

Strengthening Student Engagement and Empowering Teachers to Manage Classroom Behaviour Using Social Work Approaches: A Cambodian Experience

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Abstract

This article discusses the development and initial implementation of a positive behaviour management system in Children's Future International (CFI), an NGO in Cambodia. In 2019, the staff at CFI implemented a new positive behaviour system utilising strength-based approaches and a decision-making framework premised on the Johari window. This article describes how the system was developed by a social work student on placement and implemented by a multidisciplinary team taking an action research approach. By using an adapted Johari window decision-making tool grounded in strength-based practice, staff felt empowered and students were more engaged. Implementing a social work approach to behaviour management enabled teachers to feel confident to act when needed. Initial findings indicate that staff and students positively engaged with the system resulting in positive behaviour change.

Keywords: *Education; Cambodia; Positive behaviour; Johari window; Strength-based social work; Empowerment*

Introduction

Children's Future International (CFI) is a non-government organisation (NGO) in rural Battambang, Cambodia. Approximately 250 children and young people are supported to learn and grow in a safe and nurturing environment, 150 of whom attend the supplementary education program. This is a program designed to support students' statutory learning at public school. The children are supported by a team of teachers, social workers, and support staff. CFI aims to foster a generation of educated, self-reliant, and compassionate role models for Cambodia through supplementary education, child-protection support, and community development programmes. CFI has a long-term commitment to reducing service dependency, and maximising families and students' futures by supporting them to achieve sustainable and empowering goals (Save the Children, 2019). They pride themselves on delivering evidence-based practices to children and young people and their families in a strength-based and engaging manner (Children's Future International, 2019).

This article reports on the findings of an action research project (Cabitati & Folgheraiter, 2019), aimed at developing a clear structure for CFI's learning centre. The new structure was premised on a strength-based approach to supporting classroom behaviour, while increasing student engagement and empowering teachers; all designed to support CFI's mission of developing educated, self-reliant, and compassionate role models (Graybeal, 2001). This article provides background on how a social work approach was used to develop the new system, the steps taken by CFI to implement the new system and some early findings from staff at CFI on the new model. It also reports on the implementation of a simple decision-making framework using a modified Johari window introduced to support teachers to feel engaged and empowered in their decision making (Luft & Ingham, 1955).

All students who attend the learning centre at CFI also attend formal statutory education at public school. CFI offers non-formal education designed to support and encourage students' development in a positive way. At CFI, teachers have a range of qualifications, some in education pedagogy while others come with subject-specific backgrounds such as information technology (IT) or teaching English as a second language (TESOL). Students receive non-formal education in four subjects, Khmer (the local Cambodian language), mathematics, IT, and English along with a range of extracurricular activities such as art and craft and physical education. CFI also has a team of social workers who support the holistic development of the students to support school attendance. Prior to implementing the new positive behaviour management system, social workers were regularly called on to help manage classroom behaviour.

There are many factors contributing to educational outcomes. Often students are absent from school in low-income countries (Schwartz et al., 2019). Considering 80% of the world's children live in low and middle-income countries, focusing on education is critical. Ensuring students attend class enables opportunities and growth. CFI is actively working to increase student attendance at the CFI learning centre by focusing on student engagement. This is achieved in the following ways: an education advocacy (EA) team which works alongside both the CFI learning centre and public schools. An EA team member works in partnership with public schools to check attendance if a child has missed classes at CFI school.

They then visit the family to find out why the child is absent from school and work with the family to reduce risk factors that inhibit attendance, supporting the child to attend school. If the risks within the family warrant it, they may also receive support from one of the CFI social workers, to ensure any child-protection concerns are addressed, and risk reduced. CFI understands how crucial education is for children in low-income countries, so they want to ensure children are attending school to enhance education success. Positive behaviour management needs to focus on the child at the centre, engaging, and empowering the child rather than a focus on punishment (Barnes et al., 2019). It is hoped that by enhancing student engagement at CFI's learning centre, overall social outcomes will improve. What follows is a summary of a literature review undertaken to support a positive behaviour management system that increases student engagement and empowers teachers to work with students successfully; and the way in which a social work approach was used to address an education issue.

Literature review

Positive behaviour management

Social outcomes are impacted by the history of the country (Masino & Niño-Zarazúa, 2016; Piquemal, 2017; Schwartz et al., 2019; Zakharov et al., 2016). This is certainly true in Cambodia; the history of education is entrenched in pain and fear, due to the genocide inflicted by the Khmer Rouge (Piquemal, 2017). This impact is seen today. Due to this history, there has been limited research into education in Cambodia (Piquemal, 2017), therefore this literature review covers a broader international context, and frameworks that were adapted for this context using the process of indigenisation. This section also provides examples of how these approaches are implemented at CFI.

Literature was accessed using the Griffith University Library database, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and Wiley online library. The search parameters used included “behaviour management”; “positive behaviour management”; “discipline systems”; “education”; and “Cambodia” or “developing countries.” This was limited to the previous five years and later extended to include the last 15 years. To select the chosen articles, the abstracts were read and any articles mentioning what was needed for behaviour management in a developing country context were considered. Additional literature was found in the references of the chosen articles.

Research in Cambodia is limited – this search only located two articles focused solely on Cambodia. Research completed in Cambodia found that teachers were able to identify emotionally challenging behaviours in their students (Wyatt et al., 2018). These behaviours manifested in visible signs of distress, distraction, crying, fear, anger, acting out, and an inability to deal with challenging situations. This research suggested that by using a trauma lens such as that used in social work, teachers can understand that all behaviour is communication. Like in other international contexts, this research emphasised teachers must be encouraging and empowering towards children. And that positive reinforcement is necessary to promote positive behaviour. This can be done using encouraging words and nonverbal communication (Wyatt et al., 2018).

Theoretical frameworks

A behaviour management system needs to support the child to change their behaviour and increase positive educational outcomes (Allen & Steed, 2016). Certain approaches and frameworks have been evidenced as important in behaviour management, these include: strength-based practice, positive behaviour management, and empowerment theory. CFI's evidenced-based practices include a trauma-informed approach (Wyatt et al., 2018) but in recent years has moved towards more positive behaviour management and strength-based practice. What this means in practice is that staff have moved away from a purely trauma-informed approach that asks "what happened to you?", to focusing more on a strength-based approach by asking "what is great about you?" In this way staff can help the young person identify their strengths as a way to overcome challenges and stressors in their interactions (Levenson, 2020). In line with best practice, this has been embedded over the last four years, as evidence suggested more effective outcomes can be achieved in this way. This is evidenced at every stage of case work, from assessment (Graybeal, 2001) to ongoing engagement (Saint-Jacques et al., 2009). CFI staff reinforce positive behaviour and have implemented strength-based practice within policy and practice. For example, CFI teachers reinforce positive behaviour through a ticket system, where tickets are given out for good behaviour and can be used to "pay" for a prize.

Complementing the traditional behaviour management approaches, education can learn from social work models such as a strength-based focus to support positive behaviour management (Allen & Steed, 2016). Strength-based practice involves an emphasis on the student's strengths, abilities, and available resources and is therefore individualised (Healy, 2014). The basis of strength-based practice is that the student has the ability and tools to help themselves and achieve their goals in collaboration with their teacher. The key components of strength-based approaches include empowerment, self-determination, cultural awareness, and collaboration (Healy, 2014). For example, students are empowered to determine their own consequences, they use self determination to develop strategies for positive change and they collaborate with teachers, all of whom are Khmer (Cambodian), so engagement is culturally appropriate. Strength-based approaches are used across all CFI as a way to support engagement and empower young people. This ensures the child is seen from both a strengths and culturally sensitive position. Alongside utilising these approaches, bias must be addressed, in cases where certain children are disciplined more often or more seriously than others (Allen & Steed, 2016). At CFI, for example, bias is addressed when CFI staff hold multi-disciplinary team meetings where case work is reviewed, discussed and challenged to ensure the right approach is taken at the right time.

Positive behaviour support is evidenced as a method of behaviour management and promotion of positive education outcomes (Allen & Steed, 2016). In social work, it involves understanding the reason behind behaviour using a child-centred (meeting the child's needs) and holistic approach (considering their wider context), reducing negative behaviour repetition, building positive relationships, supporting decision making, using individualised responses and support, and including staff development; all of which can be translated to an education environment (Allen & Steed, 2016).

All aspects of positive behaviour support must be culturally responsive so, where appropriate, models from global north countries have been indigenised at CFI to fit the local context (Allen & Steed, 2016). Indigenisation is where international or mainstream global north models are adapted for a local purpose (Tsui & Yan, 2010). In this case, ensuring information frameworks and models can be integrated within the Khmer context, is undertaken through staff review and discussion of the literature (On Lee & Mak, 2010).

At CFI, empowerment is an important component of all practice. A social work lens tells us that empowering children and teachers is important and conducive to a learning environment (Murphy-Graham & Lloyd, 2016). Empowerment is important as it requires people to act and therefore enact change, promoting engagement, allowing for reflection, decreasing exclusion, increasing student capacity, and creating a better learning environment. Before this happens, students must feel physically and emotionally safe, supported, recognised for their worth, and there must be the promotion of self-esteem and agency. Murphy-Graham and Lloyd (2016) define agency as the capacity to act without limitation to reach a student's full potential. This enables students to both learn and feel empowered, directly linking to the aims of this project by supporting student engagement.

Knowledge

Knowledge, or pedagogical strategies are a key factor in education. Teachers must be aware of and understand the content they are teaching so they are effective in teaching their students (Barnes et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2019; Zakharov et al., 2016). However, research suggests that content knowledge alone is not enough for positive teaching outcomes (Schwartz et al., 2019). Teachers need to understand the subject and how to approach it through different methods to create an effective learning environment (Schwartz et al., 2019). Consequently, teachers need to have high levels of pedagogical understanding. Pedagogical content knowledge is referred to by Schwartz et al. (2019) as *information in action*, it involves understanding the content and how to use that knowledge effectively. Common pedagogical strategies are involved in behaviour management, engagement, and class structure which, in turn, impacts on learning and positive student outcomes (Barnes et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2019).

Courtney (2017) completed research into education practices in Cambodia and found teachers in Cambodia are not taught pedagogical strategies. The research also found that most teachers teach via memorisation and repetition. Observations by Courtney (2017) in two rural classrooms found children only repeat what they had been taught via memorisation, rather than deduction. Students could not answer questions about subject matter they had not memorised. Courtney (2017) suggested this is because of the way they are taught and therefore is all they know. Subject knowledge is placed above pedagogy in Cambodian teacher training and this is evident in teaching methods in schools. This means students and teachers alike are sometimes unable to think critically and adapt their thinking to problems (Courtney, 2017). Another area of concern observed by Courtney is the rigid and authoritative approach to teaching that is seen in Cambodia. Courtney relates this to the *Chhab* (literally translated as the *Rule*), a Cambodian text detailing the student–teacher relationship.

It talks of how the teacher should be an authority figure and the child must listen and memorise, leading teachers to believe that they are there to teach via memorisation and that pedagogy is not significant. Ensuring teachers have pedagogical strategies will ensure they have the confidence to manage behaviour in the classroom, such as those used in social work.

Teacher relationships

Positive teacher–student relationships are vital for positive behaviour management and educational outcomes (Allen & Steed, 2016). To ensure this, it is necessary for the teacher to have an open mind, be empathetic, unbiased, and motivated to ask questions when needed. Additionally, trust and support are essential for good teacher–student relationships (Shechtman et al., 2005). Student behaviour is linked to teacher attitudes, like stress or loss of control and anger (Barnes et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2019). Therefore, teacher attitude is a contributing factor in student engagement and positive outcomes.

The socio-emotional competence of teachers in delivering education is important (Schwartz et al., 2019). Social-emotional competence includes self-awareness, social awareness, relationship building, and decision-making skills. These all contribute to a teacher’s ability to manage the classroom and behaviour (Schwartz et al., 2019). Teachers need to be upskilled in these areas so they feel empowered to successfully manage behaviour in the classroom. Further, teachers need to understand the emotional and physical needs of students to enable learning (Wyatt et al., 2018). As detailed in the *Chhab*, teachers in Cambodia can see themselves as authority figures and this can affect the relationship between them and their students (Courtney, 2017). Additionally, Cambodian teachers understand the children they are teaching have been through traumatic events and because of this find it is hard to respond to and accommodate every need (Wyatt et al., 2018). Wyatt et al. (2018) found that teachers’ own experiences of trauma meant it was difficult for them to talk to children about their traumatic experiences as it reminded them of their own. This is particularly relevant in a country such as Cambodia where the fairly recent genocide from the Khmer Rouge and the resulting poverty has resounded across generations. Everyone therefore needs to feel emotionally safe and secure, highlighting the importance of the relationship between the teacher and student and the high level of trust, from both parties, required. What follows is a look at the relevant social work theories and frameworks that were considered helpful in addressing these classroom challenges.

Self-awareness and empathy

As noted in the previous section, teachers need to develop awareness of their experiences and emotions (Schwartz et al., 2019). Awareness of emotions and empathy are important for positive behaviour support (Allen & Steed, 2016). Unconscious bias is defined as views and stereotypes that are activated unintentionally and impact behaviour, feelings, and relationships (Allen & Steed, 2016). Awareness of bias that could promote discrimination is important for educational outcomes and behaviour management. An example of bias in a Khmer context is the assumption that all children should respect their elders unconditionally, meaning if students question an instruction they can be viewed as rude rather than curious. There is evidence that unconscious bias can impact the way teachers respond to student behaviours (Allen & Steed, 2016).

Teachers need awareness of this bias to ensure they treat all children with respect and dignity. Social workers' address this bias through ongoing reflective practice and an awareness of the impact of their worldview (Weld & Appleton, 2008). An awareness of culture can also impact discipline methods through unconscious bias (Schwartz et al., 2019).

Teacher attitude is also important because teachers are more effective when they believe all children can learn (Barnes et al., 2019). This is where self-awareness is important for teachers (Shakouri et al., 2015). It can impact their teaching ability and engagement with students, so teachers must have some awareness of the impact their outside lives can have on their professional work (Schwartz et al., 2019). A teacher's understanding and empathy for students and what students are experiencing is important (Schwartz et al., 2019). Just as in social work, teachers need to be aware of the context of students' lives, being sensitive to students' emotions and, in turn, maintain self-awareness as to how they are impacted by their students (Shakouri et al., 2015; Weld & Appleton, 2008). This enables teachers to reflect on how their behaviour is impacting others and change if needed. Research in Cambodia has emphasised that regular de-briefing and self-awareness are important, as these allow teachers to reflect on how they interact with students and manage behaviour (Wyatt et al., 2018). At CFI this is managed via regular supervision sessions for staff and reflective team meetings.

Skills

There are specific skills needed for behaviour management; these include critical thinking (including decision-making), communication, cultural awareness, time management, and assessment. Critical thinking skills are needed to decide on discipline methods and consider alternatives (Allen & Steed, 2016). Critical thinking in both education and social work allows for the objective analysis and evaluation of any issue to determine a solution or conclusion (Murphy-Graham & Lloyd, 2016). Teachers must be able to think critically so they can change lessons based on students' needs (Barnes et al., 2019). Teachers need to be able to adapt activities and instructions to different learning styles (Shakouri et al., 2015). Critical thinking allows teachers to think analytically and evaluate what is the best option for each child considering all the information they have.

Communication skills are important for education (Murphy-Graham & Lloyd, 2016; Reagan et al., 2019). It is important for a teacher to be able to communicate with their students and vice versa. Another important consideration for education outcomes is cultural awareness and sensitivity (Allen & Steed, 2016; Reagan et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2019). Decision-making is also important (Shakouri et al., 2015). Supported decision-making is important for positive behaviour management and to do this, the teacher must acquire the necessary information to make and implement these decisions (Allen & Steed, 2016). For example, this includes co-creating consequences and engagement plans with the young person. Shared decision-making is important (Shechtman et al., 2005). When teachers work together with each other and with students to decide on policies and rules, teacher power increases and stress decreases, while student engagement increases. This can also be aided by working with other professionals, such as social workers, to make decisions (Allen & Steed, 2016).

Other necessary skills include time management and individual assessments of students' needs (Barnes et al., 2019; Shakouri et al., 2015).

Transdisciplinary approaches

Evidence has shown that using a transdisciplinary approach to learning and research can help solve complex problems (Dankwa-Mullan et al., 2010). Social work offers a range of useful skills, models and approaches when working within alternative education settings. CFI regularly hosts international social work students for the benefit of both the organisation and staff (Henley et al., 2019b, Horstmanhof et al., 2018). Rather than only placing social work students in the social work team, CFI offers social work student placements across the organisation. These non-traditional placements have been shown to enhance a student's understanding of teamwork, and to help them engage more creatively and holistically with disadvantaged people (Rawsthorne et al., 2018) Given the complex nature of behaviour change in the classroom, social work approaches such as trauma-informed care and strength-based practice were reviewed to see how they could support positive change for both staff and students at CFI's learning centre through deeper learning and stronger relationships (Budwig & Alexander, 2020).

Johari window

The Johari window, developed in the 1950s, is a way to undertake self-reflection and personal development (Luft & Ingham, 1955). The framework is presented as a four-grid window outlining factors known and not known to self, and known and not known to others. While not extensively covered in the literature, the idea of a grid for decision making is not new. Halpern (2009) and Solé (1997) for example, both described using the window as a framework for generating questions, in clinical supervision and teaching respectively. Its simplicity means that it can be translated to a number of settings including ethical decision-making, whereby factors in one's self interest versus universal or organisation interest can be considered (Dumville, 1995). As decision-making is essential to a successful positive behaviour management system, the Johari window presents a simple and effective tool to aid this process. As a social engagement model such as those employed by social work, this fits well with the transdisciplinary approach to solve complex problems.

From this literature review, CFI realised they needed a consistent framework to implement the new positive behaviour management system. The new system needed to build on teacher and student strengths so both groups felt empowered to make positive change and increase student engagement. To ensure successful implementation of the new system, CFI needed to ensure that teachers had a good understanding of teaching pedagogy, could build good relationships with students, were empathetic, and self-aware. This would support their ability to address the individual needs of each student and to reduce personal bias. It was considered taking a social work lens, using the support of a social work student, and implementing a social work approach would ensure a robust and useful framework was developed. Following the literature review, staff at CFI undertook a process to design and implement a new positive behaviour management system. What follows is a discussion on the action research process and an indication of the early feedback on the usefulness of the new positive behaviour management approach.

Method

CFI benefits from a dedicated group of staff who are open to innovation and new approaches. However, these staff are still limited by their own academic training and a hierarchical Khmer community. Trialling this new collaborative, strength-based approach to problem solving and behaviour management required staff to think in new ways and explore new approaches to their work. This project involved a process of action research, a cyclical approach to developing, testing and enhancing new processes (Cabiati & Folgheraiter, 2019; Edralin et al., 2015). Action research enables organisations to test and try new approaches in real time. It is an iterative process that involves four stages: clarifying the problem; creating a plan of action; implementing this change; and then critically evaluating the approach (Edralin et al., 2015).

The process of action and reflection utilised both primary and secondary data. Secondary data included existing literature on the topic. Primary data included a review of existing CFI behavioural management policy as well as observations and semi-structured discussions with staff, students, and families across the project. The project evolved over time in response to the authors' observations and reflections and to ensure the wellbeing of both staff and students was prioritised. This section describes the process to understand the problem, the approach to address this problem, trialling and testing the new approach, and critically reflecting on the outcomes.

Clarifying the problem

CFI regularly hosts social work students completing their final placement, this project was supported by one of these students. Before the social work student started on placement, CFI created a placement plan using the knowledge development and flow approach, an approach to designing a social work placement where students gather knowledge which flows into each planned task (Henley et al., 2019a). This set the stage for the student to develop a clear understanding of the challenges at CFI through meetings with staff, students and parent representatives. Through a comprehensive literature review, the social work student explored the key elements required of a positive behaviour management system. Throughout the entire research process, supervision between the social work student and placement supervisor explored ethical issues, clarified information, assessed options, reviewed feedback and generated solutions. This review process began with gathering information. The student began by reading and analysing the previous behaviour management policies. They undertook research into behaviour management approaches and implementation, and undertook informal observations and semi-structured discussions.

Data collection and analysis

Existing mechanisms, such as the CFI youth participation group and consumer consultation group, were used to ensure that the engagement process was ethical (based on established policies and procedures) and in the best interests of those participating. These interactions were undertaken at the start of the project. The aim was to explore the implementation of the current behavioural management system and how it could be improved. To formally collect data for the project the social work student designed a series of discussions, utilising semi-structured questions. These questions were discussed and reviewed in the student's supervision

sessions prior to implementation. The discussions were conducted over several weeks to allow for rapport building. A set of semi-structured questions were used, however during the interviews questions were adapted as learning was acquired from employing an action research approach (Patton, 2002). Participants included: six teachers, the learning centre manager; the education advocacy manager; and four social workers; over a series of three formal meetings; and six families, and 15 students with one key session each. Due to language barriers between the student and staff group, a translator was used when needed. Notes were taken from each session by the social work student and a simple code based on the themes from the student's literature review was used to identify key thematic issues and areas for development.

Findings

Themes included the empowerment of teachers and increasing awareness of behaviour as a form of communication. It became clear staff did not know which version of the old policy to use or, in some cases, did not know a policy existed.

Another observation was that the relationships between teachers and students, teachers and families, and teachers and social workers all needed to be improved. Throughout the investigation into the behaviour management system at CFI, participants discussed how relationships could be improved. Interviews with parents showed they wanted to be more involved in behaviour management at school and, as at the time of this work, had not been. They told the social work student they were aware there was a system but they did not know how it worked but they would like to be involved particularly when disability or mental health issues were present. The discussions also showed that other disciplines at CFI viewed the teachers as not having good relationships with the students. The teachers themselves felt they could not communicate with the students and that the students were disrespectful towards them. The interviews with the students also identified that the relationships between teachers and students needed to be improved, with one student commenting the teachers are "too powerful with the rules".

Self-awareness needed to be further developed at the CFI learning centre. Students said they did not know anything about the rules or behaviour management system, which went against the need for a shared process as described earlier (Allen & Steed, 2016; Murphy-Graham & Lloyd, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2019). During the interview process students were asked a scaling question: "Do you understand the behaviour management system at CFI?" with 1 being you do not understand it and 5 being you understand it well. The answers given provided varying degrees of understanding. For the first question, three students said they did not know and six students answered between 1 and 2. The second question, "What are the rules in your classroom?", was where the majority identified topics such as: no eating in class, no talking in class, no fighting, listening to the teacher, and coming to school regularly. Social workers also commented that the teachers needed to become more aware of their own power to create change. A common theme in the interviews with social workers at CFI was that they feel they are being called on too often for minor issues and were frustrated by this. The social workers commented that they "would like teachers to recognise their own power and handle cases themselves as students are continually repeating the same behaviours."

Teachers seemed to focus on disrespectful behaviour and when students became uncommunicative in their class. However, when deciding if they should intervene, they were worried they might go against CFI's child-protection policy, and often chose to call on social workers instead. Teachers needed to further develop their awareness and empathy to ensure they could support the child and uncover underlying causes. This became a key focus for the new positive behaviour management system and a key feature of the Johari window decision-making framework.

Creating a plan of action

From this initial investigation, the social work student, learning centre manager and supervisor developed a clear plan. This included providing teachers with basic training in skills and knowledge required to have the confidence to implement the positive behaviour management system at CFI. For the policy itself, it was determined a single document was needed, the language updated, detailing the different roles, with a clear set of bottom-line rules, and clear stages of intervention. CFI required capacity development for the teachers and learning centre manager to ensure that, when the new policy was implemented, they knew how to employ it. Teachers also needed support in communication skills, as they mentioned when students became unresponsive, angry or sad, they struggled with how to talk to them.

A decision-making framework based on the Johari window was developed (see Figure 1). The supervisor had prior experience using a Johari window as a way to balance competing views, between teachers and between teachers and students, to generate fair and consistent decisions. The Johari window was introduced to the teachers and learning centre manager. All agreed this was a usable framework to help teachers decide when to intervene. Behaviour scenarios were tested within the framework and everyone felt the model would be simple and effective. First teachers brainstormed a list of common behavioural problems and then the group workshopped their response based on the Johari window decision-making framework. The Johari window was translated to Khmer.

Figure 1

CFI's Decision-making Framework

Disrupting the learning of other students	<p>Not disrupting other students but disrupting their own learning Intervene as needed – is doing something in class or after class better?</p>	<p>Not disrupting other students own learning Do not need to do anything</p>
	<p>Disrupting other students or self Intervene immediately</p>	<p>Disrupting other students, not their own learning Intervene as needed – is doing something in class or after class better?</p>
Disrupting their own learning		

Implementing the plan

The social work student delivered two workshops to the teachers. The first was used to co-create a set of clear bottom line expectations, focusing on student promises or desired behaviours, rather than rules (see Figure 2). Every bottom line was framed as a positive action, emphasising what students *should do* rather than what they *should not*.

Many students did not know what the classroom rules were and teachers did not have a clear understanding of their own bottom lines. In the first workshop participants determined bottom lines, clearly setting out five, positively framed guidelines for all classrooms. This involved giving the power to the teachers to decide their bottom lines in an effort to empower them, with the social work student providing guidance. These were discussed and reviewed with students at the start of the term to ensure their buy-in. The guidelines took a collective approach so they could be used for all classrooms, framed positively, and were reasonable. These bottom lines are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2

CFI Classroom Promises / Bottom Lines

1. We are all ready to learn
2. We are all engaged in all activities
3. We are all respectful, use polite words and good behaviour
4. We are all hygienic
5. We make sure all activities are safe for ourselves and others

The second workshop involved introducing the teachers to the Johari window as a framework for decision making. This helped the teachers understand when to intervene. The social work student also spent time individually with teachers brainstorming classroom challenges and supporting them to develop their own approach to the positive behaviour management system. The final stage of this review process included developing a new policy and list of recommendations.

The new policy included both strength-based practice and positive behaviour management with its formation supporting student engagement and teacher and student empowerment (Healy, 2014; Murphy-Graham & Lloyd, 2016; Shechtman et al., 2005). Teachers were involved in the formation, allowing them to establish the five new bottom-line rules and how they fitted within the new positive behaviour management policy. The new policy included a description of the reinforcement of positive behaviour to remind teachers to Books \$46.44 celebrate positive behaviour. Also included was a description of the stages of intervention, a flow chart, and the Johari window decision-making framework.

Critical review

In line with the action research approach, CFI maintained ongoing reflective discussions about this new system. While developing the approach, the social work student had informal discussions with the staff about their thoughts on the workshops, discussing what they had learnt and if they believed the Johari window would work. In regular weekly teachers' meetings and in one-to-one discussion between the manager and staff, discussion and reviews of the positive behaviour management system took place. The social work student took notes and this information was added to existing thematic data. Over time, three key themes emerged and these comments are discussed below. Overall, teachers found the model easy to use, the model created a shared space for teachers and students to work together on improving the classroom environment and raised concerns about how the new approach fitted with traditional Khmer culture. Teacher comments have been translated to English and appear in italics.

Firstly, regarding the application of the model the teachers noted that they found the Johari window helpful. With one teacher explaining *"it has given me confidence to deal with behaviour in my classroom"*. They found the model supported their decision making knowing when to intervene and when to leave issues either completely or deal with them at the end of the class. *"I think it is better than before because now we know if the problem needs to be dealt with and what we can ignore."* The learning centre manager also felt the new system had increased engagement in the classroom and reduced absenteeism, although it is likely a much longer time is required to determine the longer-term benefits of this approach. Teacher feedback tells us this new approach has supported the objective to empower teachers to manage their own classrooms. The confidence to know when to act or, more importantly, when not to, has alleviated some teacher anxiety. They feel there is a consistent approach across the school and that students are treated fairly and equally (Allen & Steed, 2016; Murphy-Graham & Lloyd, 2016; Wyatt et al., 2018).

Secondly, teachers described that the approach had created a level of shared responsibility between students and teachers. *"Now that we explain the student responsibilities (classroom promises) at the start of the semester, it feels like the students and teachers are working together to create a good classroom environment."* The teachers also involved the students in determining the consequence if there is an issue that needed to be addressed. *"We ask the student to pick their own consequence which works well, but sometimes it feels like they are just picking their favourite consequence and misbehaving so they get to do that."* If the behaviour was ongoing, the teachers opened dialogue with the students and their families about the behaviour. Instead of telling a student they had done something wrong they created a shared understanding of the behaviour and what needed to change. *"It has been a good idea to get more information about the student's background to the problem and what might have caused it."* This directly supported the objective to increase student engagement using a strength-based approach to behaviour management.

Thirdly, not all feedback was positive. One of the teachers raised a concern with the approach, supported by their peers. They believed by ignoring minor issues in the classroom they were not responding in a culturally appropriate way.

“I’m worried how this might affect the Khmer culture, if we ignore things, will this show students a bad example and go against the Khmer culture?” This is a challenge when indigenising an approach. Tensions can appear when current approaches are not working and western models adapted to local cultures are trialled (Strydom & Schiller, 2019; Yeo et al., 2019). It is important for CFI to remain cognisant of this and to maintain ongoing conversations and continue to critically review the approach with the teaching team.

Discussion

This project developed a clear structure for CFI’s learning centre which took a social work, strength-based approach to supporting classroom behaviour, while increasing student engagement and empowering teachers. Through action research it became apparent self-awareness, building relationships, knowledge, and critical thinking were all important in empowerment of both teachers and students (Murphy-Graham & Lloyd, 2016). These key skills were not only important in empowerment but in behaviour management. Teachers needed to know more than just what is in books and what they were taught in their degrees. There may have been some unconscious bias in how teachers treated students, as teachers were very focused on what they personally deemed to be disrespectful behaviour (Allen & Steed, 2016). CFI teachers needed further development of certain skills, such as problem solving and critical thinking. It was clear CFI teachers were able to recognise challenging behaviours, but they needed further support in how to distinguish and critically think about whether behaviour was causing disruption to the class and therefore needed to be addressed immediately and what could wait, or be ignored. This supported decisions on when to intervene and when not to, along with how to intervene. The action research process supported teachers’ effective practice through a process of continuous learning and reflection (Shakouri et al., 2015). As a result, they had the knowledge required and knew how to utilise that knowledge effectively (Barnes et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2019; Zakharov et al., 2016). Teachers enhanced their self-awareness and empathy (Allen & Steed, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2019) and developed strong relationships with their students for behaviour management (Allen & Steed, 2016). A social work approach embedded transdisciplinary learning to the original problem, offering a strengthened solution (Budwig & Alexander, 2020). The social work student benefited by learning how to work collaboratively to ensure positive results for their learning and the learning of the wider team (Horstmanshof et al., 2018). A social work approach offered benefits to children in alternative settings, particularly those who have experienced trauma, by taking a holistic and strengths-based approach to positive behaviour change.

The Johari window and ongoing review and reflection gave the teachers a framework to support their critical thinking, communication, and cultural awareness skills (Allen & Steed, 2016; Murphy-Graham & Lloyd, 2016; Reagan et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2019). Most research on teacher skills and knowledge for behaviour is from global north countries (Schwartz et al., 2019). Consequently, this action research will help inform the burgeoning research and evidence base from the global south education and multi-disciplinary experience, ultimately enhancing outcomes for this vulnerable and unique population.

Implications for CFI

CFI teachers needed to be up-skilled to be able to appropriately manage disruptive behaviour. They needed to be empowered to realise their own abilities and skills to create a conducive learning environment. They needed to understand what negative behaviour might be communicating and what behaviour is developmentally appropriate, or rather when to intervene and when to ignore disruption. They also needed to increase awareness and critical thinking. Lastly, they needed to be able to distinguish between what they could handle in-class and what they could not, what is going to disturb class further if they respond and what will not. For CFI, utilising an action research approach and the dedicated support from the social work student enabled this process to take place. By first clarifying the problem, it was found teachers felt disempowered and student engagement was declining. A plan of action was created to address this that included teacher workshops, and policy development. CFI is committed to ongoing learning and professional development for staff, and this action research highlighted the ongoing importance of, not just putting in training opportunities, but continuing to reflect on progress and identify learning gaps. It also highlighted the importance of professionals learning and complementing each other through shared models and frameworks to improve outcomes for all.

This change was implemented as a joint process between the social work student, teachers and CFI students by collaboratively developing and reviewing the classroom promises and jointly agreeing natural consequences when needed. This was achieved through ongoing critical evaluation of this approach to promote positive behaviour more often and in creative ways. A clear set of bottom-line expectations was implemented across the school that all teachers and students were aware of. As a result, teacher and student relationships improved, an important factor in behaviour management (Allen & Steed, 2016). Or as one teacher remarked “*the issues in the class seem to be much smaller now.*” CFI will continue to build on this partnership through classroom engagement and utilising the advice from the youth participation group. It has also highlighted the value that can be added by sharing knowledge across disciplines and taking a transdisciplinary approach such as using a social work approach to solve an education-based problem.

Recommendations for others

For others wanting to replicate this work, the collaborative approach that action research provides is recommended. Using this process and jointly agreeing ways forward generated buy-in from both teachers and students. The teachers unanimously agreed the Johari window provided them some assurance they are responding when they should and there is a consistent approach across the learning centre. Alongside this the use of transdisciplinary approaches to identify and resolve an area of practice was beneficial for staff and the social work student (Budwig & Alexander, 2020; Dankwa et al., 2010).

The positive behaviour process is still in its infancy at CFI and needs further review and reflection. Targeted review and measurement will help ensure the changes made, continue to support both teacher empowerment and student engagement in the long term. Hopefully, others across the global south community continue to research and report on approaches and pedagogy in education to help inform the research base in this area (Horstmanshof et al., 2018).

Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to develop a clear structure for CFI's learning centre embracing a social work, strength-based approach to supporting classroom behaviour, while increasing student engagement and empowering teachers. The project found certain skills, knowledge, resources, attitudes, and strong teacher–student relationships were needed for effective behaviour management. Empathy and critical thinking were key factors in the success of this approach. Further research is needed to measure the long-term outcomes of this approach and to review the impact of a global north decision-making process to Khmer traditional values and beliefs. CFI is proud of this approach and the positive influence it has had on the learning centre and hopefully others are also able to benefit from these findings and recommendations.

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