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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### MANAGING LEARNERS' BEHAVIOUR: A CALL ON TEACHERS' USE OF POSITIVE MODIFICATION STRATEGIES

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#### Abstract

This study explored into teachers' use of positive modification approaches in managing learners' classroom behaviour. This was a descriptive survey design (qualitative) that employed a 5-point Likert-type scale for data collection. Respondents comprised of 327 public Junior High School teachers in the Western North region. A multi-stage sampling procedure was used for the selection of samples. Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Data from the study showed that majority of teachers had inadequate knowledge on using positive modification strategies in managing learners' behaviour. Tangible strategies such as earning of incentives like toffee and rewards emerged as the most frequently used behaviour modification strategies in managing the classroom. The study also found no significant gender difference with regard to the use of positive modification strategies in classroom management. The study further established that behaviour modification techniques positively influences the learning environment as well as the learner. It was recommended that teachers unions in collaboration with Ghana Education Service should organize sensitisation programs through educational fora and symposiums to encourage teachers embrace positive modification strategies as classroom management tools. Also, intermittent refresher courses ought to be organized to help educators update their knowledge on the use of positive modification strategies in managing learners' behaviour. This possibly will aid them to effectively manage learners' behaviour in the classroom.

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#### Introduction:-

One of the utmost concerns of every teacher is to maintain order in the classroom by ensuring that learners are well-mannered. Classroom discipline has remained very challenging in education currently and an utmost difficult duty that teachers have to pact with (Yeboah, Nyarko-Sampson, & Forde, 2020). Managing challenging behaviour among learners in the classroom can be discouraging, hitherto a critical task for teachers. In most educational settings, teachers understand challenging behaviours as anything that interrupts students' learning or safety and that of the school authorities. When learners display disruptive behaviours, the learning environment becomes compromised and the potential for academic success declines.

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Managing learners' behaviour goes hand-in-hand with student discipline. The teacher's ability to establish a good relationship and to generate appropriate behaviour management strategy is highly dependent on their understanding of students' beliefs and wants. Behaviour modification principles have been useful in numerous classrooms to target series of suitable behaviours such as compliance and self-management in the academic setting. Nonetheless, Allen and Bowles (2014) indicates that the application of positive modification strategies in the classroom is insignificant.

In an attempt to compensate their skill deficit, teachers tend to resort to retributive and coercive practices that seem to aggravate students' misbehaviour. For instance, punishments that are aversive and harsh in nature severely affect the self-worth of a child, as it not merely wreaks bodily pain but also causes mental pestering, and feeling of worthlessness. Craving to escape punishment may also cause students to drop out of school and to develop other personality challenges. In view of this, the Ghana government via the Education Ministry and Ghana Education Service (GES) in 2019, officially issued a letter to prohibit the use of abusive punishment in schools and while recommending the use of corrective measures such as removal from leadership positions, writing of lines, changing of seating position, assignment of extra task among others in modifying learners' behaviour. This effort was to promote a safe and protective learning environment in Ghanaian schools. Adding to this, Dr. Afisah Zachariah (Chief Director, Ministry of Health) on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June, 2019 during Peace Fm (a local radio station) evening (6pm) news encouraged the use of different types of behaviour modification measures like prompting, negative reinforcement and shaping in an attempt to correct children when they go wrong. She urged guardians, parents and educators to avoid aversive punishment in modifying children's behaviour both at home and in the school because most pupils tend to dropout as a result of canning and the use of other forms of harsh punishment.

There has been an unending argument in the public space concerning acceptable ways in managing learner's behaviour in the classroom. The classroom has been a place where teachers favour positive punishment such as canning over others. Most educators seem to have difficulty maintaining discipline within the educational setting in response to the introduction of new educational policies that regulated discipline in schools due to skill deficit in using appropriate modification strategies in the classroom. This makes it obvious that most teachers in public schools in Ghana have some discrepancies regarding the use of positive modification strategies in managing learners' classroom behaviour. Some studies have explored how gender have impacted the perception of teachers on disruptive behaviours and discipline strategies (Shin & Koh, 2007; Hodzic, 2011). Conversely, few of these studies have examined how gender could influence teachers' use of behaviour modification strategies in managing learners' behaviour in the classroom. The inconsistencies in findings reported in literature regarding teachers' gender and use of positive modification strategies in classroom management cannot be overlooked. Therefore, this study becomes relevant to find out which of these strategies teachers are knowledgeable about and commonly utilize to manage students' behaviour in modern classrooms and to examine if significant gender variations exist in behaviour modification strategy usage in managing learner's behaviour. The study is also aimed to determine whether positive modification strategies could influence classroom management. The study was guided by these research questions and hypothesis: What positive modification strategies do teachers often use in managing learners' behaviour in the classroom? How do behaviour modification strategies influence classroom management? There is no significant gender difference in the use of positive modification strategies in managing learners' behaviour in the classroom.

### **Teacher use of positive modification strategies in classroom management**

For many years, teachers have used punitive measures in handling disciplinary issues in the classroom (Lovett, 2010). But with increased numbers of problem behaviours in the educational setting, there has been a trend in education where positive response is expected to be employed for proactive outcomes. According to Feurborn et al (2013), most teachers still argue for stricter disciplinary measures rather than providing instructional support particularly with regard to learners with emotive and behaviour problems. For instance, Shin and Koh' (2008) in a study examined the strategies employed by 116 American and 167 Korean public high school teachers to manage student disruption. Results revealed significant differences in approach with 55% of American teachers employing time-out/punishment and 33% utilising positive interventions. Teachers have reported using a varied strategy to manage students' disruptive behaviours in the classroom. But preventive and collaborative strategies have been consistently identified by scholar as useful means of managing learners' disruptive behaviours (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hydes, 2005).

To some extent, behaviour is seemed to be triggered by expectation of reinforcing consequences. These reinforcements may perhaps stimulate teachers to promote effective teaching techniques to boost learners' engagement in school activities hence sustaining their interest in schooling. Bolu-steve and Esere (2017) carried out a

study in relation to the personal and social transition of high-school teenagers with 120 students from 6 high schools in Ibadan. They found that, positive modification strategies were the primary methods used by school counsellors to support adolescents with behavioural challenges. Content analysis of literature also brings to bear diverse strategies with the most effective being positive behaviour modification strategies such as the use of incentives, praise, and modelling, and the least effective being the use of threats and warnings (Reupert, & Woodcock, 2010). These positive strategies could enhance teachers' ability to manage students' behaviour and to build classroom environments where positive interactions become the norm and hostility minimized.

Laboratory experiments have shown that punishment is efficient in decreasing a specific behaviour, however, it has disadvantages specifically when used in the classroom since it may elicit anger, aggression and other negative emotional responses (Pritchard, 2009). Adding to this, Flower, McKenna and Haring (2017) specified that raising of voice to get students on-task and threatening students with punishment have proven to be ineffective and causes so much tension and resentment among students in the classroom hence jeopardising other classroom management effort. Even though most teachers advocate for punishment like writing lines, shouting out the name of student as warning and giving verbal directives to end the inappropriate behaviour of students in the classroom (Brooks, 2012), studies on methods for the control of destructive behaviour of students carried out by Wolde (2014) found that destructive habits could be coped with techniques like painful ignorance, overcorrection and boosting of the student's interest, instead of punishment.

Teachers often use praise-related comments to diversify teaching methods and acknowledge student achievement. Verbal praise, informative feedback and attention provide students with some form of satisfaction in relation to their progress in academia (Hardin, 2012). Relevant verbal input from teachers is a valuable tool for encouraging student's achievement and effective tool for modifying learners' behaviour (Long & Maynard, 2014). When sincerely done, teacher praise and positive reinforcement is more likely to inspire and improves students' self-esteem, reinforce rules and encourages students to repeat pleasant behaviours.

A study by O'Connor, Dearing and Collins (2011) revealed that, the predominant positive modification strategies teachers used includes praise and incentives such as food, special privileges like no homework and free time-out among others. Johansen, Little, and Akin-Little (2011) also indicates that the using incentives to reduce off-task behaviour and to encourage a healthy learning environment has been proven to be effective among middle school pupils. Wagner and Riener (2014) carried out a study in 25 high schools in North Rhine-Westphalia to assess the effect of social incentives on students' test score. The study found that the interest and concentration of students was on the classes that prepared them for a high level of testing, which improved student school success, using social incentives. Most teachers tend to use praise statements as a form of incentive to demonstrate their acceptance or approval of students' action. According to Rydell and Henricsson (2004), praise statement such as "good job" or "nice work" help develop self-confidence and inspires students to carry on with their hard work in order to be recognized. For this reason, it appears to be the most widely studied social incentive used in managing the classroom (Jenkins et al., 2015). In their opinion, teacher praise is inexpensive, hitherto a powerful strategy in managing learners' behaviour. Khalil and Mohammed (2015) highlights the importance of positive reinforcement in classroom management, as students often seek recognition and respond well to praise. However, when over used and over relied on, verbal praise may become ineffective and unhelpful suggesting that students should not be habituated to earning praise and rewards from teachers at all time because the reinforcer becomes less effective if students become soaked with the reinforcement (Fefer et al., 2016). The selective use of teacher attention could also be an effective strategy for developing and sustaining suitable classroom behaviour (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). A study conducted by MacLean and Giesbrecht (2015) found that after teachers had changed their pattern of attention, 25% less time was spent attending to disruptive behaviours in the classroom than they had initially. Itthipuripat et al (2017) reiterates that systematically giving attention to children with problem behaviour in the classroom resulted in better behaviour among other students and improved relations between the children with problem and their peers.

### **Influence of Positive Modification Strategies on classroom Management**

To attain academic success and conducive learning environment, it is indispensable for schools to establish appropriate discipline approaches such as dialogue, behaviour shaping, reinforcement and behaviour contracting among others. Ekennia (2015) posit that positive modification strategies such as teacher praise, teacher feedback, and shaping are powerful techniques that could be used to bring about a desirable behaviour in addition to promoting an auspicious learning environment in schools. In addition, the National Association of School Psychologists indicates that positive practices of discipline increase appropriate behaviours among learners. A study by Reynolds, Mackay

and Kearney (2009) showed a significant positive impact of teacher encouragement on learner's academic attainment. Haapenen (2014) indicates that a schoolroom where learners are stimulated and attended to provides learners the opportunity to express themselves and also stimulate them to put a more desirable behaviour. To him, such classroom is and also aimed at effectively addressing learners needs as well as preventing exclusion. Undoubtedly, a positively functioning and effective classrooms teaching, with little disruptions requires planning and consistency in the use of the appropriate modification strategies employed by the teacher (Coles et al., 2015). The use of constructive modifications in the learning environment decreases unwelcome behaviours since positive practices of discipline focus on increasing appropriate behaviours. The researcher further reiterates that positive reinforcement such as praise and reward can have significant influence in managing the classroom and effectively change student behaviour. It is therefore argued that most harsh positive punishment does little in changing undesirable behaviours of students to desirable ones but rather bring about hostility in the lives of affected students (Mwai, Kimengi, & Kipsoi, 2014).

#### **Gender and use of behaviour modification strategies in managing learners' behaviour in the classroom.**

The aspects of classroom management could differ as a function of the teachers' gender. Granting the fact that there are series of research that cogitate how teachers vary in managing their learners, a small number of them put into consideration the gender of the teacher in interactions (Jalali, Panahzade, & Firouzmand, 2014). However, studies give indication that there is still a connection between teacher's gender and the use of positive modification strategies in managing learners, behaviour. The gender of teachers tends to influence the roles played by their students thus impacting their learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2005). Shin and Koh (2007) in their cross-cultural study among Korean teachers observed male teachers demonstrating more controlling instructional management strategies than their female counterparts. In a study on how classroom behaviour is managed, Brempong (2014) found that female teachers are more likely to encounter difficulties maintaining order in the classroom. According to Sharma, Malawade, and Shrikhande (2018), male teachers are reported to have difficulties using positive modification strategies in managing and controlling their classrooms. Female teachers on the other hand, appeared to use positive behaviour management practices as they have inordinate tolerance for students with behaviour challenges in their class (Sullivan et al., 2014). This may be due to the fact that females as mother are generally sympathetic towards children. Agreeing to this assertion Andreichyn (2015) found that children are better managed by women in the classroom because these management responsibilities commence during foetal development as they interact with the foetus in the uterus. Sak and Yerlikaya (2015) found a significant gender difference with regard to the use of behaviour modification strategies in classroom management. The findings of Aliakbari and Abdollahi (2014) suggest that male teachers tend to use punitive control, whereas female teachers favoured comment-based intervention such as giving warnings among others. Contrariwise, Rahimi and Hosseini (2012) found that female teachers mostly use punishment and aggression in managing their classroom compared to male teachers. These differing findings in literature brings to bare how important the sex of a teacher could influence their classroom management practices. Hence the need for this study to examine if there is a significant difference in gender with regards to the use of positive modification strategies in managing learners' behaviour in the classroom.

#### **Methods:-**

This study used descriptive survey design (quantitative approach) to explore teacher's use of positive modification strategies in managing learners' classroom behaviour. The population for the study included all public Junior High School (JHS) teachers in the Western-North Region of Ghana. The sample size for the study was 327 teachers in the aforementioned region. Respondents for the study were selected through a multistage approach, where simple random procedure (lottery method), systematic, cluster sampling, and proportionate-stratified sampling were used. Data for the selected using an adapted Behaviour Modification (ABM) scale developed by Musgrove (1974). The instrument was a unidimensional Likert type scale with 20-items ( $\alpha = .94$ ) weighted on a numerical scale of 1 to 5 with the highest value indicating a strong support for the statement. Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical based on objectives of the study. Specifically, means and standard deviation were used to address the most frequent modification strategies used by teachers in managing learners' classroom behaviour while Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was employed to establish whether there is a significant gender difference in the use of positive modification strategies. And also, to determine whether positive modification strategies could influence classroom management.

#### **Result and Discussions:-**

This section presents the findings of the study.

Fifteen (15) items distributed among four factor components on the behaviour modification scale were used and computed using means and standard deviations in responding to research question one which sought to find out what positive modification strategies teachers used in managing learners' behaviour in the classroom. The item with the highest composite mean values indicates the modification strategies often used by public JHS teachers in managing learners' behaviour in the Western-North Region of Ghana. The study found tangible modification strategies ( $M=18.77$ ,  $SD=3.84$ ) as often used by teachers in managing learners' behaviour in the classroom (See Table 1). This confirmed the findings of Haydon and Musti-Rao (2011) citing the use of incentives as the most frequent and important forms of positive behaviour strategies employed by educators in managing learners' behaviour. More so, the findings of Madjar and Cohen-Malayey (2016) that incentives such as food, and special privileges are the most frequent behaviour modification strategies used by teachers in the classroom was supported.

Result of the study possibly could mean that the giving of rewards and incentives to learners appears to be among the few positive modification strategies teachers in public Junior High schools within the Western-North region are conversant with, hence its frequent usage in managing learner's behaviour in the classroom. It may also be probably be due to their inexpensive nature and easy use. Agreeing with Postholm (2013), giving of incentives could be satisfying to students and affects the quality of their behaviour. But then students should not be inured to earning of incentives and rewards from teachers at all times since the reinforcer becomes ineffective if students become soaked with it (Fefer et al., 2016).

**Table 1:-** What positive modification strategies do teachers often use in managing learners behaviour in the classroom?

PMS	Mean	Std. D
Intangible strategies	8.85	1.66
Tangible strategies	18.77*	3.84
Behaviour Contract	13.55	1.51
Punitive strategies	6.12	1.30

Source: Field survey (2021)

(N=327)

\* Denotes highest mean value

To explore the influence of behaviour modification strategies on classroom management the multivariate multiple regression (MMR) was used. Preliminary analysis of assumptions revealed satisfactory levels of normality, linearity, homogeneity of co-variance matrices and multicollinearity. The Pillai's Trace was examined to check for the possible influences among the variables using the Bonferroni adjustment of .02.

From Table 2, no significant influence was found when the omnibus hypothesis was tested, thus  $F(3, 320) = 1.205$ ,  $p > .000$ ; Pillai's Trace = .029, partial eta squared = .011. However, there was the need to further examine individual variable to find out whether any of the variable influenced the other. With behaviour management as a dependent variable,  $R^2 = .049$ ,  $F = 6.379$ ,  $p < .02$ . This shows that 49% use of tangible modification strategies explained the variance in behaviour management. Pertaining to individual predictions, positive modification strategy (Beta = .134) predicted high in behaviour management. This means that teachers' use of tangible modification strategies such as incentive, token systems and reward among others influenced the way teachers managed learners' behaviour in the classroom. This confirmed the findings of Jones (2023) that the implementation of positive behaviour strategies such as praise and reward results in a substantial decline in disruptive behaviour and a significant upsurge in academic performance and engagement. It is believed that, a positive change in behaviour could occur when behaviour modification strategies are used appropriately and efficiently by the teacher in the classroom. However, if not appropriately used, its resultant change might be insignificant.

**Table 2:-** Multivariate Multiple Regression (MMR) results for the influence of Behaviour Modification Strategies on Classroom Management.

DV	Parameters	B	S. E	T	Sig.	PES	F	P
People Mgt.	Intercept	14.083	1.331	10.582	.000	.258	111.969	.000
	Intangible	.052	.031	1.647	.100	.008	59.669	.000
	Tangible	.146	.077	1.895	.059	.011	93.705	.000
	Behaviour	.074	.084	.882	.379	.002	2.713	.100

	contract							
	Punitive	.035	.093	.373	.710	.000	1.607	.206
Behaviour Mgt.	Intercept	7.103	.920	7.725	.000	.156	.894	.345
	Intangible	.027	.022	1.268	.206	.005	3.590	.059
	Tangible	.134	.053	2.526	.010*	.019	6.379	.012
	Behaviour contract	.099	.058	1.690	.092	.009	.258	.612
	Punitive	-.077	.064	-1.199	.231	.004	.777	.379
Inst. Mgt.	Intercept	13.627	1.408	9.680	.000	.225	2.857	.092
	Intangible	.031	.033	.946	.345	.003	9.381	.002
	Tangible	.041	.081	.508	.612	.001	.139	.710
	Behaviour Contract	.274	.089	3.063	.002*	.028	1.438	.231
	Punitive	.074	.099	.753	.452	.002	.567	.452

Source: Field Survey (2021)

Significant at .02

a. R Squared = .030 (Adjusted R Squared = .018)

b. R Squared = .049 (Adjusted R Squared = .037)

c. R Squared = .042 (Adjusted R Squared = .030)

\* Denotes significant values

Another objective of this study was to determine if there is significant gender difference in the use of positive modification strategies in managing learners' behaviour in the classroom. Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used because positive modification strategies had four level against gender with two levels (male and female). All necessary assumptions were verified and met before running the MANOVA analysis.

The analysis revealed nostatistically significant gender differencesin the utilisation of positive modification strategies among teachers in managing learners' behaviour. Thus, Pillai's Trace result in Table 2 indicatedno significant difference between male and female teachers in the use of behaviour modification strategies. Thus,  $F(4, 322) = .603, p=.660$ ; Pillai's Trace =.007, partial eta squared ( $\eta^2$ ) =.007. This implies both male and female teachers do not differ in the use of positive modification strategies in managing learners' behaviour in the classroom. As a result, the assertions by Sullivan, Johnson, Owens, and Conway (2014) that female teachers are attestedto use positive modificationstrategies becausethey have inordinate tolerance for students with behaviouralchallenges was rebutted.The study also refuted the findings of Andreichyn (2015) that children are better managed by women in the classroom because these management roles starts from conception as mothers interact with the foetus in the uterus.

**Table 3:-** Multivariate test result on gender and use of positive modification Strategies.

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Intercept	Pillai's Trace	.990	8093.216 <sup>b</sup>	4.000	322.00	.000	.990
	Wilks' Lambda	.010	8093.216 <sup>b</sup>	4.000	322.00	.000	.990
	Hotelling's Trace	100.537	8093.216 <sup>b</sup>	4.000	322.00	.000	.990
	Roy's Largest Root	100.537	8093.216 <sup>b</sup>	4.000	322.00	.000	.990
Gender	Pillai's Trace	.007	.603 <sup>b</sup>	4.000	322.00	.660	.007
	Wilks' Lambda	.993	.603 <sup>b</sup>	4.000	322.00	.660	.007
	Hotelling's Trace	.007	.603 <sup>b</sup>	4.000	322.00	.660	.007
	Roy's Largest Root	.007	.603 <sup>b</sup>	4.000	322.00	.660	.007

Source: Field Survey (2021)

### Conclusion and Recommendation:-

Considering that the appropriate usage of positivemodification strategies in the classroom and the school in general could aid teachers to manage students' conduct and reduce hostility among learners, the findings of this studies point that when teachers are adequately knowledgeable in the use of these strategies, they will develop a positive attitude towards them and find its usage less stressful in managing learners behaviour in the classroom. The use of behaviour modification strategies is believed to promote a positive classroom environment and could help learners to learn how to cope with their academic environment, reduces resentment among learners and improves over all classroom conditions. Teachers should consider the frequent use of behaviour modification strategies such as verbal and material rewards as well as behaviour contract in managing the classroom. This would help yield more positive outcomes in the teaching and learning process than aversive punishment.

Bearing in mind the enormous significance of behaviour modification strategies in effective teaching and learning, teachers' updated knowledge level may perhaps increase their desire to implement the modification strategies in managing the classroom. This will abetreduce the use of the old repressing discipline techniques in managing students' disruptive behaviours hence, making the classroom environment less hostile. It is therefore recommended that as part of teacher professional development sessions, teachers should be reoriented by behaviour modification experts or Ghana Education Service directorates to use more of positive modification techniquesas classroom management tools. Once adequate knowledge is attained, teachers will find themselves in a better position to use the modification strategies as classroom management tools with little or no stress.

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### Ethical issue:

Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. Participation was completely voluntary.

### Conflict of interest:

"The author declares no conflict of interest." "No funders had any role in the design of the study; in the data collection, analysis, or interpretation of data; neither in the writing of the manuscript, nor in the decision to publish the results."

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