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Sustaining positive classroom culture through teacher development

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Sustaining positive classroom culture through teacher development

Enobong Imaha, Nigeria

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School context

Pegasus School is a vibrant school in southern Nigeria that strives for excellence. It has a culture of equality, diversity and inclusion, and operates the British and Nigerian curricula. Pegasus was established in 1994 with the vision of servicing the educational needs of the children of Mobil workers. Initially called Mobil Pegasus Primary School, it added a high school in 2007 and has recently built boarding facilities. This has enabled more students who reside outside the state to seek enrolment. It currently has 526 students. English is the primary language of instruction. Technology plays a major role as it was one of the few schools in Nigeria able to operate online during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has a Board of Trustees and Heads overseeing the different schools. Pegasus has benefited from British Council teacher support and student competitions. To improve the school ranking, Pegasus had a virtual inspection by the Council of British International Schools committee in February 2024. It received COBIS accreditation in May 2024.

About the author

Enobong Imaha is an English teacher who has taught for over two decades in both primary and high school. She rose to the level of a vice-principal at Frankfurt High School, Eket, Nigeria before her employment with Pegasus Schools in 2007. In her job, she wears many hats as she is the Activities Coordinator, the Head of the Girl Guides Club, and the facilitator for the 'Leader in Me' project. Enobong holds a master's degree in leadership of education from Liverpool John Moores University, United Kingdom. She enjoys moulding children and has led several initiatives aimed at promoting the voices of the girls and women in general. She authored her first book, *NENE*, in 2022.



Key learnings

This research explored new strategies to sustain a positive class culture.

- **Class culture included courtesy, morals, respect and decorum.**
- **Deviation from class culture is influenced by a lack of parental involvement, along with influence from the media, community and friends.**
- **Teachers observed deviation despite utilising open communication.**
- **Class culture deviation can occur when students do not understand the rules.**
- **Teachers agreed that targeted CPD helped create synergy with the students and assisted in managing classroom behaviour.**
- **The involvement of students in setting class rules also helped.**



Action research rationale

A move towards embracing 21st-century teaching and learning practices has led to more students speaking up, questioning rules, duties, authority, and the relevance of certain instructions of learning. These issues raised concerns amongst educators who found it hard to manage students' attitudes regarding adherence to traditional class rules and expectations.

My topic for action research was chosen after interviewing teachers and students on improving learning and behaviour. The periodic professional development modules designed for school improvement did not satisfy the needs of most teachers in this regard.

As such, teachers needed new strategies to sustain a positive class environment to meet the learning objectives. This is where targeted and sustainable continuous professional development (CPD) became a tool to aid educators. Fifteen teachers who instructed the 39 students in Grade 4 were chosen to make up the sample group.

This action research explored ways to sustain a positive class culture and how teacher development helped in achieving this objective. The premise is that by investing in targeted and sustainable CPD for educators, schools can empower teachers with the knowledge and skills required to create a learning environment that supports the learning process and conditions the students to be willing learners (Kostas & Ioannidou, 2023).

Exploratory research questions

1. According to teachers, why do students deviate from accepted class culture?
2. What do students think about these deviations?
3. What are the CPD needs of teachers to support a positive class culture?

Data collection procedure

The research adopted a mixed-method approach. The data collection tools were two focus groups, questionnaires and the researcher's self-reflection journal. Group 1 had six students aged between 8 and 9 years, chosen randomly but ensuring diversity in gender and character (an introvert and an extrovert). They were selected from the 39 students who made up Grade 4.

Focus group 2 had three teachers selected based on gender, tribe and years of experience. This allowed for a range of opinions, effective communication, and insight into teachers' views on the research topic. These three teachers were chosen from the original population of 15 teachers who taught Grade 4.

The questionnaires addressed the research questions while my self-reflection journal covered detailed observations before, during and after lessons showing both behaviour that aligned with, and deviated from, acceptable class culture.

Consent was sought from all participants. Parents of young participants consented before the students were allowed to take part. The customised forms were approved by the British Council and Pegasus Schools Management. The researcher verbally confirmed the students understood the research and were willing to participate. They were informed as to how their data would be used, stored, and protected as it is confidential, and all details would remain anonymous.

A pilot test was administered to selected teachers and students from Grade 5 to test the choice of tools and their effectiveness.

The premise is that by investing in targeted and sustainable CPD for educators, schools can empower teachers with the knowledge and skills required to create a learning environment that supports the learning process and conditions the students to be willing learners.



Figure 1: Students focus group

Key findings from exploration

RQ1: 78% of teachers stated that external factors such as lack of parental involvement, influence of the media, community and friends encouraged deviation from acceptable class culture.

RQ2: 90% of students felt uncomfortable when class rules were broken, and this affected learning.

- 67% found it hard to focus and follow rules.
- 48% wanted to be funny and different.
- 41% explained that rules were unfair, and they had no respect for their teachers.
- 18% did not know the rules.

RQ3: 99% of teachers explained that they often self-reflected over teaching practices and areas CPD can help improve class culture. Teachers strongly agreed to having received CPD related to classroom management and maintaining a positive class culture but would benefit from targeted CPD to better address deviation from class culture. They suggested international exchange programmes, helpful educational sites, behaviour management training, child psychology, non-conventional learning and effective 21st century methods which will help manage classroom behaviour.

Action plan

My action plan included:

- generating targeted professional training support for teachers
- encouraging collaboration by stakeholders
- school policy reform.

Action plan implementation

In 2024, Pegasus Schools had its 30th anniversary and, as part of its celebration and rebranding strategy, it pushed for accreditation from the Council of British International Schools (COBIS). In addition, Pegasus Schools received the British Council Action Research Grant of £2,500 in the 2023/24 session which helped in this work. Due to these developments, the research action implementation plans targeted professional development programmes for teachers. These programmes centred on classroom management, empathy, collaboration, enhancing 21st century skills and sustaining a positive school culture through webinars and onsite workshops.

Awareness of the action plan was enhanced by creating posters, an action research board at a central point in the school, and periodic meetings. These meetings were held with the student leadership team, face-to-face meetings with parents during Open Day events, and scheduled Zoom meetings between parents and the school management. These areas were discussed during solemn assemblies and every other general school meeting. In practice, new class rules and expectations were jointly set by teachers and students of every class. Weekly reviews in small groups were also encouraged.

Pegasus Schools added the students' voices to the bi-weekly 'Leader in Me meetings' (LIM). The LIM is a Lighthouse team working in partnership with the Steven Covey Foundation which teaches *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Representatives from the students' leadership team now join the live sessions via Google Meet. The Schools Now Conference of 2024 'Enriching your Curriculum' also led to the activation of the students' voices at a larger scale. School policies were reformed with the intention of sustaining positive class and school culture while enhancing concepts related to safeguarding, well-being, and encouraging student voices.

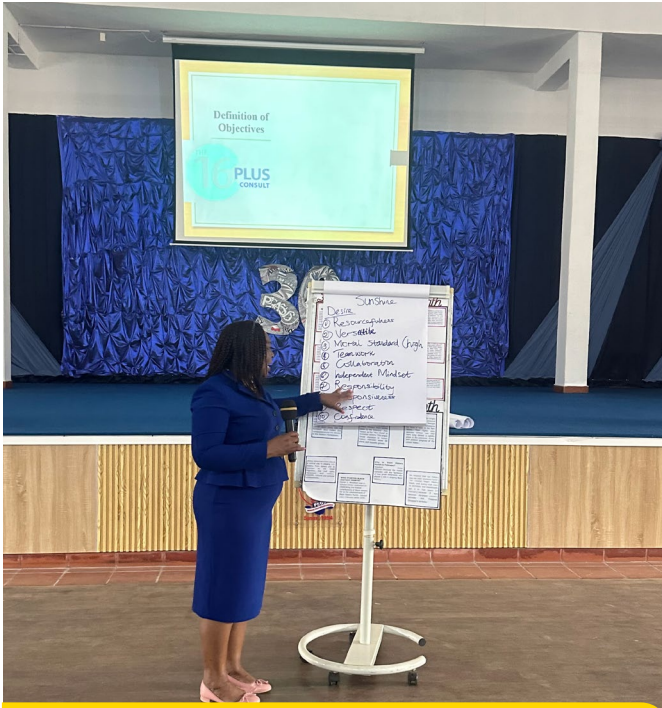


Figure 2: In-house training for teachers

Teachers significantly agreed that targeted CPD helped to create synergy with the students and assisted in managing classroom behaviour.

Data collection procedure

The action research procedure focused on in-house teacher training to enhance positive class culture. It applied a mixed-method approach with the data tools: a focus group, questionnaire and researcher's self-reflection journal. The focus group had five teachers from Grade 4 selected based on gender, tribe and years of experience. This allowed for a range of opinions and insight into teachers' views on the research topic.

The questionnaires addressed the action research questions which centred on teachers' satisfaction of the training and the schools' administration support.

Consent was sought from all participants verbally and in written form. The customised forms were approved by the British Council and Pegasus Schools Management. The researcher verbally confirmed that teachers understood the action research and were willing to participate. They were informed how their data would be used, stored and protected.

Key findings

The summary and analysis show that a significant number of teachers and students agree that deviation from class culture is influenced by a lack of parental involvement in the lives of their children, with influence from the media, community and friends. They agreed that class culture deviation can occur when the students do not understand the rules. Teachers observed deviation despite utilising open communication in the forms of wall posters, constant verbal reminders, and pointing them back to the expected behaviour. Class culture, to a significant number of teachers, included courtesies, morals, respect and decorum.

Teachers significantly agreed that targeted CPD helped to create synergy with the students and assisted in managing classroom behaviour. The involvement of students in setting class rules also helped. In the latest development, Maths teachers collaborated with selected students, their parents, and the school management to attain first position in the Mathematics All Stars competition on 14 March 2024.

They involved the parents by creating a social media page where parents were informed, which made them intentional and supportive towards their children to continue in the 13-day marathon Maths competition thus helping Pegasus Schools become the global champion for 2024.





The act of intentionally listening to students made them take ownership of their learning and classroom environment.

Conclusion

My action research work provided educators with a new perspective on how to view classroom behaviour, and shows that students know what they want. The act of intentionally listening to students made them take ownership of their learning and classroom environment.

Parents and all stakeholders should be informed of the effect of their actions and inactions as these affect their children's output in class. Understanding the influence of external factors will help build systems that will support a positive class culture. This work demonstrated an improvement in the teachers' outlook on their students' behaviour, an ability to create synergy and empathy in the classroom, and an improvement in character moulding and learning outcomes especially as they felt the support of the school leaders.

These strategies will benefit educators trying to find a balance in similar settings. It is expected that with consistency, more outstanding outcomes will be achieved. This is because it takes time and being intentional to achieve a positive and sustainable class culture. For sustainability of the process, periodic reviews of school policies, reward systems, and an expression of empathy towards the students should be enforced.

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