

The Importance of Being Punctual

Hazelman Norhafis, Changkat Changi Secondary School

Discipline. For many, the word is synonymous with punishment. Mr Hazelman Norhafis explains why discipline in schools today means so much more, and how simply showing up on time for school can help students do better.

“Eighty percent of success in life is showing up”

Woody Allen

I echo that, as to me, being present and on time mean half the battle won. That is why I’m known as “Mr Punctuality” in school.

Late-coming is an issue I have been focusing my energies on for the past three years. Why focus on late-coming? I strongly believe that students must begin the day right by showing up for school on time. This will set the tone for learning for the rest of the day.

Late-coming is also usually symptomatic of more serious underlying issues, such as a lack of self-confidence. Being punctual signals that a student can be depended on to fulfil the basic task of being on time for school. Accomplishing small successes like these will allow students to gain greater self-confidence and be in better control of their education journey and ultimately, life.

When I started out as a teacher, I faced many of these issues head on. I vividly remember the first lesson I taught as a teacher. It was a Chemistry lesson with my form class in July 2010. As I walked into the class, a student walked out. I asked him where he was going and he responded with cold silence. I was invisible.

It took many lessons before the student decided that my lessons were worth attending. My mantra for teaching was that I would repeat a point a hundred times if that was what it took for my students to understand the lesson. By year end, I was getting the hang of things. It was not easy but I felt I was making a difference. However, I was deeply troubled when I discovered that a student from my form class held the record for the highest number of late-coming offences that year. I was dismayed that a simple issue like late-coming could potentially hold my student back from accomplishing more in school.

In 2011, I became the form teacher of a Normal (Technical) class. It was a constant struggle and at times, I felt helpless. I did everything I could possibly think of but I could not help every student as much as I wanted to. I knocked on the doors of those who were frequently absent, I called employers or turned up at workplaces to see if I could convince them to come to school, and I even drove to a student’s house to wake him for his ‘N’ levels examination. Nonetheless, my students were frequently

late. When the school bell rang for the first period, out of a class of 40, at least 8-10 would be missing, or would stroll in casually after 7.45am.

Time to take action

The problem was not restricted to my class. It was a school-wide issue. The late-coming situation in 2011 and 2012 was appalling. There were, on average, around 70 latecomers daily. On certain days, the number of latecomers could exceed 100 and we had a problem fitting them within the foyer area. I felt that I had to do something about this.

Hence, by mid-2011, I volunteered to be in the Discipline Committee (DC).

As a member of the DC, I decided to tackle the late-coming issue as this was something I was passionate about, and an area in which I believed I could make the most difference. The challenge was to gain support.

I formulated a plan to help address the late-coming issue with input from various stakeholders. My plan for Detention After School (DAS) was approved in December 2012, with the understanding that I would be in charge.

My plan was straightforward in theory and I shared it with the staff and, thereafter, I spent the first week of 2013 educating students on what constituted late-coming and its consequences. I was at the foyer every morning to remind students who were late on the late-coming procedure, and emphasise the values of responsibility, resilience, respect and integrity. I shared that punctuality showed a strong sense of responsibility and it took great resilience to be punctual every single day. I worked on instilling in students the value of respecting themselves so that they were with the rest of the school when expected, and to respect the school by abiding with the school reporting time. Students who were late three or more times would serve DAS, and coming for DAS without being chased to do so showed integrity.

Discipline goes beyond punishment

I had to be flexible, yet fair. I had students who lived as far as Woodlands and even Johor who naturally found it difficult to be punctual all the time. One girl had to wake up at 3am every morning to help her mother prepare nasi lemak before delivering the food to coffee shops. That was how the family made a living. She was only able to prepare for school after her deliveries, so she would often be late. Punishing such students with DAS every time they were late would be wrong and show a lack of empathy. I spent time to understand the situation of every student in order to exercise sound judgement.

With the whole school working in unity, the programme took off. The parents were supportive once they understood how the programme was run, with counselling to improve self-confidence and self-esteem by the school counsellor and supervision by a teacher as the students complete their homework or do their revision.

It took a while, but...

After a few months, the number of latecomers began to fall. From an average of 70 latecomers per day in 2012, to around 40 latecomers per day in 2013, and 30 latecomers per day in 2014. The number is even lower now between 10 to 20 latecomers per day. There was a reduction of late-coming offences by 71% from 2012 to 2014. Success tasted so sweet to me as it came with a great deal of hard work, challenges and most importantly, teamwork.

Handling the late-coming issue gave me an insight into the deeper problems students were facing. Most students who were habitual latecomers had issues with self-esteem and self-confidence. They did not see themselves as capable of improving. My aim with the structured group counselling was to help students realise that they could take control of their lives and improve their self-mastery.

Being punctual provides students with a small taste of success by giving them a sense of accomplishment, which leads to more success. An example is Andy*, a Secondary Two boy in 2013. He was often late and would first blame his father for preparing breakfast late before blaming the public transport system. It took my team some time to educate Andy that blaming everyone else was not going to solve his late-coming problem. Once he realised that he must be responsible for his life, he changed and became punctual. He was so proud of his achievement that he would make it a point to smile at us as he entered school and remind us that he was early. Andy is graduating this year. The resilience he has developed by being punctual is helping him cope with current examination stress. In short, being punctual creates a success loop.

What I did not anticipate was how powerful that success loop was, even for the teachers. The discipline tone of the school improved and the DC was awarded an Outstanding Contribution Award in 2013.

Late-coming may seem trivial to some students. What difference does five minutes make? If a student is five minutes late three times a week, this equates to nine hours of education missed in a year**, which means 36 or 45 hours of missed learning opportunities over a four-year or five-year secondary school lifetime. By arriving punctually for school, students place themselves in better positions to make the most of their time in school.

**Actual name has been changed.*

***Based on a 36-week school year*