

# A RESEARCH STUDY OF STUDENT TEACHERS IMPLEMENTING CLASSROOM ENCOURAGEMENT

Chi-Sing Li<sup>1\*</sup>, Yu-Fen Lin<sup>2</sup>, Yung-Lien Lai<sup>3</sup>, Prof. Daniel Eckstein<sup>4</sup>, Bill Mullener<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor of the Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling at Sam Houston State University

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor of the department of Counseling and Human Services in University of North

<sup>3</sup>Student of College of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University (USA)

<sup>4</sup>Professor of Medical Psychology, Saba University, School of Medicine, Saba (THE NETHERLANDS)

<sup>5</sup>Substance Abuse Program Manager for Tri-County MHMR in Conroe (USA)

Corresponding author: chisingli@shsu.edu

## 1. STUDENT TEACHERS IMPLEMENTING ENCOURAGEMENT IN THEIR CLASSROOMS

Encouragement is a process whereby one focuses on an individual's resources in order to build that person's self-esteem, self-confidence and feelings of worth. Encouragement involves focusing on any resource that can be turned into an asset or strength. Dreikurs (1981) said that humans need encouragement like a plant needs water. He believed that every person with whom one comes in contact feels better or worse depending upon how others behave toward him or her.

Carl Rogers, the founder of non-directive therapy, writes in *Personal Power* (1977) that as a child he loved stories of Native Americans who could guide noiselessly and undetected through the forest. He then described his own optimistic, person-centered philosophy as *quiet power*. The authors of this article contend that encouragement is a subtle example of such quiet power. The value of encouragement is often taken for granted or missed completely because it tends to be private, not public. And although there are identifiable words and behaviors correlated with encouragement, in many ways it is best manifested by an attitude that non-verbally communicates caring and compassion.

To encourage requires a subtle shift of focus in a world in which people are too often bombarded with shortcomings or the deficiencies of their birth, their parents, their culture, their organization and, of course, themselves. Encouraging individuals have the ability to perceive a spark of divinity in others and then to act as a mirror that reflects that goodness back to them. Successful encouragement is a felt emotional experience that translates into cognitive decisions. The paradoxical profound simplicity of encouragement is that it is an attitude that inspires and empowers. To encourage others is to realize that, although there truly is a dark side and a light side to each person, ultimately it is one's own perception of a glass half-full versus half-empty that makes a profound difference in one's approach to life's challenges (Eckstein, as cited in Eckstein & Cooke, 2005). To be in the presence of what has indeed been the darkness, while nonetheless seeing the potential lightness or goodness within all things, is a characteristic of encouraging individuals. Carl Rogers (1977) described the human potential as an "actualizing tendency" (p. 7), the desire within human beings to be *more*.

Too often teachers are guilty of what Sid Simon (1974), a values clarification expert, called red-pencil mentality. By this he meant that teachers often think that identifying the mistakes by learners is the primary purpose of both on-line and research-related interventions. The contemporary positive psychology movement is based on the classic work of Alfred Adler who stressed the need to build on strengths and not on weaknesses. "Catch someone doing something right" has been noted by one-minute manager guru Ken Blanchard (2000).

Dinkmeyer and Eckstein (1996) also define encouragement as a process that focuses on the individual's resources and potential in order to enhance self-esteem and self-acceptance. Discouragement is based on a lack of belief in one's own abilities to find solutions and to make positive movement. Encouragement is strongly correlated with an optimistic philosophy of life, whereas discouragement is too often synonymous with pessimism (p. 7). Dinkmeyer and Eckstein also summarize their *Leadership by Encouragement* philosophy as follows:

Successful encouragement is an emotional experience that translates into cognitive decisions. To encourage is to realize that although there are negative and positive emotions, ultimately it is one's own perception that makes a profound difference in one's view of, response to, and approach to life. Encouragement is one of the practical building blocks that can help bridge the gap between our potential and our self-imposed limitations (p. 216).

To encourage is to unite such dualities as labor/management, male/female, Democrat/Republican, conservative/socialist, black/white. Encouraging people have, to use a metaphor from the game of pool (or snooker), a cue ball personality -- making things happen in contrast with an eight ball personality of sitting passively on the table waiting to be knocked around. Encouragers are trendsetters who help translate dreams into reality.

Some of our most powerfully encouraging role models have been such notable spiritual teachers as Jesus Christ in the West and the Buddha in the East. The greatest leaders are the ones who truly inspire us to seek the *more* dimensions of life, the ones who help us to remember our dreams, the ones who touch our hearts with a phenomenal ability to see beauty in all things. They inspire us to new heights because of their ability to assist us in seeking and ultimately believing that we will indeed find our own personal heaven (Eckstein & Cooke, 2005).

The authors presented the following three encouragement activities for approximately 300 student teachers at their university. The purpose of the present article is to summarize quantitative research gathered at the end of the presentations. The article starts with a brief overview of salient writings on encouragement;

educational applications of encouragement are then introduced. This is followed by charts summarizing the questionnaires that were completed by student teachers at the end of the presentation.

A complete description of the actual content of the workshop itself can be found in *An Encouragement Micro-Lab* (Cooke & Eckstein, 2009). Basically, the workshop consists of the following three specific encouragement activities. The first is a general sharing of who encouraged them and how. The second focus includes what the authors call "the four directions on encouragement, namely downward, lateral, upward and inward." The last section of the workshop includes seven methods of encouragement based on a factor analysis in which 1,000 research studies were analyzed (Eckstein & Cooke, 2005). The rank-order of the seven methods of encouragement included descriptions of a role model: they saw a special trait or characteristic, they encouraged me over the long haul, they saw me as special, they were there for me in dark times, they encouraged me even when it was different for their own wishes for me, and they helped me make a career choice.

## 2. PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURES

Participants were student teachers primarily in the last semester of their senior year who enrolled in a student teaching field course in the College of Education of a state university in Texas. Participants attended the encouragement workshop and were asked to rate encouraging behavior and/or attitudes of teachers with respect to the school environment in which they were completing their student teaching.

The survey was conducted in Spring, Summer and Fall semester of 2009 and 294 student teachers participated. Approximately 84.4% of subjects were female and 83.7% were age 29 or under. Considering racial make-up, 83.3% of the respondents were Caucasian, 9.5% were Hispanic, and 4.4% were African American. Approximately 92.5% of respondents were senior level students, and more than 55% of respondents reported their major discipline to be academic studies (29.6%) and education (26.5%). In terms of grade taught, approximately 68.7% of respondents reported the range of 1<sup>st</sup> -5<sup>th</sup> grade and 45.2 % reported the range of Pre K and K (Table 1).

## 3. INSTRUMENTS

The survey consisted of twenty-five questions that utilize a Likert scale format. Responses were of five types: 1) Not at all, 2) Seldom, 3) Sometimes, 4) Often, and 5) Very Often. The instrument used was an adapted version of the Teacher Encouragement Scale (TES) created by two of the authors. The twenty-five items were also summed together to form a scale of Encouragement that had a Cronbach's alpha of .970. In this TES scale, the loading value of each item was from .534 to .846 with Eigen value of 14.75 (see Appendix).

## 4. RESULTS

The overall mean of TES scale was 4.17 with standard deviation of 0.68, suggesting that this finding is corresponding to a response of Often. This was encouraging and could be interpreted as student teachers perceiving the teachers as often engaging in encouraging behaviors and having encouraging attitudes with their students (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for Sample (N=294)

Measure	Description	Frequency	%	Mean	SD
Gender	1=Male	46	15.6		
	2=Female	248	84.4		
Age	1=20-29Y	246	83.7		
	2=30-39Y	29	9.9		
	3=40-49Y	12	4.1		
	4=50-59Y	5	1.7		
	5=60 or above	2	0.7		
Ethnicity	1=Caucasian	245	83.3		
	2=African American	13	4.4		
	3=Hispanic American	28	9.5		
	4=Asian American	4	1.4		
	5=Others	4	1.4		
Classification	1=Freshman	0	0		
	2=Sophomore	0	0		
	3=Junior	0	0		
	4=Senior	272	92.5		
	5=Graduate	22	7.5		
Discipline	1=Academic studies	87	29.6		
	2=Education	78	26.5		
	3=English	30	10.2		
	4=Health	26	8.8		
	5=Math	24	8.2		
	6=Others	47	16.0		
Grade taught	1=Pre K-K	133	45.2		
	2=1 <sup>st</sup> - 5 <sup>th</sup>	202	68.7		
	3=6 <sup>th</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup>	129	43.9		
	4=9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup>	71	24.1		
	5=College	3	1.0		
	6=Others	3	1.0		
Encouragement	(Combined q1-q25)/25			4.17	0.68

## 5. ANALYSIS OF DIFFERENCE OF MEANS

This section addresses the differences of mean between any two groups (e.g. male and female) on dependent variables including each item and Encouragement. Table 2 presents the results of t-test comparing male and female teachers. Female teachers had higher means on items of "different learning style," "foster classroom team spirit," "convey confidence in students," and "appreciate the uniqueness of the individual learners" than did male teachers, suggesting that female teachers exhibit four additional significantly encouraging behaviors/attitudes toward their students in school environment than those of males (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Comparison of Mean Between the Different Groups By Gender

Dependent Variable	Gender		t-value; Sig.
	Male ( n=46 )	Female ( n=248 )	
9.Different learning style	3.87	4.18	-2.563*
11.Foster classroom team spirit	3.63	4.13	-3.141**
12.Convey confidence in students	3.98	4.31	-2.507*
16.Appreciate the uniqueness of the individual learners	3.93	4.19	-2.024*

Note : \*\*p < .01 ; \* p < .05.

Table 3 presents the results of the t-test comparing junior teachers (20-29Y) and senior teachers (30Y or above). On average, junior teachers had higher means on those items of "Foster classroom team spirit," "Demonstrate empathy with students' feelings," "Enthusiasm for concerns of students," "Recognize the value of differences between students," and "Appear more authoritative than authoritarian" than those of senior teachers. These results indicate that junior teachers had more motivation to foster team spirit, demonstrated empathy, expressed concerns of students, recognized the differences between students, and appeared more authoritative attitudes toward students than did senior teachers (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Comparison of Mean Between the Different Groups By Age

Dependent Variable	Age		t-value; Sig.
	20-29 ( n=245 )	30 or above ( n=47 )	
11.Foster classroom team spirit	4.10	3.77	2.129*
13.Demonstrate empathy with students' feelings	4.17	3.81	2.579*
14.Enthusiasm for concerns of students	4.31	3.89	3.066**
15.Recognize the value of differences between students	4.27	3.96	2.294*
23.Appear more authoritative than authoritarian	4.10	3.66	3.096**

Note : \*\*p < .01 ; \* p < .05.

In this study, the researchers divided the category of discipline background into two groups: education background (included academic studies and education) and specific background (included agriculture, art, curriculum and instruction, and others). Table 4 presents the results of the t-test between those two groups. Those teachers who had an education background have slightly higher means on seven items as follows: "Spend extra time with challenged learners," "Recognize the value of differences between students," "Convey confidence in students," "Foster classroom team spirit," "Give insights into problems students encounter," "Foster an atmosphere of trust," and "Allow students freely share their idea." These higher means are to be compared with means of other teachers with specific backgrounds, also suggesting that teachers with an education background exhibited more of those seven encouraging behaviors/attitudes toward their students in school environment than teachers with specific background (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Comparison of Mean Between the Different Groups By Discipline

Dependent Variable	Discipline		t-value; Sig.
	Normal ( n=164 )	Specific ( n=129 )	
2.Allow students freely share their idea	4.20	3.99	2.016*
4.Foster an atmosphere of trust	4.37	4.13	2.134*
10.Give insights into problems students encounter	4.19	4.00	1.999*
11.Foster classroom team spirit	4.18	3.88	2.527*
12.Convey confidence in students	4.37	4.12	2.605*
15.Recognize the value of differences between students	4.32	4.09	2.226*
21.Spend extra time with challenged learners	4.21	3.92	2.616**

Note : \*\*p < .01 ; \* p < .05.

This research divides the variable of grade taught into four comparative groups: 1) Pre K-K compared with others; 2) 1<sup>st</sup> -5<sup>th</sup> group compared with others; 3) 6<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> group compared with others; 4) 9<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> group compared with others. Table 5 presents the results of the t-test between the Pre K - Kindergarten group with others. Those

teachers who taught in pre K and Kindergarten had slightly higher means on six items: "Allow students to freely share their idea," "Foster an atmosphere of trust," "Offer support to students to overcome self-doubt," "Appear non-judgmental in their discussions of students," "Convey confidence in students," "Foster an atmosphere of trust," and "Enthusiasm for concerns of students" than did of teachers taught in other grades. These findings indicate that those teachers who taught in Pre K and Kindergarten were more likely to adopt those six encouraging skills toward their students than others (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Comparison of Mean Between the Pre K- K Group with Others

Dependent Variable	Grade taught		t-value; Sig.
	Others ( n=160 )	Pre K-K ( n=133 )	
2. Allow students freely share their idea	4.01	4.23	-2.189*
4. Foster an atmosphere of trust	4.13	4.42	-2.661*
5. Offer support to students to overcome self-doubt	4.08	4.39	-3.106**
8. Appear non-judgmental in their discussions of students	3.69	3.99	-2.426*
12. Convey confidence in students	4.13	4.42	-3.036**
14. Enthusiasm for concerns of students	4.14	4.37	-2.229*

Note : \*\*p < .01 ; \* p < .05.

Table 6 presents the results of a t-test between the 1<sup>st</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> group with others. Those teachers who taught in 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grades had significantly higher means on eight items than did of teachers taught in other grades: "Offer support to students to overcome self-doubt," "Give students recognition for a job well done," "Appear non-judgmental in their discussions of students," "Foster classroom team spirit," "Convey confidence in students," "Convey confidence in students," "Demonstrate empathy with students' feelings," "Enthusiasm for concerns of students," and "Develop the interest of students to help with their motivation." These findings suggest that those teachers who taught in 1<sup>st</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> grades were more likely to adopt those eight encouraging behaviors and attitudes toward their students. Consistently with those teachers who taught in Pre K – Kindergarten, teachers who worked in 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grades were also likely to adopt these skills in regard to students: "Offer support to students to overcome self-doubt," "Appear non-judgmental in their discussions of students," "Convey confidence in students," and "Enthusiasm for concerns of students" (Table 6).

**Table 6.** Comparison of Mean Between the 1<sup>st</sup> -5<sup>th</sup> Group with Others

Dependent Variable	Grade taught		t-value; Sig.
	Others ( n=91 )	1 <sup>st</sup> -5 <sup>th</sup> ( n=202 )	
5. Offer support to students to overcome self-doubt	4.02	4.31	-2.590*
7. Give students recognition for a job well done	4.36	4.58	-2.079*
8. Appear non-judgmental in their discussions of students	3.59	3.93	-2.496*
11. Foster classroom team spirit	3.77	4.17	-3.267*
12. Convey confidence in students	4.01	4.37	-3.476**
13. Demonstrate empathy with students' feelings	3.92	4.19	-2.452*
14. Enthusiasm for concerns of students	4.09	4.32	-2.100*
20. Develop the interest of students to help with their motivation	3.97	4.21	-2.053*

Note : \*\*p < .01 ; \* p < .05.

Finally, when comparing teachers taught in 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grades with others, the findings indicate that those teachers had significantly lower means on 10 items: item 4, 5, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 23, and 24 (did not present in Table 7). Specifically, the teachers who taught in 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grades had significantly lower means of Encouragement than did other teachers (t=2.140, p<.05). Similar results were found in a comparison of teachers who taught in 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade with other teachers. In this comparison, those teachers who taught in 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grades had significantly lower means not only on item 1, 2, 4, 5, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 10, 21, and 25 (not shown in Table 7), but also slightly on Encouragement at the level of .05 (t=2.442, p<.05). These findings suggest that the higher grades in which those teachers taught, the less likely they were to adopt encouraging behaviors and attitudes to motivate students in classes (Table 7).

**Table 7.** Comparison of Mean Between High Grades Groups with Others

Dependent Variable	Grade taught				t-value; Sig.
	Others ( n=158 )	6 <sup>st</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> ( n=123 )	Others (n=216)	9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> (n=65)	
Encouragement (combined 25 items)	4.24	4.07	---	---	2.140*
	---	---	4.22	3.99	2.442*

Note : 1. \* p < .01 ; \* p < .05. 2. Since more than 10 items had significant differences between each comparative group, this table just revealed the differences on encouragement scale.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Overall, encouragement behaviors were reported by student teachers in all grade level.

In other words teachers often engaged in encouraging behaviors and having encouraging attitudes with their students. Female teachers were reported to exhibit more encouraging behaviors or attitudes toward their students in school than male teachers. Junior teachers appeared to have more motivation, demonstrated empathy, expressed concerns, recognized the differences between students, and appear more authoritative attitudes toward students than senior teachers. In addition, teachers with education background exhibited more encouraging behaviors/attitudes toward their teachers with other backgrounds. Teachers who taught in Pre K and Kindergarten and teachers who taught in 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grades were more likely to adopt encouraging skills toward their students than teachers of other grade level.

Student teachers or novice teachers is a critical time in the career of those who desire to commit their time in educating the next generation. However, they often reported the first year of teaching as lonely and unsupported (Paulus & Scherff, 2008). Therefore providing encouragement in a safe environment to discuss their concerns is crucial to student teachers as well as teachers in general (Hough, Smithey & Evertson, 2004). Paulus and Scherff further suggested that with the advance of technology, online discussion can be utilized to provide student teachers novice teachers with psychological and emotional support. Buckner and McDowelle (2000) shared similar view about encouragement in developing teacher leaders. They stated, "All teachers should be encouraged to become leader, and principals should strive to create an atmosphere in which teacher leadership is accepted" (p.35).

To conclude, encouragement has an instrumental effect on teachers, the school environment and education in general. It resulted in reducing stress, more positive attitude, higher morale, more effective teaching and better academic performance in the school setting. Therefore, it is crucial that teachers and school administrators can provide an encouraging and safe environment for everyone in the school setting.

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**APPENDIX**  
**Teachers Encouragement Scale (TES) Factor and Reliability Analysis**

No	Item	Loading value
1.	Appear caring and willing to listen	.773
2.	Allow students freely share their ideas	.771
3.	Have respect for other teachers' unique abilities	.693
4.	Foster an atmosphere of trust	.788
5.	Offer support to students to overcome their self-doubt	.814
6.	Maintain that it's alright for students to be imperfect	.757
7.	Give students recognition for a job well done	.704
8.	Appear non-judgmental in their discussions of students	.748
9.	Consider students' different learning styles	.807
10.	Give insights into problems students encounter	.789
11.	Foster classroom team spirit	.715
12.	Convey confidence in students	.787
13.	Demonstrate empathy with students' feelings	.817
14.	Have a personal enthusiasm for the concerns of students	.846
15.	Recognize the value of differences between students	.827
16.	Appreciate the uniqueness of the individual learners	.826
17.	Have an appropriate sense of humor	.722
18.	Stay on the topic of conversation-without digressing	.534
19.	Recognize the potential of students	.842
20.	Develop the interest of students to help with their motivation	.816
21.	Spend extra time with challenged learners	.733
22.	Inspire students to seek more in their lives	.760
23.	Appear more authoritative than authoritarian towards the class	.776
24.	Convey respect for competence by keeping out of the way	.755
25.	Hold students responsible without allocating blame	.795
Eigen value (% of variance )		14.75(59.00)
Cronbach's Alpha		.970