Teachers' perceptions of their schools' climate and discipline in an urban school district

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' perceptions of their schools' climate, discipline issues, and the preventive measures used to combat discipline issues and to determine if there were differences in those perceptions between middle and high school teachers. The 239 Mississippi teachers who participated in this study completed a four part survey that gathered demographic data and their perceptions of their school's climate and discipline. The results indicated that there were significant differences between high school and middle school teachers' perceptions of school climate and discipline. The perceptions of the high school teachers' were less favorable than those of middle school teachers. The results also indicated that very few high school teachers perceived that discipline problems were addressed in proactive ways.

Keywords: discipline, school climate, school culture, classroom management

INTRODUCTION

In the age of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), many schools and districts find themselves struggling to close the achievement gap that exists between groups of students in American schools. This issue is more prevalent in urban schools which serve the highest percentage of poor, minority, and special needs students (Lannie & McCurdy, 2007).

Urban schools are in a state of deterioration (Nogura, 2003). Lannie and McCurdy (2007) agreed and stated, "that although urban schools are typically defined by high concentrations of poverty, they are further distinguished by (a) high rates of student mobility, (b) difficulty in hiring qualified teachers, and (c) large numbers of classroom discipline problems" (p. 86). Thus, teachers electing to teach in urban schools must come with an arsenal of pedagogy and behavior management strategies to effectively teach and deal with students (Lippman, Burns, & McArthur, 1996).

There is a severe shortage of qualified teachers in the United States especially, in urban settings. The problem of finding and retaining qualified teachers is due to the lack of discipline in the classroom (Pedota, 2007). According to Walker, Ramsey, and Gresham (2004), urban school classrooms taught by poorly prepared and novice teachers with little or no city school experience place students at risk for engaging in chronic patterns of antisocial behavior and misconduct. When teachers are poorly prepared, they over-rely on reactive and aversive strategies in the absence of planned, effective, preventive approaches to address classroom discipline problems. Therefore, public urban schools are under increased scrutiny to improve student, classroom, school, and district outcomes in order to attract and retain teachers (Gros, Lyons, & Griffin, 2008).

Educators who work in urban settings frequently face the challenge of striving to increase desirable behaviors while simultaneously attempting to decrease undesirable behaviors. To increase desirable behaviors and the overall strength of instruction, a school must have (a) effective time management procedures, such as quick-paced and well-planned transitions; (b) effective implementation of instruction, such as guided practice and review; and (c) effective continuous academic monitoring (Ryan, Sanders, Katsiyannis, & Yell, 2007). Moreover, a school's culture can have a "powerful impact on the academic performance of students and the ways that teachers feel about their work and students" (Johnson, Musial, Hall & Gollnick, 2014, p. 147). As such, it is important to examine how teachers perceive their school's climate.

The study was specifically designed to examine middle and high school teachers' perceptions of their schools climate and discipline issues as measured by the Secondary School Discipline Survey utilized for this study.

THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to compare middle and high school teachers' perceptions and utilization of the discipline methods used in public schools in an urban school district in Mississippi. Specifically, this study examined teachers' perceptions of their schools' climate, and the preventive measures used to combat discipline. In addition, this study added to the paucity of research, which currently exist on the implementation of disciplinary methods in secondary schools.

The design of this research was descriptive and comparative. Descriptive research was appropriate for this study since answers were being sought about teachers' perceptions and utilization of classroom management strategies. Comparative research was also appropriate for this study because this type of research is used to determine differences in the behavior of groups of individuals.

The Secondary School Discipline Survey was utilized for the study. Descriptive statistics and a Mann Whitney U were the statistical tests utilized to analyze the data and answer the research questions posed in the study. Descriptive statistical analysis using frequency and percentages distributions were generated to describe the demographic data for each item in Part I of the survey. Parts II and III on the survey were analyzed using a Mann-Whitney U test.

The target population for this study consisted of 430 middle and high school teachers from a select urban school district in Mississippi. However, only 239 teachers participated in the study. At the time of the study, the urban school district in Jackson, Mississippi had 10 middle and 8 high schools. Participants for the study were randomly selected from the middle and high schools in the urban school district that were selected to participate in the study. Each school selected had an average staff size of approximately 40 teachers.

JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

Urban educators are often faced with a myriad of issues in the classroom. Among those issues are (a) inadequate resources, (b) meeting the needs of diverse learners, and (c) effectively managing the classroom. According to Martella and Nelson (2001), the need for highly qualified educators who can effectively manage classrooms in urban settings has reached a critical level.

Many schools and school districts lack the expertise to define and use classroom management practices and systems that meet the needs of their students with both efficiency and effectiveness (Emmer & Stough, 2001). With the advent of legislation requiring more proactive strategies to identify and serve students with academic and social behavior concerns, secondary schools may be unprepared and ill advised as to how to best implement such practices (Fairbanks, Sugai, Guardino, and Lathrop, 2007).

Difficulty managing behavior in the classroom is frequently cited as a source of frustration for teachers and a common reason why new teachers leave the profession (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Being attentive to issues related to classroom management is critical to continuous improvement in academic performance. Paying close attention to classroom management issues at the middle and secondary education level is especially important, given that many of the strategies and methods of managing behavior in the elementary school years are perceived to become less effective with older populations of students (Malmgren, Trezek, & Paul, 2005).

Implementation and utilization of effective discipline strategies and procedures have been and continue to be vital concerns for urban schools and districts seeking to find ways to improve student achievement. Under the premise of NCLB, schools were increasingly held accountable for their efforts to improve the academic and social behavior of their students despite diminishing resources (Eber, Sugai, Smith, & Scott, 2002).

As school districts in Mississippi continue to seek effective discipline strategies and techniques that can be utilized in the classroom, there is very little current research that links

teachers' perceptions of effective discipline strategies used in urban settings. Teachers' perceptions and utilization of effective classroom discipline strategies is a vital aspect of both effective teaching and continuous academic improvement. Yet, despite its importance, there is a paucity of research on how teachers use and implement successful strategies for effective management of their classrooms (Garrahy, Cothran, & Kulinna, 2005).

This study assesses secondary teachers' perceptions of discipline issues they faced on a day-to-day basis and offers suggestions for the effective management of those issues. Therefore, this study should be of value to the urban school district selected because it will provide educators and administrators with information on how teachers perceived their schools' climate. This information can be used to offer recommendations and suggestions for school administrators to help further the professional growth of their teachers, as well as provide a venue to assist schools in improving the overall discipline strategies being utilized by secondary classroom teachers in an urban school district in Mississippi.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perspectives & Theoretical Framework

The ability to manage discipline problems is what school principals and educational leaders focus on when assessing the effectiveness of teachers (Zuckerman, 2007). Yet, many teachers feel unprepared to deal with disruptive behavior and believe that this substantially interferes with their (a) teaching, (b) ability to be effective, and (c) ability to provide meaningful learning experiences so that all children can experience success. Urban educators are faced with a myriad of issues in the classroom. Among those issues are (a) inadequate resources, (b) meeting the needs of diverse learners, and (c) effectively managing the classroom. The need for highly qualified educators who can effectively manage classrooms in urban settings has reached a critical level (Martella & Nelson, 2001).

Traditionally, schools have addressed challenging behavior by increasing the number and intensity of punitive disciplinary tactics (Sugai & Horner, 2002). These strategies include (a) adopting zero tolerance policies, (b) hiring full and part-time security officers, (c) utilizing metal detectors, (d) expelling and suspending students, (e) conducting random searches, and (f) placing students in alternative educational facilities (Lassen et al., 2006).

Urban educators face a number of challenges while attempting to educate students in addition to the responsibility of effectively teaching the core academic subjects. Lassen, Steele, and Sailor (2006) indicated that teachers must increasingly deal with the non-academic factors that influence the instruction they provide. According to Kourea, Cartledge, and Musti-Rao (2007), some of those non-academic factors that negatively influence instruction include (a) poverty, (b) abuse, and (c) neglect which also led to disruptive behavior in the classroom.

McCurdy, Kunsch, and Reibstein (2007), indicated that school officials face the challenge of sustaining a full gamut of effective practices to promote the success of all students. In urban school settings, this challenge was exacerbated by multiple school and community-based factors, such as (a) poverty, (b) abuse, (c) neighborhood decay, (d) lack of fully credentialed teachers, (e) fewer school resources, and (f) more students with behavior problems (McCurdy et al., 2007). These challenges quickly lead to classrooms and schools that appear to be in disarray and the default mechanism becomes reactive rather than proactive, leading to an increased number of suspensions and expulsions.

Brown and Beckett (2006) suggested that student discipline disproportionately affected urban school districts with a large number of low income and minority students. African American students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were punished more often and more severely than other students (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson, 2002). Although African American students represent only 17% of the nation's population, they represented 34% of students who received out of school suspensions (Brown & Beckett, 2006).

Educating urban students can be rewarding, yet challenging. Attracting and retaining qualified teachers to carry out this task can be exigent due to the critical teacher shortages that school districts in the U.S. faced on a daily basis (Smith & Smith, 2006). Most urban teachers start their careers in disadvantaged schools with high turnovers and teaching the neediest students (Aaronson, 1999). Stranton (2001) indicated that 30 to 50% of teachers leave the profession within the first five years, but in urban areas, the numbers were even higher. About one-third of all newly hired urban teachers leave the profession if professional development programs and activities are not geared toward helping them manage their classrooms (Petty, 2007). Thus, a study of teachers' perceptions of their schools' climate and discipline issues, as well as the preventive measures used to combat discipline issues is timely.

Preparing Teachers for Urban Schools

Although teacher preparation programs have always operated under the shadow of legislation and politics, they still are in dire need of ongoing effective assessment systems that can better pre-service teachers for the realities of the classroom (Kirkpatrick, Lincoln, & Morrow, 2006). Research on the effectiveness of teacher preparation has yielded a direct relationship between its quality and student learning (Darling-Hammond & Young, 2002). NCLB challenged traditional concepts of teacher preparation by emphasizing content mastery and verbal ability and downplaying the importance of pedagogy and classroom management (NCLB, 2001).

Blanton (2004) noted that since pedagogy and management were less powerful determinants of student achievement than content mastery, policymakers proposed alternatives to traditional teacher preparation programs. Thus, NCLB encouraged states to develop routes that moved teachers into classrooms on a fast-track basis and included in its definition of highly qualified teachers individuals enrolled in such alternative routes (NCLB, 2001). Brownell, Ross, Colon, and McCallum (2005) indicated that the development of alternative routes came at a time when teacher education was under fire for its perceived inability to prepare quality teachers. Critics argued that teacher education programs (a) made no contribution to K–12 student achievement, (b) were not intellectually challenging, (c) did not adequately prepare teachers to deal with the demands of the classroom, and (d) acted as deterrents to bright, young people interested in entering the classroom (Finn & Kanstroom, 2000).

Teacher education advocates proclaimed that positive correlations existed between teacher certification status and student achievement (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). For example, Darling-Hammond (2000) reported that states with the highest proportions of certified teachers tended to have the highest National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores. Additionally, it was revealed in a study controlling for student socioeconomic status and school characteristics that students taught by certified teachers performed significantly better on standardized tests of reading and language arts than those

taught by non-certified teachers (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002).

Effective Discipline Techniques and Strategies

Rink (2002) defined classroom management as the arranging of the environment for learning, maintaining, and developing student-appropriate behavior and engagement in the content. Marshall (2005) wrote that classroom management dealt with how things were done and that it entailed structure, procedures, and routines to the point of becoming rituals.

Educators see management as the primary factor by which quality instruction and student learning occur (Garrahy et al., 2005). Discussions of management frequently focus on student behavior and control which is a vital component of classroom management. In contrast to classroom management, discipline is the responsibility of the student and its focus is appropriate student behavior (Marshall, 2005). Marshall (2005) added that although it was incumbent upon the teacher to maintain a classroom that was conducive to learning, a student was responsible for his or her own behavior.

Teachers are the single most important factor in creating a well-managed classroom (Parris & Block, 2007). In a review of several studies, Pedota (2007) indicated that effective teachers were those teachers who (a) had fewer discipline problems in the classroom, (b) spent a good deal of time on planning, (c) took into consideration diversity factors and student's individual learning style, and (d) provided students with activities that kept them engaged from the beginning of the class to the end.

Teachers play various roles in a typical classroom, and the most critical is that of classroom manager. Marzano (2003) wrote:

> The first high-profile, large-scale, systematic study of classroom management was done by Jacob Kounin in 1970. In his study, he analyzed videotapes of 49 first and second grade classrooms where he coded the behavior of the students and the teachers. As a result of his analysis, Kounin identified several critical dimensions of effective classroom management. Those dimensions included: (1) "withitness" or a keen awareness of disruptive behavior or potentially disruptive behavior and immediate attention to that behavior, (2) smoothness and momentum during lesson presentations, (3) letting students know what behavior is expected of them, and (4) variety and challenge in seatwork. (p. 5)

Taken together, effective classroom management of disruptive behaviors in middle and high schools is a national concern. In light of this concern, schools often rely on punitive practices such as office referrals or suspensions/expulsions that frequently do little to create safer educational environments (Oswald, Safran, & Johanson, 2005).

Schools face a number of challenges in educating students. However, a growing body of research demonstrates the utility of proactive and preventive approaches to dealing with challenging behavior in schools. One such approach is through Positive Behavior Supports (PBS; Lassen et al., 2006).

PBS is an approach to dealing with exigent behavior that includes a wide range of systematic and individualized strategies aimed at improving individual quality of life (Carr et al., 2002). The overarching intent of PBS is to create environments that support social and learning outcomes while preventing the occurrence of problem behaviors (Trussell, 2008). PBS facilitates student success through a team-based approach and is increasingly being adopted as a school-wide, preventive strategy to manage problem behaviors (Oswald et al., 2005).

Another well-researched classroom management model is the Classroom Organization and Management Program (COMP). Marzano (2003) indicated that the COMP was developed by Evertson (1995) and her colleagues at Vanderbilt University. In addition to its strong emphasis on rules and procedures, the program addresses techniques for (a) organizing the classroom, (b) developing student accountability, (c) planning and organizing instruction, (d) conducting instruction and maintaining momentum, and (e) getting off to a good start (Marzano, 2003).

COMP was designed to be an inquiry-based approach to staff development for K-12 educators. During the 6-18 weeks of in-service training, teachers get the opportunity to (a) analyze their classroom practice using a series of checklists, (b) try out research-based strategies, and (c) examine the effectiveness of their efforts (Evertson, 1995).

Think Time, another highly structured program model, has been shown to decrease disruptive behavior in students as well as increase student engagement (Nelson & Carr, 1999). The Think Time program model consists of three basic goals. Those goals are (a) to provide consistent consequences throughout the whole school when students exhibited disruptive behavior, (b) to provide students with feedback for their disruptive behavior and to allow for planning to avoid similar incidents, and (c) to enable teachers and students to cut off negative social exchanges and initiate positive ones. Utilizing this model, teachers employ specific procedures for addressing inappropriate behavior, while making every attempt to correct the behavior in the context of the regular classroom. If students cannot rectify the behavior in the regular classroom, they are sent to the Think Time classroom, where they are expected to analyze and think seriously about their behavior. Students do not return to the regular classroom until they demonstrate an awareness of their negative behavior and understand appropriate alternative behaviors (Marzano, 2003).

Assertive Discipline is a widely used behavior modification approach that is based on traditional behavior modification in which misbehavior results in specific consequences (Canter & Canter, 1976). Implementation of the current version of Assertive Discipline involves five steps. The first step focuses on establishing an optimistic climate for discipline. This requires teachers to replace pessimistic expectations of students with optimistic ones. The second step requires teachers to learn about and practice assertive behavior. The third step is to establish limits and consequences. The fourth step is follow-through and the fifth step is implementation of a reward system for positive behavior (Marzano, 2003).

Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement (TESA), yet another behavior modification program, is based on the underlying principle that teachers should ensure that their behaviors are equal and equitable for all students; therefore creating an environment where all students feel accepted. This model focuses on 15 teacher behaviors that are organized into three strands (Marzano, 2003). Those strands include (a) the response opportunity strand which addresses equitable distribution of positive responses, (b) the feedback strand which addresses affirmation and praise for correct performances, and (c) the personal regard strand which addresses proximity, courtesy and personal interest.

INSTRUMENTATION

A survey instrument consisting of four parts entitled Secondary School Discipline Survey was used in this study. Part I of the survey was designed to collect demographic

information about the participants (e.g. gender, years of teaching experience, and school classification). This information was collected to note the characteristics of participants. Part I consisted of two questions about the number of students who will or had participated in violence prevention programs and if the teacher was directly involved in programs designed to prevent violence. Part II of the survey was designed to gather information to determine teachers' perceptions about the climate at their schools. Part III of the survey was designed to gather information to determine teachers' perceptions about the discipline issues that existed at their schools, and Part IV of the survey was designed to gather information to determine teachers' perceptions about discipline preventive measures utilized in their schools.

The Secondary School Discipline Survey was developed by Heaviside et al. (1996). The survey was administered in the 1993-94 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD) Public School Universe File under contract with Westat, using the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Fast Response Survey System (FRSS). All FRSS survey questionnaires are public domain, and therefore may be used in whole or part to gather information and report data. The researcher modified the survey to exclude items related to police/law enforcement being called, because teachers may not have had that information.

FINDINGS

Information and data were collected regarding selected variables (e.g. school climate, school discipline issues, school discipline preventive measures, and the number of students and teachers participating in programs aimed at preventing school violence) to describe urban school teachers' perceptions of their school climates and discipline issues as well as the preventive measures utilized to combat discipline issues.

Data were collected from 239 (58%) participants from a population of 430 (*N*=430). Using SPSS 15.0, the researcher assessed the reliability of survey items by examining their internal consistency. Using the results from the pilot and the actual study, reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) of .84 and .95 were calculated respectively.

After the data were collected and analyzed, the researcher determined that there were significant differences in middle and high school teachers' perceptions of their school's climate impact on their ability to implement effective discipline strategies. The respondents indicated that some of their students participated in violence prevention programs (29% middle and 27% high), and approximately half (42% middle and 53% high) of the teachers participated in violence prevention programs. High school teachers' responses revealed that student tardies, students cutting classes, theft, vandalism, student alcohol/drug use, possession of weapons, verbal/physical abuse of teachers by students, and gangs were discipline issues that had an impact on their ability to implement effective discipline strategies; whereas middle school teachers indicated that these items had less of an impact on their ability to implement effective discipline strategies.

According to the findings of the study, few high school and even fewer middle school teachers participate in school-based programs aimed at curtailing school violence. Since Parris and Block (2007) indicated that teachers were the single most important factor in creating a well managed classroom, it is the responsibility of the school principal to ensure that teachers are active participants in school-based efforts that are both proactive and preventive in nature.

The results of this study indicated that there is a statistically significant difference between middle and high school teachers' perceptions of their school climate's impact on their ability to implement effective discipline strategies. Of the six items under the school climate

section, only the items that referred to behavior, rules, and the environment indicated findings that showed statistically significant differences with $p < .05$; (behavior=.00; rules=.00; and environment=.01). As compared to middle school teachers, the responses from high school teachers revealed that they perceived that their students were held more accountable for their behavior, rules were explained more clearly, and the school environment was more conducive to learning. This difference was determined by the Mann Whitney U statistics of (5155.50=behavior; 5571.00=rules; and 5741.00=environment).

Findings in this study also revealed that there were statistically significant differences between middle and high school teacher's perceptions of their school climate's impact on their ability to implement effective discipline strategies. High school teachers indicated rules being explained clearly, students being held accountable for their behavior, and the school environment being conducive to learning were all prevalent parts of the school climate. However, middle school teachers mean rank scores were lower for this item, meaning that they perceived these items to be less prevalent in their school climates.

CONCLUSIONS

School climate is defined as the shared beliefs, values and attitudes that shape interactions between the students, teachers, and administrators (Mitchell, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2010). These tacit rules define the parameters of acceptable behavior and norms for the school. Given the relationship between school climate and positive student outcomes, such as improved academic achievement and reduced discipline problems, school climate is often a target of school improvement initiatives and programs aiming to promote positive outcomes for students and staff.

More than ever, the public perception is that student behavior is out of control. Although isolated instances of violence (e.g., school shootings) contribute to this perception, people are most concerned with the lack of discipline and control in schools (Rose & Gallup, 2005). As a result, schools create policies that try to increase discipline and control, often by adopting "get tough" practices. Schools set strict rules about the types of student behavior that are unacceptable and assign rather severe consequences for students who do not abide by the rules. When the initial policies prove ineffective, schools often respond by "getting tougher." That is, they invest in other security (e.g., metal detectors) and punitive measures (e.g., "zero tolerance" policies that result in expulsion) that actually have little impact on student behavior (Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

Based on the findings in this study and given the multiple competing initiatives and demands, schools need to invest in proactive approaches to organizing and managing resources. Specifically, schools need to identify clear and measurable outcomes (e.g., decrease problem behavior, increase academic achievement); collect and use data to guide their decisions; implement relevant, evidence-based practices; and invest in systems that will ensure that practices are implemented with fidelity and sustained over time (Simonsen et al., 2008).

Conclusions based on the findings in this study indicated that approximately half of high school teachers (58%) and even fewer middle school teachers (42%) participated in school-based programs aimed at curtailing school violence. Since teachers are the single most important factor in creating a well managed classroom, it is the responsibility of the school principal to ensure that teachers are active participants in school-based efforts that are both proactive and preventive in nature.

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