

# Teachers' and Students' Causal Explanations for Classroom Misbehavior: Similarities and Differences

Rachel C. F. Sun

**Abstract**—This study aimed to examine the similarities and differences between teachers' and students' causal explanations of classroom misbehavior. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve teachers and eighteen Grade 7-9 students. The qualitative data were analyzed, in which the attributed causes of classroom misbehavior were categorized into student, family, school and peer factors. Findings showed that both interviewed teachers and students shared similarity in attributing to student factors, such as 'fun and pleasure seeking' and 'attention seeking' as the leading causes of misbehavior. However, the students accounted to school factors, particularly 'boring lessons' as the next attributed causes, while the teachers accounted to family factors, such as 'lack of parent demandingness'. By delineating the factors at student, family, school, and peer levels, these findings help drawing corresponding implications for preventing and mitigating misbehavior in school.

**Keywords**—Causal explanation, misbehavior, student, teacher.

## I. INTRODUCTION

STUDENT misbehavior can hamper the effectiveness of classroom teaching and learning. To properly intervene, one of the key issues is to understand why student misbehave by unearthing the factors predisposing or perpetuating misbehavior. There are two lines of research: i) quantitative research that uses a scientific approach to identify the factors having significant causal/predictive effects on or correlational relationships with misbehavior; and ii) qualitative research that describes and explores how people perceive and explain the causes of misbehavior. Both lines of research are of equally importance. However, in order to gain a 'thick' description and deeper understanding of the research phenomenon, this study intended to adopt the qualitative approach to examine teachers' and students' common-sense explanations for misbehavior based on their everyday analysis [1], [2].

In reviewing the literature on the causal explanations of student misbehavior, there are several observations. First, both teachers and students usually explained that the causes of classroom misbehavior were multidimensional, including student-related factors (e.g., effort, ability, motivation, personality), family-related factors (e.g., parent-child attachment, parental discipline, parental support, family background), teacher-related factors (e.g., teaching methods, encouragement, classroom management, teachers' personality), school-related factors (e.g., curriculum, class size, services for students, overall school management) and peer-related factors (e.g., peer relationship, peer influence)

[3]–[13]. It revealed that teachers and students commonly considered that misbehavior was not only originated from the students' personal faults and vulnerabilities, but also related to their immediate living contexts where there are relatively more risk factors and less protective factors [14]. Therefore, in line with the ecological systems theory [15], [16] which advocates that a person is inseparable from the surrounding environment, it is valuable to examine the causal explanations of misbehavior within the 'troubled child' and his/her 'troubled systems' [17]. It, in turn, helps drawing corresponding implications for preventing and mitigating misbehavior at different levels.

Second, there are research findings showing that teachers and students perceived similar personal and social causes for explaining classroom misbehavior, but they had different views when locating the main causes of misbehavior. Many studies commonly showed that teachers tended to account mostly to student- and family-related factors [3], [6], [8], [9], [12], and similarly, students tended to downplay their own accountability for their misbehavior [5]. Particularly, attributions would vary with the type or intensity of misbehavior, with more severe and frequent misbehavior being attributed to out of school factors [4], [8], [18]. Self-serving attribution biases [19] were used to explain this phenomenon, as people would like to locate the causes of problems to external factors in order to protect their self-esteem, and to deny their responsibility for the problems [20]. Some studies, on the other hand, showed that teachers and students did not refuse their ownership of the problem since they had attributed to internal causes and perceived their responsibility in accounting for the misbehavior [13], [21], [22]. As teachers and students are in different hierarchical positions in school which may influence their perceptions, it is of particular importance to examine both teachers' and students' casual attributions for classroom misbehavior simultaneously in a single study, in order to have a clearer understanding on both views, as well as the degree of similarities and differences between both views, since studies in this aspect are limited [5].

Third, compared with the studies conducted in the Western cultural contexts, only a few research studies were conducted in the Chinese cultural contexts [3]. Hence, it is worthwhile to examine Chinese teachers' and students' subjective causal explanations for classroom misbehavior, particularly in Hong Kong where similar studies are non-existent.

Fourth, different methods were used to collect data in different research studies. For instance, survey questionnaires were used by some studies [3], [9], [13], but the limited

Rachel C. F. Sun is with the University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong (phone: 852-2857-8376; fax: 852-2517-0075; e-mail: rachels@hku.hk).

response choices in the questionnaires were subject to criticism because attributions of student misbehavior would vary with the types of misbehavior and even with the frequency and intensity of a specific misbehavior. Also, some qualitative studies provided hypothetical vignettes in advance [7], and/ or asked the respondents to rate the degree of importance of the causes with reference to a pre-set list in the interviews [11]. This method was accused of restricting or even leading the respondents to attribute to some particular causes. Therefore, some qualitative studies collected data via interviews in which teachers and students were encouraged to list all the student misbehaviors and their possible causes in an open manner [12], [22]. It was argued that using open-ended interviews to collect rich and detailed information is the most appropriate if research studies intended to explore people's common-sense explanations of the causes of classroom misbehavior.

With regard to these observations, this research adopted the qualitative approach to describe and explore the lay explanations for the causes of classroom misbehavior among Chinese teachers and students. It aimed (i) to examine the attributed causes of classroom misbehavior at different levels (e.g., student, family, school and peer), and (ii) to examine the similarities and differences between teachers' and students' causal explanations for classroom misbehavior. It is hoped that the present findings can shed lights on measures at various levels to mitigate and prevent classroom misbehavior. Below are the research questions.

1. What are the causal factors teachers and students use to explain classroom misbehavior?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the teachers' and students' causal explanations for classroom misbehavior?

## II. METHOD

### A. Participants

The sample was comprised of twelve teachers and eighteen students who were local Chinese in Hong Kong. Although there is no "sacred number" in qualitative research, an engagement of 30 informants could be regarded as on the high side and sufficient for the purposes of this research. All the interviewed teachers had experiences of teaching junior secondary grades (Grade 7, 8, and/or 9), and their average years of teaching experience was 9.25 years (range = 1–22 years). Among them, five were males and seven were females. The interviewed students were all junior secondary school students (6 boys and 6 girls at each Grade 7, 8 and 9), with the mean age of 13.9 years old (range = 12–17 years old). The recruitment of the teachers and students from schools with different academic abilities and background characteristics could ensure that a wide range of experiences would be examined. Before conducting this research, written consent from the school principals and the informants, as well as passive consent from the students' parents, were obtained prior to data collection. All participation was voluntary. Anonymity and confidentiality of the study were ensured.

### B. Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data in in-depth individual interviews. The interview guide was self-constructed, and it had been piloted in another research study by the author. In the interview, the informants were asked to describe the student misbehavior and explain the causes of the misbehavior in general. Sample interview questions were, 'What are the student misbehaviors in the classroom?', and 'What are the factors leading to these classroom misbehaviors?'. Each interview was conducted in the school by two trained interviewers (including the author) in Cantonese (the mother tongue of both the interviewers and interviewees). The average interview time was 48.5 minutes (range = 33-78 minutes). The interviews were audio-taped with interviewees' prior consent and transcribed in verbatim after the interview.

## III. ANALYSIS

Data was analyzed by using general qualitative analyses techniques by a process of data reduction, data display and conclusion verification [23]. Codes and categories were inductively derived from the data by the author and a trained research colleague who has a Bachelor degree of Psychology and teaching experiences, and further reviewed by a peer who has a Bachelor degree of Psychology and professional counseling training (i.e., peer checking). The codes and categories were finalized with consensus among the coders to reduce the influences of personal bias in data analysis. Following Miles and Huberman's suggestion (1994), the intra-rater and inter-rater reliabilities of the codes were calculated, and the reliabilities were high (95% and 90% respectively). An audit trail was kept to make the research processes transparent. In short, several measures were carried out to ensure the credibility of the findings.

## IV. RESULTS

Table I summarizes the codes and categories of the causal explanations of classroom misbehavior reported by the interviewed teachers and students. There were 250 raw responses, from which 47 codes were derived. Among the codes, 33 were grouped under the categories of 'student' factors, 6 were 'school' factors, 5 were 'family' factors, and 3 were 'peer' factors. A majority of the teachers' responses (68.5%) and students' responses (71.1%) were student-related factors. Teachers also accounted to family factors (17.6%), school factors (11.1%), and peer factors (2.8%). In contrast, students did not account to family factors much (0.7%). They accounted to school factors (23.9%) and peer factors (4.3%). Below are the analyses within each category.

### A. Student Factors

As shown in Table I, most of the teachers and students agreed that 'fun and pleasure seeking', 'attention seeking', 'tiredness', 'difficultly in catching up with the syllabus', 'forgetfulness' and 'poor time management' were the factors leading to student classroom misbehavior.

TABLE I  
TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' ATTRIBUTIONS FOR CLASSROOM MISBEHAVIOR

Category	Code	Teachers' Views (N=12)	Students' Views (N=18)	Total
Student	Attention seeking	6	8	14
	Challenging authority	1	4	5
	Desire to 'share' with classmates	0	6	6
	Difficulty in adapting secondary school life	1	0	1
	Difficulty in catching up with the syllabus	6	3	9
	Dislike of lesson	0	5	5
	Dislike of the teacher	0	6	6
	Emotional disturbance	3	0	3
	Feeling great	3	4	7
	Forgetfulness	2	7	9
	Fun and pleasure seeking	4	14	18
	Habit	2	1	3
	Impatience	0	1	1
	Irritability / bad temper	3	1	4
	Lack of ability	2	0	2
	Lack of emotional management	0	3	3
	Lack of goal or life meaning	2	0	2
	Lack of interest in learning / subject / topic	6	2	8
	Lack of motivation towards school work	3	1	4
	Lack of responsibility	0	1	1
	Lack of self-confidence	1	0	1
	Lack of self-control	3	3	6
	Laziness	1	3	4
	Perception of having no bad consequence following the misbehavior	0	4	4
	Poor time management	3	6	9
	Rebelliousness	4	4	8
	Recognition seeking	2	4	6
	Self-centeredness	1	2	3
	Self-image construction	1	0	1
	Special educational needs	5	1	6
	Tiredness / Insufficient sleep	4	7	11
	Unclear behavioral norms and values	3	0	3
	Without a second thought	2	0	2
<b>Subtotal</b>		<b>74</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>175</b>
Family	Family conflict	1	0	1
	Lack of parental demandingness (strictness & supervision)	7	0	7
	Negative parents' values & behavior	4	0	4
	Parents arranged too many extra-curriculum activities	1	1	2
	Socio-economical status	6	0	6
<b>Subtotal</b>		<b>19</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>20</b>
Peer	Other classmates stirred up troubles	1	2	3
	Peer influences	2	2	4
	Poor relationship among classmates	0	2	2
<b>Subtotal</b>		<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>
School	Boring lesson	7	14	21
	Lack of clear classroom rule	1	0	1
	Poor teacher-student relationship	1	0	1
	Teacher factors	0	6	6
	Unattractive learning content or teaching method	3	9	12
<b>Subtotal</b>		<b>12</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Total responses</b>		<b>108</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>250</b>

The students mostly reported that students misbehaved just for fun and attention. For instance, a student (A07) described, 'actually, you could feel that s/he (the student) was pretending to be fallen asleep in order to get teacher's attention. That is letting others knew that it was fun and felt that it was very amusing'. Some teachers also agreed, and they further explained that the attention-seeking misbehavior was related to other personal deficiencies. For instance, a teacher (A02) explained, 'it was related to his/her self-perception, i.e.,

insufficient self-confidence, plus other factors, such as lacking special talents or interpersonal communication skills, and having relatively weak learning interest or ability. All these were closely knitted. S/he did not have the ability and interest because s/he could not achieve. Hence, s/he tried to make himself/herself happy in another way'.

In fact, the teachers mainly attributed to students' difficulty in catching up with the syllabus, deficit in learning interest, and special educational needs. A teacher (B04) described, 'in

English class, I spoke English all the time. However, there were some less-able students. They could not catch up. They didn't know what the teacher was teaching, and thus they started daydreaming... Of course, there were students having special needs who simply could not control themselves. They actually did not have a sense of self-control. When they wanted to stand up, they stood up. When they wanted to kick a desk, they kicked'.

Another teacher (B03) echoed, 'First, the student did not have any interest in the lesson. For instance, I taught Mathematics. S/he was really uninterested in, and thus easily misbehaved (doing one's own things). Second, the student had individual problems. Some students had more emotional difficulties, and so their frequency (of misbehaving) was higher during lesson. I consider these two were the most popular (causes)'.

Moreover, some students and teachers explained that physical tiredness was a factor leading to sleeping in class, while forgetfulness was a common reason explaining why students failed to bring textbooks or submit homework. Some of them further revealed that poor time management was another cause because students might spend long hours playing computer games or online games at home which affected their concentration in class and learning behavior.

At the student level, while about half of the factors were agreed by both teachers and students, half were uniquely perceived by either party. For example, the teachers explained that students misbehaved because they had difficulty in adapting to secondary school life, or they did not have proper norms and values, or they did not think twice before action. On the other hand, the students explained that they just wanted to do so, or they did not perceive any bad consequences following the misbehavior.

#### *B. School Factors*

Both teachers and students attributed classroom misbehavior to 'boring lesson' and 'unattractive learning content or teaching method' at the school level (see Table I). Comparatively, the students were more articulate in attributing to school factors than the teachers did. A student (B06) explained why students liked chatting in class, 'sometimes the lesson was very boring, and s/he (the teacher) was teaching something difficult. So, you would be naturally paying no attention'. Another student (B10) further explained that a lesson was considered boring if 'there were not many group activities, not much opportunity for students to interact... There was direct lecture, without any other teaching aids. If there was something like PowerPoint, it would be better'. In fact, the school factors of 'boring lesson' and 'unattractive learning content or teaching method' and the student factor of 'fun and pleasure seeking' were closely related, as several informants agreed that students would misbehave (such as talking out of turn, and clowning) to amuse the whole class when the lesson was boring.

In addition, the students reported some school factors which were not mentioned by the teachers. For instance, they pointed out that 'unchallenging lesson' and 'teacher factors' (such as

the teacher was inexperienced, too kind, or very unreasonable) were the causes eliciting misbehavior in the classroom (such as talking out of turn, and arguing with teachers). Teachers also talked about some school factors which were not mentioned by the students in this study. For instance, they explained that student misbehaved because there was 'a lack of clear classroom rule' or 'poor teacher-student relationship'.

#### *C. Family Factors*

Compared with the teachers, the students were less likely to perceive family as a cause of student misbehavior (see Table I). A student noted that parents had arranged too many extra-curricular activities for their children, and thus some students did not have enough time to complete homework for on-time submission. It was agreed by a teacher. However, the teachers were more likely to explain to poor parenting. A teacher (A03) shared his observation, 'once, the students did not submit their homework frequently, and thus we reported to their parents. However, some parents helped their children finding an excuse. Other parents knew their children had behavioral problems, but they felt incapable to handle. Some were indulgent, just didn't want to destroy the relationships with their children, and let it be'.

Another teacher (C01) shared, 'actually, many of my students were coming from low socio-economical background. Most of their parents were busy to strive for a living, and did not have much time to supervise their children... say, how to pack school bag. Some students really could not pack their school bags properly. They accepted disorganization, and so did incomplete homework, non-submission, etc.'

Some teachers also explained that student behavior would be affected by parents' values and behavior. A teacher (C04) accounted, 'some students' dad, in the parents' day, had a mouthful of foul language. Their mum also spoke vulgarly. Hence, their children were used to it. Rebuke was their communication styles with dad and mum at home'.

#### *D. Peer Factors*

Both teachers and students explained that students misbehaved when they were influenced or provoked by their peers. The students added that some classroom misbehavior (e.g., teasing and fighting) was originated from the poor relationship among classmates.

### **V. DISCUSSION**

This study aimed to examine the attributed causes of classroom misbehavior, and the similarities and differences between teachers' and students' causal explanations for classroom misbehavior. The findings showed that about 70% of the causal explanations were student-related, such as 'fun and pleasure seeking', 'attention-seeking', 'tiredness', 'difficulty in catching up with the syllabus', 'forgetfulness' and 'poor time management'. There were also school-related explanations such as 'boring lesson' and 'unattractive learning content and teaching method', family-related explanations such as 'lack of parental demandingness' and 'socio-economical status', and peer-related explanations such as

'peer influences'. The present findings showed that the Chinese teachers' and students' causal explanations of misbehavior were generally similar with those of their counterparts in the Western contexts [9], [12], [13]. It also echoed that the causes of misbehavior were multidimensional, and related to both the troubled child and their immediate troubled systems [17]. Therefore, this qualitative study demonstrated the value of using the ecological approach to describe and understand the research phenomenon at multiple levels, and thus help providing lights for discussing corresponding practical implications.

As shown in the present findings, most of the causal explanations for classroom misbehavior, particularly those were agreed by both teachers and students, were student-related. It was similar to most of the existing findings [22], as students were usually considered to be responsible for their own misbehavior. It might be more prominent in the Chinese culture where students are expected to behave properly in the school. Hence, teachers and students who had internalized this idea would tend to blame for the misbehaved students for failing to carry out their responsibility in maintaining proper behavior. However, teachers and students still had some distinctive explanations for the causes of misbehavior, which might be related to their specific roles in the school. For example, within the category of student-related explanations of misbehavior, teachers were more likely to associate misbehavior with learning problems (e.g., having difficulties or special needs in learning, and having low motivation and interest), while students were likely to explain from their student-centered angle (e.g., seeking for fun and pleasure in the boring lessons).

Similarly, the teachers and students had different perceptions of family and school influences on student misbehavior. Teachers pointed to family factors (17.6%) as the second leading cause, which was followed by school factors (11.1%). In contrast of teachers' perspectives, students were less likely to perceive family as a cause (0.7%). They were likely to favor school factors (23.9%) as the next popular cause of misbehavior. It might be because teachers were more cognitive-matured in perceiving the phenomenon from a wider and deeper angle, while students' perceptions were relatively limited. Also, teachers might be more acquainted with the misbehaved students' family background and thus they were likely to attribute to family factors than the students did. Moreover, teachers might have expectations on the role of parents in guiding student behavior, and thus they tended to blame the family for causing student misbehavior. On the other hand, students might have expectations on classroom learning and teachers, and thus they were more likely to list out the school factors that failed to meet their expectations as the causes of misbehavior.

Similar to previous findings [3], [6], [9], [12], the present study found that teachers attributed mostly to external factors comprising student and family factors. Only a small proportion of their attributions were related to school factors. There are several explanations for this phenomenon. First, teachers might adopt self-serving attribution biases in

explaining the reality [19], in order to avoid blame and responsibility in accounting for student misbehavior in the classroom. It reflected that they would like to protect their own professional self-esteem on one hand, and to resist making changes in their classroom management or teaching to help eradicating misbehavior on the other hand [20]. Second, teachers might have insufficient awareness of the relationship between their classroom management and student behavior, and thus they tended to attribute to external factors [10]. It would be disastrous to student learning and development if teachers deny their responsibility and are unable to adjust their classroom management and teaching. As revealed in the interviews, students were looking for fun, attention, challenging learning content and diversified teaching methods, but they found the lessons were boring and unattractive. Hence, they would resort to talking and clowning (i.e., misbehaving) as a response when their needs cannot be properly satisfied in the classroom [24].

In short, the present study showed that misbehavior was a reflection of problems at the student, family, school and/or peer levels. Furthering Ho's study, [24] the present findings showed that both teachers and students considered that student misbehavior was a collective issue shared among the students and their family and school. Hence, positive changes must be taken place at various microsystem levels and in synchronization for eradicating classroom misbehavior. First, at the student level, it is suggested that the school could organize some developmental guidance programs at the universal basis that target at strengthening students' psychosocial competencies, such as emotional management, adherence to proper norms and values, self-control and respect. Similar positive youth development program was demonstrated to be effective in mitigating problem behavior among Chinese students [25], [26]. Individual intervention could also be stepped up for some misbehaved students to reduce their vulnerability and enhance their unique strengths.

Second, it is suggested that teachers could avoid personal biases or labeling when attributing student misbehavior. It is also suggested that teachers could take up the responsibility in maintaining classroom order and discipline on one hand, and encourage positive behavior and learning on the other hand. For instance, as misbehaved students were thought to be lacking the ability of identifying behavioral norms and the consequences of one's misbehavior, teachers could involve the students when setting up classroom rules as well as the consequences of adherence and non-adherence. More importantly, teachers could let the students understand the rationales behind discipline and the importance of self-control, and guide students to make the right choices to behave properly in accordance with the norms and expectations [27]. Furthermore, noting that misbehavior is a product of mismatches between the classroom and student needs [28], teachers need to adjust the learning context accordingly to satisfy students' needs. For instance, teachers could engage students to learn via using interactive teaching methods, challenging tasks, and interesting teaching aids. It is believed that effective teaching is another way that enhances learning

and positive behavior, and thus reduces the occurrence of misbehavior.

Third, teachers could help enriching the students' family by maintaining constructive communication with parents about their child's needs, problems and strengths; educating and working collaboratively with parents in supporting their child's positive behavior; and referring the students and their family to professional help (e.g., family counseling and parenting training) if necessary.

There are several strengths in this study. First, it adopted the ecological approach to examine the teachers' and students' causal explanations for classroom misbehavior. Second, it used a qualitative approach in which data was collected via in-depth semi-structured interviews. Third, it included multiple sources (i.e., teachers and students) in order to paint a complete picture of the phenomenon. Fourth, the present qualitative findings added to existing literature by elucidating the similarities and differences between teachers' and students' causal explanations, as most of the existing studies looked at teachers' attributions [4], [12] and students' attributions [22] separately which did not allow concurrent comparison.

Meanwhile, there are some limitations in this study. First, the informants included teachers and students only, and thus future research could also include parents and even students who are identified as having frequent and severe misbehavior to gain rich information. Second, it should be noted that all the explanations were global rather than specific, i.e., explaining classroom misbehavior in general rather than a definite misbehavior. If future studies could ask the informants to give an account of some specific misbehaviors, the results would be illuminating. Third, the present findings might be limited to Hong Kong local school contexts. More studies in other Chinese cultural contexts could be carried out.

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**Rachel C. F. Sun** got her Bachelor Degree of Social Sciences (1999) and Doctoral Degree of Philosophy in Education (2005) at the University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, P.R.C.

She is Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, The University of Hong Kong. She is a Principal Investigator of school misbehavior research studies, and Co-Principal Investigator of positive youth development programs and a service leadership program in Hong Kong. Her research areas include academic achievement motivation, school satisfaction, life satisfaction,

positive youth development, problem behavior, school misbehavior, adolescent suicidal ideation and psychological health.

Dr. Sun is an executive committee member of the Society of Boys' Centres, and school management committee member of two schools in Hong Kong. She is a member of the editorial board of Research on Social Work Practice.