defiance, and non-compliance, with some students being involved in alarming behaviors related to substance abuse.

According to the respondents, verbal aggression involves behaving rudely, using offensive language, insults, profanity, or getting into verbal altercations with classmates and teachers. Acts of physical aggression include violent behaviors such as pushing, hitting, kicking, or engaging in fights with peers and classmates. *“May mga times po sir na na-oobserve ko kahit teacher po hinahamon ng studyante, nakakatakot at nakakapanlumo po sir ang ganoong pangyayari”* (There are times sir that teachers are also challenged physically by the students which is sad and depressing).

These disruptive and aggressive behaviors interrupt the learning flow and negatively impact the classroom environment. This includes talking out of turn, being consistently late or absent, engaging in off-task activities, or refusing to follow instructions. It impedes the learning process for students and their peers as these not only create an unsafe environment but also hinder the emotional well-being and academic progress of both the aggressor and the victims. Any actions that hinder learning and disrupt the harmony between individuals and classroom dynamics can be classified as disruptive behaviors. These behaviors not only affect the student causing them but also have consequences for their classmates and teachers (Jurado & Tejada, 2019).

2. Strategies that teachers employ to address and manage students' challenging behaviors

Table 2. Strategies employed to address challenging behaviors

Challenges	Sample of specific behaviors	Strategies employed
Challenges in communication	Low self-esteem and social phobia	Talking to them personally, observing and listening, and establishing a trusting relationship
Resistance to instruction and academic engagement	Lack of motivation, poor study habits, incomplete assignments, or a lack of engagement in classroom activities	Positive reinforcement, setting clear expectations, and figuring out students' interests
Disruptive and aggressive behaviors	Verbal and physical aggression, bullying, defiance and non-compliance, and involvement to substance-related abuse.	Patience and individualized support, implementing classroom management strategies, maintaining a balance of empathy and firmness

When faced with students' communication and isolating behaviors, the respondents said that talking to them personally, observing and listening, and establishing a trusting relationship are their strategies for overcoming these challenging behaviors of the students. These approaches also involve being aware of the behavior, observing the underlying causes, and responding calmly and calmly.

“Ano po sir kinakausap ko po yung bata kasi syempre as teachers kailangan nakikinig tayo para malaman po natin yung mga underlying reasons tsaka po ako gagawa ng next step” (I listen sir to my students because it is necessary for us to know the underlying reasons behind these behaviors before creating next steps). The respondents highlighted the need to observe, listen, and initiate conversations with these students in a non-confrontational approach, showing genuine concern for their well-being. Using open-ended questions to encourage them to express their thoughts and emotions. Let them know that you are available to listen and offer your support.

As to resistance to instruction and academic engagement, according to the respondents, students' participation plays a crucial role in fostering engagement and promoting effective learning outcomes. Accordingly, one key factor influencing student participation is the teacher's use of positive reinforcement techniques. *“Kasama rin siguro dito sir yung pagbibigay natin ng awards kapag sila ay nag-eexcel hindi lang siguro sa academics pati na rin sa kani-kanilang extracurriculars po”* (Maybe included here sir are our acts of giving awards to those who excel not just academically but also those that active in their own extra-curricular activities.

From the perspective of Skinner's theory, positive reinforcement creates a supportive learning environment where students feel valued and recognized for their contributions. When teachers provide praise, rewards, or acknowledgments for active participation, students are more likely to feel motivated and confident in expressing their thoughts and ideas. This positive feedback helps to build a sense of belonging and encourages students to actively engage in discussions, ask questions, and share their perspectives.

Disruptive and aggressive behaviors in students can present significant challenges in maintaining a positive and productive learning environment. Educators must provide individualized support to address and manage these behaviors effectively. By tailoring interventions and strategies to meet the specific needs of each student, teachers can create a supportive and inclusive environment that promotes behavioral change and academic success. This discussion will explore the importance of individualized support in dealing with student's disruptive and aggressive behaviors and provide strategies for implementing such support.

Consequently, the respondents told the researchers that individualized behavior plans are essential for addressing disruptive and aggressive behaviors. Most of the respondents narrated that disruptive and aggressive behaviors often stem from underlying emotional difficulties. Thus, they need to provide emotional support to students in addition to behavioral interventions. This support includes one-on-one counseling, providing a safe space for expressing emotions, teaching coping strategies, or connecting students with appropriate mental health resources. *“Ano po sir, we are trying to establish a mindset that they can trust us, and we have limited resources to help them.”*

In addition, a respondent narrated that one of the first steps in providing individualized support is understanding the underlying causes of disruptive and aggressive behaviors. Students may have unique factors contributing to their behavior, such as personal issues, academic difficulties, social challenges, or emotional struggles. By conducting assessments and observations and engaging in open communication with the students, they gain insight into the root causes.

By addressing the student's emotional needs, teachers can help them develop healthier ways to manage and express their emotions, reducing the likelihood of disruptive or aggressive behaviors. The theory of Behaviorism states that by tackling behavior at its source and providing personalized support, PBS aims to encourage positive behaviors, enhance social-emotional health, and promote overall academic success among students.

Implementing Management Strategies, according to them includes establishing clear expectations for behavior in the classroom from the beginning of the school year and communicating these expectations to students and ensuring they understand the consequences of aggressive or disruptive behavior; providing explicit instruction on appropriate behavior and offering opportunities for students to practice these skills; keeping students actively engaged in learning by using varied instructional strategies, incorporating hands-on activities, and differentiating instruction to meet the diverse needs of students and; creating a positive and supportive classroom environment that fosters respect, inclusivity, and a sense of belonging. Display student work, provide comfortable seating, and organize the physical space to promote engagement and minimize distractions.

Lastly, the respondents said it is necessary to maintain a balance of empathy and firmness in addressing students' disruptive and aggressive behaviors. According to them, it requires continuous self-reflection, flexibility, and the willingness to adapt to meet the needs of students. By demonstrating empathy while maintaining firm boundaries, they can create a supportive and respectful classroom environment that promotes positive behavior and academic success.

This practice includes setting boundaries and maintaining consistency, understanding individual students' needs, actively listening, using restorative practices, reflecting and adjusting strategies based on individual student needs and the dynamics of their classrooms, and seeking feedback from colleagues and mentors.

3. Identifying obstacles teachers face in accessing educational support in managing challenging student behaviors.

The final concern the respondents endeavored to determine during the interview is the availability of educational support to teachers experiencing challenging behaviors from students in the classroom. Based on the interview results, there is an alarming absence of educational support directly resulting in the hyper-independent approach employed by the interviewed teachers. An overwhelming majority of the respondents expressed that they have their own methods and techniques for dealing with concerning behaviors displayed in class. However, this independent manner of handling said behavior is not due to preference but rather the lack of available support and guidance on the required proper classroom management techniques.

The primary concerns highlighted by the respondents can be classified under Professional Concerns, Training, and Development. This relates to Bicol University's Research, Development, and Expansion of Theme 6: Inclusive Education and Lifelong Learning, particularly Agenda 6: Pedagogy and Perspectives in Learning and Teaching. This concern is a potential driver for

improving the overall educational system in the region since it measures access and the relevance of educational governance.

A primary obstacle significantly affecting the teachers dealing with challenging student behaviors is the lack of written materials, training, and professional support they can turn to in times of need. For instance, the presence of a handbook, scheduled seminars, and a professional counselor or well-being coach can mean the difference between positive and negative classroom management. Due to this, most of the teachers interviewed detailed how their fellow teachers, particularly tenured ones with far more experience in effective classroom management, serve as their mentors in handling challenging behaviors among students. They highlighted the importance of gaining perspective and receiving advice and input from school administrators and colleagues. One interviewee also stated how he did not seek support, instead opting for his techniques in dealing with troubled students exhibiting challenging behavior.

Another significant aspect related to the emotional toll experienced by teachers is the vital need for self-care. Without proper ways of dealing with the stress associated with the job, challenging behaviors from students can easily lead to burnout and, eventually, resignation or disinterest in the correct way of managing a classroom. The respondents noted the importance of building a support system, setting boundaries and separating their personal life from their professional life, developing self-compassion, and allocating time for oneself to counter the possibility of burnout and extreme fatigue.

True to the mentally, physically, and emotionally taxing nature of the teaching profession it would not only be ideal but necessary to have the appropriate training, guidance, and support in place for all teachers as challenging student behaviors are, more often than not, present in the classroom and will need immediate acknowledgment and correction. An ideal solution would be establishing scheduled training and seminars to guide secondary teachers in dealing with troubled students and the most effective ways of correcting behavior that students would be most receptive to. Another is the formation of clear classroom guidelines that foster a learning-conducive atmosphere and bring out proper manners in students. These necessary steps will provide support to teachers struggling with the difficulty posed by the workload and made even harder by students when challenging and sometimes even problematic behavior emerge in the classroom.

Conclusions

Through the phenomenological exploration of the lived experiences of secondary teachers in dealing with challenging behaviors among students, the researchers determined that students can behave in aggressive and disruptive behaviors worthy of concern. During the exhibition of such behavior, the learning experience of other students within the classroom is disturbed, and the teacher experiences growing distress.

The researchers, therefore, concluded that challenges in communication, resistance to instruction, poor study habits, and aggressive and disruptive practices are the most challenging student behaviors encountered by teachers. Based on the results and discussion of the survey conducted by the researchers in this study, according to the respondents, students nowadays are more aggressive than in the past decades in the Philippines' educational system. It is a question of

whether the revisionism of some laws, which prohibits teachers from punishing their students physically, may have an effect. It is by the fact that both parents and students nowadays know that laws protect them; hence, corporal punishment is no longer applied.

The personality and character of a teacher may also affect these challenging student behaviors. The researchers are not suggesting that there must be a sole character for teachers to be applied because, like students, teachers are also diverse. Based on the result of the paper interview on the strategies and interventions teachers employed to manage those challenging behaviors, most teachers responded by having a firm yet compassionate composure towards their students and maintaining a positive outlook to counter the distress brought about by difficulties in classroom management. It helps them control their students' challenging behavior and regulate their own emotions.

Recommendations

Based on the above conclusions, the researchers came up with several recommendations:

It would be of utmost benefit to adequately conduct comprehensive seminars or training on addressing and managing challenging behavior among students. Professionals and specialists could attend these seminars or training on challenging or problematic behaviors to guide teachers in their predicament accurately. Moreover, psychological support could also be highly beneficial to teachers as an outlet to discuss their concerns and help manage their stress levels.

Another area of recommendation is the regular conduct of parent-teacher-student meetings. During these meetings, the teacher, supported by school administrators and guidance counselor, can discuss concerns or recent displays of unwanted behavior to help loop in parents on their child's behavior within the classroom.

Furthermore, a clear and straightforward guideline provided by concerned bodies on properly handling challenging student behavior is an apparent requirement that needs to be fulfilled within the soonest possible time.

Finally, the proponents also recommend that future researchers conduct studies on outside factors affecting student behaviors. This could provide the context for the student's actions and infractions to classroom rules. Further studies related to this paper are encouraged to arrive at other vital information beneficial to thoroughly understanding, preventing, and managing challenging student behaviors in the classroom.

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