Is School Misbehavior a Decision? Implications for School Guidance

Rachel C. F. Sun

Abstract—This study examined the predictive effects of moral competence, prosocial norms and positive behavior recognition on school misbehavior among Chinese junior secondary school students. Results of multiple regression analysis showed that students were more likely to misbehave in school when they had lower levels of moral competence and prosocial norms, and when they perceived their positive behavior being less likely recognized. Practical implications were discussed on how to guide students to make the right choices to behave appropriately in school. Implications for future research were also discussed.

Keywords—Moral competence, positive behavior recognition, prosocial norms, school misbehavior.

I. INTRODUCTION

MISBEHAVIOR is regarded as a type of problem behavior, which "is socially defined as a problem, a source of concern, or as undesirable by the norms of conventional society" [1]. In school, the typical student misbehaviors reported are disruptive talking, avoidance of work, sleeping, non-attentiveness, clowning, harassing classmates, verbal and physical aggression, rudeness to teacher, defiance, hostility, truancy, and bullying, which clearly violate explicit rules and implicit expectations on student proper behavior [2]-[4]. These school misbehaviors were found to be closely connected with delinquent behaviors, such as stealing, substance abuse, vandalism, assault, and gang fighting, that break the laws and orders in the society [5]. All these problem behaviors were found to have adverse effects on the adolescents' personal achievement and development (e.g., [6], [7]). Therefore, it is vital to find out their antecedents in order to suggest corresponding preventive or even proactive measures.

According to the ecological systems theory [8], [9], school misbehavior is an outcome of the interplay between the misbehaved students themselves and the school contexts. There are several research studies showing that students had more misbehavior when (i) they had lower levels of academic and psychosocial competencies, prosocial attributes, and positive identity, and at the same time (ii) their schools were characterized with high school control, low achievement and educational expectations on students, poor school climate and organization, poor classroom management, and insufficient psychosocial competencies training for students (e.g., [10]-[12]). Magg [13] also stated that misbehavior is a

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reflection of mismatches between the school and student needs. When the students' psychological needs (e.g., love, belongingness, self-worth, freedom, fun and survival) cannot be fulfilled properly in the school, misbehavior becomes a purposeful endeavor to get their needs being satisfied [14], [15]. As such, according to the choice theory [15], misbehavior is regarded as a decision, and thus students can be guided to make the right choices to fulfill their needs through appropriate behavior. In this study, we propose that students are more likely to regulate their behavior properly if they would have proper values and skills (i.e., moral competence and prosocial norms) guiding their appropriate behavior, and if they could perceive their good behavior are recognized (i.e., positive behavior recognition).

A. Moral Competence

According to Piaget [16] and Kohlberg [17], young adolescents are at the stage of autonomous morality, where they have advanced moral reasoning and value judgement. They would follow rules, not simply for avoiding punishment, but for gaining recognition and maintaining social orders [17]. Hence, moral competence is defined as an "orientation to perform altruistic behaviors towards others and the ability to judge moral issues logically, consistently, and at an advanced level of development" [18]. Moral feelings (e.g., perspective-taking and empathic feelings) and value judgement (e.g., justice and fairness) are two important elements influencing adolescents to behave properly. It was found that adolescents who had higher levels of moral judgment tended to have more prosocial behavior and less antisocial behavior [19]. For instance, if students understand that chatting or talking out of turn during class would interfere teaching and learning (i.e., perspective-taking and consideration), they will be more responsible to behave properly in the classroom (i.e., making prosocial choices).

B. Prosocial Norms

In the school, apart from explicit disciplinary rules and regulations, there are implicit norms guiding students to behave and learn. Proscoial norms refer to the ethical standards and beliefs like social responsibility and altruism [20], and thus it is closely related to moral values that guide prosoical and moral behavior. In Chinese culture, students are expected to respect and obey teachers, and be cooperative and self-disciplined in order to maintain a harmonious school context. Chinese students who had this orientation were found having less aggressive behavior, but more prosocial act [19]. Nie and Lau [21] explained that these norms or values provide clear structure for creating an orderly classroom. When students had

internalized the classroom norms, they would regulate their learning motivation and behavior in the classroom which in turn reducing classroom misbehavior and disruption [21], [22]. Similarly, in US, the school-wide character education program was found to be promising in reducing student disruptive behavior after strengthening students' prosocial values, such as respect, justice, civic virtue and citizenship, and responsibility for self and others, and encouraging students to behave according to these values volitionally [23].

C. Positive Behavior Recognition

According to the behaviorism [24], positive reinforcement like tangible rewards, praise, recognition and affirmation from significant others are incentives underpinning students to adopt the prosocial norms and moral values, and act accordingly. In fact, seeking for recognition is a human need for protecting and enhancing one' self-esteem [25], and all students need recognition to guide them to behave appropriately [14]. Hence, recognizing students' positive behavior is noted to be a constructive approach in reducing misbehavior. Evidences were shown in the class-wide or school-wide positive behavior support programs [26]-[28], in which students were more likely to behave cooperatively when the schools had explicit rules and expectations, a clear system for reinforcing positive behavior, and effective instructional methods and student classroom engagement. Moreover, by strengthening students' positive behavior and academic competence, the students were less likely to choose to misbehave.

D. The Present Study

With regard to this, the present study aimed to examine the predictive effects of students' moral competence, prosocial norms, and positive behavior recognition on school misbehavior. It is expected that when students have higher levels of moral values and prosocial norms, they are less likely to violate school rules and expectations, and thus less likely to misbehave. When they act morally and prosocially, and this positive behavior are recognized and reinforced in school, they are more likely to engage in more positive behavior and less misbehavior. Following the ecological systems approach [8], [9] and choice theory [15], misbehavior is regarded as a decision. Students are supposed to have the ability to regulate their behavior properly, given that they have moral competence and prosocial norms governing their positive behavior, and that their positive behavior is recognized. It is hoped that the present findings help gaining insights for discussing the practical implications for school guidance and discipline in reducing student misbehavior by supporting students' positive behavior and strengthening students' moral competence and prosocial norms. Below are the hypotheses of this research study:

H1. Moral competence, prosocial norms, and positive behavior recognition would be positively correlated with each others, and all of them would be negatively correlated with school misbehavior.

H2. Moral competence, prosocial norms, and positive behavior recognition would negatively predict school misbehavior.

II. METHOD

A. Participants and Procedure

A total of 1,220 Grade 7-9 students (978 boys and 231 girls) from three secondary schools in different locations in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, the New Territories) were invited to complete a set of self-administered questionnaires on a voluntary basis. Their mean age was 13.63 years old (ranging 11-18 years old). Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the researcher's academic institute. The issues of anonymity and confidentiality were clarified to the participating schools, students and their parents. Written consent of participation was obtained.

B. Instruments

The questionnaires included the following instruments:

Moral competence, prosocial norms, and positive behavior recognition: The corresponding subscales of the Chinese Positive Youth Development Scale (shortened version) [29] were used to measure moral competence (3 items, α = 0.60), prosocial norms (3 items, α = 0.75), and positive behavior recognition (3 items, α = 0.76), on a six-point rating scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 6 (agree strongly). This scale was found to have good reliability and validity in previous studies [30], [31].

School misbehavior: The 23-item School Misbehavior Scale, with demonstrated reliability and validity [32], was used to measure the frequency of misbehavior (e.g., talking out of turn, disrespecting teacher, isolating classmates, cheating), on a seven-point rating scale (0 = never, 1 = 1-2 times, 2 = 3-5 times, 3 = above 5 times, 4 = several times a month, 5 = several times a week, and 6 = every day). The scale was shown to have good reliability in this study (α = 0.96).

III. DATA ANALYSES

Initial statistics were computed by using Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS 21.0), including reliability of the scales, and mean scores of the variables. Correlations and standard multiple regression analysis was computed to test the predictive effects of moral competence, prosocial norms, and positive behavior recognition on school misbehavior.

IV. RESULTS

As shown in Table I, the students reported having high levels of moral competence (M=4.48, SD=0.84, range=1-6), prosocial norms (M=4.45, SD=0.98, range=1-6), and positive behavior recognition in school (M=4.20, SD=1.01, range=1-6). The frequency of their school misbehavior was very low (M=1.23, SD=1.09, range=0-6). The results of one-way between groups ANOVA showed that there were significant differences in the mean scores for Grade 7, 8 and 9 students. Grade 8 students reported significantly lower levels of moral competence [(2,1218)=7.82, p<0.01], prosocial norms [F(2,1218)=12.37, p<0.01] and positive behavior recognition [F(2,1218)=6.37, p<0.01] than their Grade 7 and 9 counterparts. Grade 7 students had significantly less school misbehavior [F(2,1218)=21.41, p<0.01] than Grade 8 and 9 students. Despite reaching

statistically significance, the effect sizes (0.01-0.04) calculated by using eta squared were small [33].

TABLE I
ANOVA SUMMARIES OF THE VARIABLES

Variables	Total (N=1220) M (SD)	G7 students (N=469) M (SD)	G8 students (N=469) M (SD)	G9 students (N=282) M (SD)	F value	Effect size
Moral Competence	4.48(0.84)	4.54(0.85)	4.37(0.83)	4.59(0.80)	7.82**	0.01
Prosocial Norms	4.45(0.98)	4.59(0.96)	4.28(1.03)	4.51(0.89)	12.37**	0.02
Positive Behavior Recognition	4.20(1.01)	4.31(1.02)	4.08(1.05)	4.21(0.93)	6.37**	0.01
School Misbehavior	1.23(1.09)	0.97(0.93)	1.41(1.18)	1.36(1.08)	21.41**	0.04

Note. Higher mean scores mean higher levels of moral competence, prosocial norms and positive behavior recognition, and higher frequency of school misbehavior
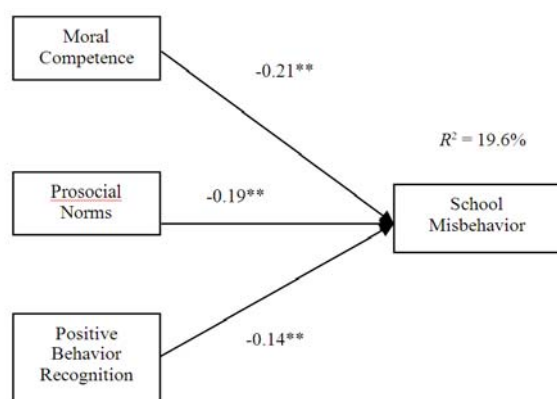** $p<0.01$

The results of Pearson correlations (Table II) showed that moral competence, prosocial norms, and positive behavior recognition were moderately and positively correlated, and all of them were negatively correlated with school misbehavior. The first research hypothesis (H1) was supported. All these correlations did not violate the assumption of multicollinearity. Therefore, standard regression analysis was computed to test the predictive model of school misbehavior. The predictive model (Fig. 1) was significant, which explained 19.6% of variance in school misbehavior $F(3,1217)=89.67$, $p<0.001$. In the model, moral competence was the strongest predictor (-0.21), followed by prosocial norms (-0.19), and positive behavior recognition (-0.14). The second research hypothesis (H2) was supported.

TABLE II
PEARSON CORRELATIONS AMONG VARIABLES

Variables	Moral Competence	Prosocial Norms	Positive Behavior Recognition	School Misbehavior
Moral Competence	1	0.55**	0.44**	-0.36**
Prosocial Norms		1	0.55**	-0.38**
Positive Behavior Recognition			1	-0.33**
School Misbehavior				1

Note. ** $p<0.01$

Note. ** $p<0.001$

Fig. 1 Predictive Model of School Misbehavior

V. DISCUSSION

The present study focused on investigating the predictive effects of moral competence, prosocial norms, and positive behaviour recognition on school misbehavior among Chinese junior secondary school students. The predictive model showed that students were less likely to misbehave when they had higher levels of moral competence and prosocial norms, and when they perceived having higher levels of recognition for their positive behaviour in the school. The present findings added to the literature in related fields, as recent research studies on school misbehaviour were scanty in Chinese contexts, particularly in Hong Kong [34], [35]. The present findings also contributed to the existing theories by adopting both ecological systems approach [8], [9] and choice theory [15] to examine the personal and social factors underlying students' decision of misbehaving. It further shed lights on the school guidance programs for positive development and behavior management.

As shown in the predictive model of school misbehavior (Fig. 1), both moral competence and prosocial norms had strong negative predictive effects. It showed that when students had a well-established set of explicit standards for prosocial behavior, together with strong moral values and judgement, they were less likely to misbehave in school. In regard of this, students' moral competence and prosocial norms, particularly the Chinese values of respect and responsibility for self and others, should be enriched in the school via developmental guidance measures such as positive youth development programs, moral education or character education (e.g., [23], [36]). It is different from the school rules and regulations for disciplinary purpose, in which students usually adhere to in order to avoid punishment. Upholding moral values and prosocial expectations, and making the rationales behind explicit would facilitate students to achieve an advanced level of moral judgement so that they could internalize higher levels of moral reasoning, values and skills that shape their behavior. These cognitive, affective and behavioural advancements would subsequently help students developing a sense of responsibility in regulating one's behavior. Thus, acting in according to the moral values and prosocial expectations become volitional choices, resulting in less misbehavior and disruption in school [21], [22].

Moreover, positive behaviour recognition was also found to have a significant negative predictive effect on school

misbehavior. In school, punishment is often used as a deterrent of misbehavior. However, it has been argued that punishment can only suppress misbehavior shortly, and would inhibit student responsibility in regulating their behavior [37], [38]. Indeed, rewards were found to be more effective than punishment in encouraging positive behaviour [39]. Therefore, the present findings added to the argument that recognizing students' positive behavior not only encourages future positive behavior, but also reduces misbehaviour [26]-[28]. Hence, it is recommended that teachers can attend to students' positive behavior and recognize it timely, for the dual purposes of increasing positive behavior and eliminating misbehavior.

In managing student behavior, a clear reward system for recognizing positive behavior is indispensible. To avoid students' reliance on extrinsic reinforcement, the material rewards should be gradually extinct when the students are able to internalize the rules and behave properly. Yet, social recognition, such as praise and encouragement can still be maintained, with the purposes of strengthening students' self-esteem and sense of mastery in regulating one's positive behaviour [14], [25]. Moreover, the effects of recognition can be enormous, because recognition not only influences the students being "rewarded", but also has a contagious effect reinforcing the observers to follow the act in a similar way. According to the social learning approach [40], students can learn the norms, values and positive behaviors from their significant others and role models, particularly if these behaviors are recognized. In short, the present findings suggested that while promoting students' moral competence and prosocial norms, it is equally important that the school could have a clear system for rewarding, recognizing and reinforcing students' behavior when they can act in accordance with the moral and prosocial values. It echoes the developmental strengths-based approach –managing student behavior is not simply reducing problem behavior, but also encouraging students' self-determination and strengths in choosing to act properly.

In short, the present findings suggest that the school can manage student behavior in a proactive way by strengthening students' ability and responsibility in managing one's behavior. Developmental guidance activities, such as positive youth development programs or character education, can be implemented to strengthen students' moral competence and prosocial norms. Moreover, a clear recognition system for reinforcing student behavior in accordance with the moral and prosocial values is inevitable to encourage students' positive behavior. The purpose of all these measures is to guide students to choose to behave appropriately and properly. As the students at upper grade levels were found to have greater misbehavior problems in this study, these developmental measures could be carried out as early as possible (e.g., since Grade 7) for preventing student misbehavior from becoming severe over years. Also, more intensive developmental measures could be carried out at Grade 8 since students at this grade level were found to have lower moral competence and prosocial norms.

There are some limitations of the present study. First, the sample size was not large and there were more boys than girls.

Hence, the generalizability of the findings should be cautioned. Second, the data was mainly based on students' self-report, in which the effects of social desirability and self-serving biases should be noted. Third, the model only explained 19.6% variance in school misbehavior. The unexplained variance indicates that there would be third variables accounted for problem behavior, which were not examined in the present study. Future studies could incorporate other potential variables, such as underachievement and family functioning. Finally, it was a quantitative research adopting a cross-sectional survey method, which only showed the predictive contributions of moral competence, prosocial norms and positive behavior recognition to school misbehavior. Future research could use longitudinal research to figure out the causal relationships among the variables. Moreover, a qualitative research method can be adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of the research phenomenon, for instance, to understand what moral and prosocial values, and how these values affect student behavior in school via interviews.

Despite these limitations, the present study highlighted the negative predictive effects of moral competence, prosocial norms and positive behavior recognition on school misbehavior among Chinese junior secondary school students. The findings showed the significant personal and social variables underlying student choice of behavior, and provided practical suggestions for school in guiding and managing student behavior.

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