

**Qualitative Analysis of Disruptive Behavior
and Leadership Influence in Two Urban K-6 Virginia
Elementary Public Schools**

Maloney Rhonda Hunter-Lowe

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Virginia Elementary Public Schools*

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Boca Raton, Florida
USA • 2008

ISBN-10: 1-58112-388-4
ISBN-13: 978-1-58112-388-3

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR AND LEADERSHIP
INFLUENCE IN TWO URBAN K-6 VIRGINIA ELEMENTARY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by

Maloney Rhonda Hunter-Lowe

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

UNIVERSITY OF PHOENIX

October 2007

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ABSTRACT

The problem addressed in the current study was that disruptive student behavior is detrimental to learning because quality teacher-student interaction time is reduced. The purpose of this ethnographic research study was to explore relationship between disruptive behavior of students and leadership styles of teachers, parents and school leaders. Results indicated that in some cases, an individualized approach could help the K-6 elementary student by reducing their disruptive behavior. However, it was also confirmed that as part of this individualized approach, school-wide implementation might provide the level of support needed to prevent future disruptive behavioral problems as well as providing the positive role models for students to observe and emulate.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Linneth and Linton Hunter. They believe in me and everything that I do, and motivated me to complete this journey. This is also dedicated to my husband Christopher Ricardo Lowe, my sons Devoy Darnell-Davis Hunter, Devay Devante-Carnielus Hunter, Devran Drandon Hunter-Lowe, and Develle Devaughn Hunter-Lowe, for putting up with me while I spent hours and hours on the computer. I also dedicate this dissertation to my sister Latoya Hunter-West, Clifton Hunter, and Anthony Hunter, and all my nieces and nephews. Third, I would like to dedicate this to my extended family in Canada and Jamaica. Finally, to all my friends who have been there, friends such as Sandra Martin, Lee Bond Jr., Sylvan Lashley, Pauline Johnson, and my principal and dear friend Elizabeth Ann Horne.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my mentor Ricardo Archbold. Without him, I would probably not have completed this journey. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Sylvan Lashley who has been in my corner for over three years as an instructor and was determined to see me succeed. His support and devotion got me through this. (Thanks for listening and accepting my calls as well.) Last, but not least, I would like to acknowledge Dr. Sienrokus, my third UOP instructor into the program, who from the start wanted to see me to the end of this journey. Thanks for your patience, guidance, and understanding over these years. I also want to acknowledge Rubye Holloway who has started the cohort with me and has been there for me over the last four years, and to Dr. Gilton Grange one of my cohorts in the program. Thanks Gilton, I have certainly followed your footsteps closely. Finally, to my editor Dr. John Caruso who has sacrifice his time and some sleep to help me with my work. You are truly the best!

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

An important issue in elementary schools in America is disruptive student behavior and the influence that parents, teachers, and school administrators may have on disruptive behavior. Studies from Devine (1996), Fordham (1996), Irvine (1990), Kohl (1994), MacLeod (1987), Mehan (1979), Oakes (1985), Peshkin (1991), and Willis (1997) all allude to the extensive troubles caused by disruptive behavior in school. However, none of these researchers provided a complete perspective on what is happening in the classrooms when students choose to engage in behavior that is disruptive to the learning process. Children exhibiting disruptive behavioral problems can be challenging for teachers because they require teachers to spend a substantial amount of classroom time on behavioral management rather than teaching (Galloway, 1997). Educators are faced with the daunting task of effectively addressing the disruptive behaviors of these students (Fraser, 1997). The noncompliant, off-task, and inattentive behaviors manifested by these students often leads to pandemonium in the classroom (Proctor & Morgan, 1991). Rather than being able to facilitate the academic and social development of students, teachers devote a great deal of time and energy to the amelioration of such disruptive behaviors. Consequently, instructional time and eventually, academic achievement are negatively affected (Stage & Quiroz, 1997).

This study used in-depth interviews with 42 parents, 4 administrators, and 6 teachers. All participants were interviewed over a period of three months using open-ended questions in search of patterns and behaviors. The in-depth interviews sought to increase our understanding of the culture and classroom environment of two urban Virginia schools. Organizational culture, issues of diversity, leadership and economic

status were examined. Teachers, parents and school administration may benefit from understanding the reasons for disruptive behaviors in schools (Frick, 2004; Jimerson, Ferguson, Whipple, Anderson, & Dalton, 2002; Stormont, 2002). The study may be relevant for teachers due to the effect of student discipline problems on teacher attrition from the profession (Ingersoll, 2001). The study also has the potential to increase instructional teacher-student time and to save money for the school district, thereby leading to improved student performance and larger matching-dollar sums from the state because of improved standardized scores. It is also important for K-6 students because of the venomous effects that disruptive behaviors have on student learning outcomes, student social success, and student drop-out rates (Frick; Jimerson et al.; Stormont). Finally, this research may help to inform schools about the types of programs that will support and prepare teachers.

Background of the Problem

Usova (2001) reported that student disruptive behavior is a concern shared by educators and the public. Not only are teachers concerned with disruptive behavior in the school, but the general public is also concerned by this behavior. Disruptive behavior is associated with a wide range of cognitive, educational, constitutional, and family problems (Galloway, 1983). Although various interventions have been designed to promote classroom management of disruptive behavior, teachers tend to use interventions that they deem expedient, efficient, and manageable in the classroom (Witt & Elliot, 1982). Disruptive behavior decreases the amount of time a teacher spends on teaching and increases the amount of time spent on coping with disruptive student behaviors. Instruction is interrupted by students displaying these behaviors (Galloway).

Unfortunately, disruptive behavior has been escalating over the years in some schools (Galloway). The students who are not disruptive in school are unable to concentrate on classroom lectures, as other students are constantly disrupting them (Galloway).

It is evident that growing numbers of children in the United States are exhibiting disruptive behavior or externalizing behavior beyond the occasional minor incident typical of most children during the normal course of development (Herschell, 2001). Such behavior has become one of the most pressing issues in schools (Bullock, Reilly, & Donahue, 1983; Evans & Evans, 1985; Hranitz & Eddowes, 1990). Further, growing numbers of students and teachers reported that they were seriously concerned for their safety at school (Hranitz & Eddowes).

There is little question that educators across the country must address disruptive behavior. This is especially important to schools because of the well-established relationship between academic underachievement and poor social adjustment (Kazdin, 1987; Patterson, 1982). Although addressing the growing level of violent and disruptive behavior in schools may be a subordinate objective of the broader academic goals of schools, doing so may be a necessary condition for achieving academic excellence (Nelson, Colvin, & Smith, 1996).

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in the current study is the fact that disruptive behavior in schools, which leads to a lack of teacher-student one-on-one interaction time, represents a critical risk factor that can contribute to an unsuccessful experience for all children in K-6 elementary schools. When disruptive behavior happens during the K-6 elementary school years, it has been shown to relate negatively to decoding skills, reading problems, and

academic achievement. The combinations of these factors are related to school dropout rates (Jimerson et al., 2002). Disruptive behaviors place students at a learning disadvantage in K-6 schools. More than 60% of students are at a learning disadvantage due to disruptive behavior (Canter & Canter, 1997).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the connection and pattern between the lack of one to one instruction time in K-6 classes, student behaviors, and the lack of school completion success. The research utilized surveys and classroom observations to compare disruptive behavior in two urban Virginia K-6 schools. This study employed an ethnographic design using qualitative data by noting and recording patterns in behavior. Parents were asked to complete a survey questionnaire, teachers were observed, and school administrators were interviewed. Few previous studies have examined the causes of disruptive behavior in K-6 urban Virginia schools.

Significance of the Problem

Although schools continually face new challenges, the challenge of disruptive behavior has remained in classrooms across the nation (Frick, 2004). Students in K-6 public school classrooms exhibiting highly disruptive behavior problems have the potential to impede their own learning and the learning of their classmates (Frick). Therefore, differences in occurrence rates or patterns between the two school sites may shed light on etiological factors of students with highly disruptive behavior, thereby assisting educators in making more intentional and informed decisions for intervening on the behalf of students with disruptive behavior (Achenbach, Dumenci, & Rescoral, 2003). Fullan (2000) further suggests that adept leaders will use all these forces to their

advantage and combine them in a synergistic arrangement to promote student behavior. The study is therefore significant because of the potential value leadership has in an educational setting such as K-6 schools.

Schools need transformational leadership. Transformational leaders lead and direct the behavior of others by creating new ideas in an energetic manner to develop a culture that embraces continuous change (Wren, 1995). Leadership in schools has varying tasks. Hallinger (1992) emphasizes the variety of forces acting upon principals and school:

The principal's job involves interpreting community values and ensuring that they are reflected appropriately in school in the local school. By virtue of their position in the organization hierarchy, principals find themselves at the intersection where forces seeking the maintenance of traditional values meet those that press for change. (p. 43)

This study adds to the leadership research literature and provides data to inform future researchers. Few, if any, studies have examined the impact of disruptive behavior on schools in Virginia. The qualitative data produced because of the study can lead to quantitative studies on a larger scale, or case studies limited to single schools. One of the key theories of leadership is Bass' (1990) theory of transformational leadership. Bass noted that "Transformational political leaders may also use their authority and power to radically reshape the social and physical environment, thus destroying the old way of life and making way for a new one" (p. 18).

Nature of the Study

An ethnographic design was applied to explore the reasons for disruptive behavior in two urban Virginia schools. This design was appropriate because the study is an empirical inquiry that “investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2003, p. 13). Bickman and Rog (1998) further indicated that ethnographers assume a holistic outlook in research to gain a comprehensive and complete picture of a social group. A survey instrument elicited information from teachers, administrators, and parents in two urban Virginian public elementary schools. The ethnographic design was appropriate because only two schools will be studied. An ethnographic design involves first-hand intensive study of the features of a given culture and the patterns in those features. Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) stated:

Ethnographers study members of a culture in order to determine how their behavior reflects the values, beliefs, customs, rituals, and other aspects that are built up by a group of human beings and are transmitted from one generation to another or from current members to newly-admitted members. (p. 607)

The findings from this study may highlight problems that might be examined in a future workshop to formulate models and examples for teachers, administrators, students, and parents who are exasperated and frustrated with disruptive behavior. It may provide solutions to overcome the issues that lead to disruptive student behavior in the classroom. Griffith (2001) used a survey tool to link the performance and progress of socio-economically disadvantaged youth to disruptive behavior based on principal leadership roles and parental involvement. The responses to the survey instrument were used to

analyze the data from the perspective of administrators, parents, and teachers at their respective schools.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the connection between the lack of one-one instruction time in K-6 classes, disruptive student behaviors, and a lack of school completion success. There are three areas of focus in the ethnographic study: cultural, socio-economical, and performance as measured by grade point averages. Gall et al. (1996) reported the ethnographer's focus should be on the similarities and differences among the individuals in a study, particularly the emic perspective. The emic perspective involves the study of individuals to determine how they describe reality and how they experience events with the emphasis on describing a culture as they see it. Bickman and Rog (1998) stated:

The emic perspective is the insider's or native's perspective of reality and is the heart of the ethnographic research. The insider's perception of reality is instrumental to understanding and accurately describing situations and behaviors. An emic perspective compels the recognition and acceptance of multiple realities. Documenting multiple perspectives of reality is crucial to an understanding of why people think and act in the different ways they do. Differing perceptions of reality can be useful clues to individuals' religious status. (Rog 1998 p. 476)

The ethnographer begins with a mass of undifferentiated ideas and behavior and then collects pieces of information, comparing and contrasting, and sorting categories until a discernable thought or behavior becomes identifiable. Ethnographers match patterns from detailed categories or themes, which suggest an emerging design. The ethnographer can acquire a deeper understanding of and appreciation for a culture as each

part of the human tapestry is woven together, by observing the patterns and relationships of behavior (Bickman & Rog).

Research Questions

Three research questions that guided this ethnographic, qualitative study through observation, and interviews. Question 1 explored the extent of how leadership influences classroom disruptive behavior. Question 2 sought to identify the pattern with academic performance based on the differences in leadership roles. Question 3 sought to identify how disruptive behavior influences teaching time and students' performance, and the role of leadership styles.

According to Bickman and Rog (1998), "research questions shape the selection of a place and a people or program to study" (p. 479). The research questions addressed in the current study were:

- R1. To what extent does leadership influence classroom disruptive behavior?
- R2. Is there a pattern with academic performance of two urban Virginia elementary K-6 classes on the basis of the leadership roles?
- R3. How does a teacher leadership style impact teacher-student time because of disruptive behavior?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was based on models of (a) leadership styles, and (b) disruptive behavior. Commonly studied leadership theories include autocratic, transactional, and transformational leadership (Murphy, 2005). This research analyzed a number of competing concepts and theories in order to examine the relationship among variables such as socio-economic status (SES), culture, and

performance. Although researchers have explored the concept of disruptive behavior (Leedy, 1985) the continued usage of the term and the lack of discipline in some schools affords the opportunity for closer study in Virginia schools. Theories that drive the research study include transactional theory (Bass, 1990), transformational theory (Bass, 1990), and moral theory (Burns, 1978). So, too, are the terms favored by Rost (1991): “collaboration, common good, global concern, diversity and pluralism in structures and participation, client orientation, civic virtues, freedom of expression in all organizations, critical dialogue, qualitative language and methodologies, substantive justice, and consensus-oriented policy-making process” (p. 181).

Several theoretical concepts provide the framework supporting this study. The dynamic nature of leadership creates an environment in which leaders influence followers, followers influence leaders, and the leader-follower relationship is created on this interaction (Murphy, 2005). Second, there are two primary types of leadership styles, transactional and transformational (Bass, 1990). Transactional leaders focus on the present rather than on the future and are considered task-oriented, whereas transformational leaders are beyond the simple transactional leadership exchange process (Bass, 1990).

A review of the current literature demonstrates that school leaders’ competencies are important to decreasing students’ disruptive classroom behavior. The lack of transformational leadership in schools is central to the problem of reducing disruptive classroom behaviors. As the research literature makes clear, these well-disciplined, smooth-running school environments are not the product of chance. The current research