Book review. Johnson, Brad & Johnson, Jeremy (2024). Becoming a more assertive teacher: Maximizing strengths, establishing boundaries, and amplifying your voice. Routledge.

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Introduction

When interacting with students and delivering instructional messages in the classroom, teachers or educators frequently face a dilemma. The same applies when interacting with colleagues and school administrators. Should we be assertive or silent? In general, many take the option of silence to maintain harmony and avoid conflict. First-time teachers typically adopt this stance for a variety of reasons. Cultural and gender considerations are two examples. While this may sound positive, it can create a closed and disempowering learning environment and increase stress for the individual teacher.

Brad Johnson discusses this issue in his book series on education and leadership for teachers and school administrators. He has authored a series of books over the last three years (2022-2024), including "Dear school leader: 50 motivational quotes and anecdotes that affirm your purpose and your impact", "Thank you, teacher: 100 uplifting and affirming letters from your fellow educators", "Building dynamic teamwork in schools: 12 principles of the v formation to transform culture", and others. The book under review is "Becoming a more assertive teacher: Maximizing strengths, establishing boundaries, and amplifying your voice".

Drawing on his 25 years of experience as a teacher and principal, he collaborated with Jeremy Johnson, who has experience and research interests in the application of personality theory in the workplace. The book provides structured and organized answers to questions about the goals of moral education (Lickona, 1997). These goals include assisting teachers in understanding various moral values, including assertive and non-assertive ones, which is the focus of most classroom management literature (Aliakbari & Bozorgmanesh, 2015), fostering a sense of moral connectedness, and ultimately assisting them in acting as assertive teachers (Figure 1).
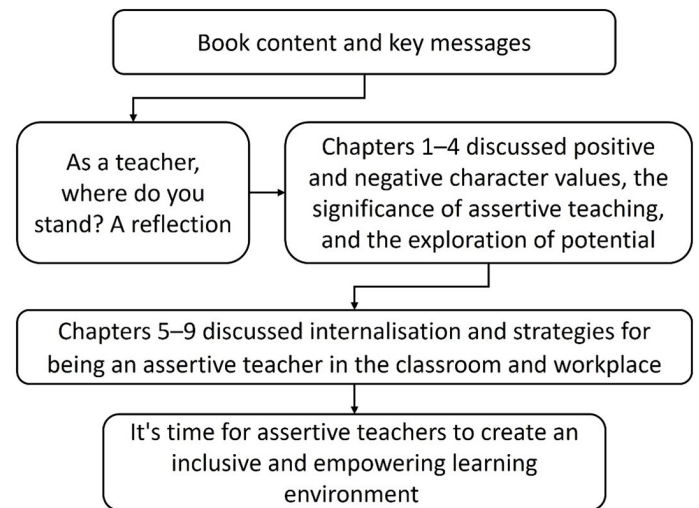

Figure 1. The book's contents and key messages.

Overview

The first key message encourages readers to evaluate their teaching practice using a personality reflection quiz. The quiz consists of two aspects, namely, the level of friendliness or humility and assertiveness. Reflection is an important part of teaching, as it can help teachers deal with challenging experiences (Cole et al., 2022).

After recognizing one's attitude and personality in teaching practice, the second main message conveyed in Chapters 1-4 discussed positive and negative character values, the significance of assertive teaching, and the exploration of its potential. Chapter 1 is about positive and negative moral values, each with various implications. These values serve as a framework for becoming an assertive teacher and exploring one's potential. The authors give examples of negative moral values that sound positive, such as avoiding conflict and confrontation. If this persists, it will lead to unresolved classroom issues and escalate the teacher's stress levels. Therefore, it is necessary to strike a balance between positive and negative moral values by incorporating more

assertiveness into teaching. For teachers, assertiveness is the most valuable moral value because it allows them to clearly communicate their expectations and demonstrate their position of authority. However, learners can still feel the moral value of respect and empathy given by their teachers. In the following discussion (Chapters 2 and 3), the authors invite teachers to become assertive by building self-confidence based on the optimal potential and strengths that are already within each of them. The focus is on improving the strengths that can increase the teacher's value, not the weaknesses. Remember, fixing weaknesses traps teachers in a deficit-based culture. Coaching is one strategy for improving assertive skills in professional development. Coaching techniques as a means to support education systems that experience problems in retaining teachers and school leaders are suitable for helping individuals who face authentic challenges, professional interests, and dilemmas experienced in complex education systems (Lofthouse, 2019).

After internalizing the moral value of assertiveness, the authors hope that a growth mindset will inspire teachers to view challenges as opportunities for personal growth and development (Chapter 4). Therefore, the ability to manage diverse conflicts and confrontations, the proactive approach, the concentration on the problem, and the avoidance of adopting the most morally correct stance all contribute to preserving the relationship.

The third main message is internalizing the moral value of assertiveness and its strategies in the classroom and workplace (Chapters 5–9). Chapter 5 discusses the power of assertive communication in an education system. Assertive communication lays the groundwork for fostering meaningful relationships with learners, colleagues, school administrators, and parents. Communication not only emphasizes that teachers are active talkers but also excellent listeners. Listening has the power to become the art of truly understanding others. It can also train teachers' competencies as coaches who emphasize the power of listening.

Establishing boundaries involves internalizing assertive moral values when interacting with learners, conveying learning messages in the classroom, and relating work tasks to fellow colleagues and school administrators (Chapter 6). Setting boundaries in the educational context plays an important role in building structured teacher-student relationships and mutual respect among colleagues and school administrators. In reality, teachers are always victimized by their reluctance to say "no" for fear of being perceived as rude for refusing a workload that has exceeded their limits.

The next internalization of assertive moral values is to foster an attitude of collaborating and contributing with colleagues to achieve common goals (Chapter 7). It is important to do so that teachers are not afraid to voice the truth, even though what they say differs from group thinking. Instead, teachers anticipate the emergence of new perspectives that can offer clarity and enhance the quality of educational practices. Collaboration in classroom learning practices should also be done to create "relationship-centered" learning for

effective classroom management, setting clear boundaries, and fostering a positive and respectful learning atmosphere (Chapter 8). This aligns with teachers' views that one of the components of effective teaching is social presence in the form of positive relationships (Kamali et al., 2024). In other words, teaching as an art means building relationships to create positive moral interactions (Jarvis, 2004). This differs from teacher- and content-centered or learner-centered learning, which emphasizes teaching as technology.

Internalizing the moral value of assertiveness in the classroom and workplace does not make teachers extraordinary if they forget about self-care. Therefore, it is crucial to prioritize self-care by practicing stress management techniques, resting regularly, detaching from technology, and maintaining an attitude of gratitude (Chapter 9). Finally, the epilogue of this book conveys the main message that it is time to become an assertive teacher in order to create an inclusive and empowering learning environment. Assertive teachers have a positive relationship with learner performance (Aliakbari & Bozorgmanesh, 2015). Teacher assertiveness is also expected to instil morality in students because learners also struggle with assertive communication with other learning groups. However, Levesque (2024) suggests that we can repeatedly train these obstacles to become habits.

In terms of book quality, the discussion has several advantages. First, before discussing the main content of each paragraph, the authors provide illustrations in the form of film stories, examples, and fairy tales. This allows readers to easily understand the message conveyed in each chapter. For example, Chapter 1 discusses the character of Abraham Wald, a mathematician and statistician who dared to differ from public opinion and take risks.

Secondly, at the end of each chapter, there is a summary of the practical and memorable assertive toolbox. It contains only three messages, making it easier for readers who want to practice immediately without memorizing them. Thirdly, the book includes examples of moral dilemmas, particularly those encountered during classroom learning, which enhances the contextualization of the discussion, particularly for teachers and administrators. However, the lack of comprehensiveness in the examples discussed in the book represents a shortcoming. In fact, there are numerous types of moral dilemmas in teaching and learning, many of which naturally involve teachers. Such dilemmas include those concerning rules and regulations, teacher-learner interactions, learner interactions, testing and evaluation, professional behavior and qualifications, and textbook content (Akbari & Tajik, 2019).

Discussion and reflection

We need to discuss and reflect on how to navigate the cultural differences of being a Western assertive teacher in the context of Asian educational culture, particularly Indonesia, which emphasizes the importance of a culture of harmony. Various fields always internalize harmony as one of the main moral values and social capital (Gede Agung et al., 2024; Jumanto et al., 2024; Sandra et al., 2024). According to Meyer (2014), Asian communication

culture generally uses a high-context approach compared to Western society, which uses a low context. Therefore, messages must be delivered implicitly and in this context, an assertive teacher must also consider cultural differences. If an assertive teacher is excessively assertive in expressing their opinions in the workplace with fellow colleagues and the principal, particularly when they go against the general or majority view, it can lead to disharmony and be viewed as disrespectful.

However, teachers must remain assertive in a constantly changing external education environment. Traditional educational approaches are unable to meet the educational needs of our developing society by prioritizing the 4C soft skills—creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). For example, the Indonesian education system implemented a curriculum reform called *Kurikulum Merdeka*, whose idea was to provide autonomy for teachers in designing and implementing holistic learning (Syahrir et al., 2024). Holistic education to solve complex and integrated world problems (Miseliunaite et al., 2022) certainly requires an assertive teacher figure.

When teachers, especially from the younger generation—Gen Z—are assertive in calling for change in the school environment, the first thing they feel is anxiety and pressure. We need to implement integration and acculturation strategies to address this natural transitional phase of culture shock (Berry, 2005). This means that teachers must maintain their valued assertive identities and positive relationships to minimize conflict. Incorporating strategies such as role modeling and moral encouragement, which are valuable resources in moral education (Engelen et al., 2018), is essential to ensure that the change is acceptable to all parties while minimizing conflict. Initially perceived as insignificant, sustained efforts will yield extraordinary results (Clear, 2018), enhancing the effectiveness of the adaptation and acceptance process.

Conclusion

Can we be assertive teachers? Of course, the answer goes back to each individual educator. Are we willing to make an effort so that all the assertive potential within us can come out? As written in the introduction of this book, "you may uncover the dormant power within you" (p. viii). This book is a valuable reading companion for teachers, school administrators, and other stakeholders who focus on developing teachers' and school principals' human resource competencies.

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