

TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS DIFFER ON THE SERIOUSNESS OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE: A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The seriousness of the problem of lack of school discipline is rarely disputed. The notion that our schools need to be safe and secure places of learning for our students is a first priority for all school Principals. The focus of this article is to examine to what degree teachers and principals agree on the seriousness of various discipline problems. Data for this study were drawn from The Schools and Staffing Survey (The Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), 1987-88, 1990-91, 1993-94; National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). SASS data were collected from approximately 134,403 teachers and 35,190 principals through surveys conducted in 1987, 1990. Questions that addressed school-related discipline problems were examined. Teachers' and principals' perceptions of the degree of seriousness of various discipline problems were assessed through 11 items on the survey. The problems included student tardiness, student absenteeism, students cutting class, physical conflict among students, robbery or theft in school, vandalism of school property, student pregnancy, student use of alcohol, student drug abuse, student possession of weapons, and verbal abuse of teachers.

The recent Phi Delta Kappa 31st annual Gallup poll on public opinion on public schools showed lack of discipline as the top problem. Throughout the years, the public has been consistent in reporting opinions in the area of school discipline. "From 1969 to 1985, lack of discipline came up first in every poll but one. From that point forward, either drug abuse, lack of financial support, or lack of discipline has topped the list" (Rose & Gallop, 1999, p. 42).

The problem of violence in schools has become one of the most pressing educational issues in the United States. Many school districts place the concerns about violence above academic achievement (Noguera, 1996). Landau and Gathercoal (2000) stated that keeping

schools safe while preserving productive learning environments is an increasing concern for educators everywhere. "Teachers and administrators are seeking strategies that will help students learn to act respectfully and responsibly" (p. 450).

The seriousness of the problem of lack of school discipline is rarely disputed, the notion that our schools need to be safe and secure places of learning for our students needs to be a first priority for all school principals. There is less consensus, however, as to what constitutes a serious problem. The focus of this article is to examine to what degree teachers and principals agree on the seriousness of various discipline problems.

Discipline as a Problem

There is no scarcity in educational literature about the importance of school leaders first establishing a disciplined student environment before an appropriate and worthwhile learning environment can be established and maintained. In survey after survey, Americans complain that too many schools are disorderly, undisciplined places (Bennett, Finn, & Cribb, 1999). Sergiovanni (1995) advised that a principal needs to domesticate a "wild culture" before creating school as community.

Shakeshaft et al. (1995) in a study in New York schools found most adolescents view school as a harassing experience. Shakeshaft concluded that educators must intervene to create more caring environments. The lack of sensitivity to the pervasive culture of bullying in school is becoming so endemic to the public school system that there is often a feeling of hopelessness with teachers and administrators. There is no shortage of comments and explanations from teachers and principals about how they feel unsupported by local boards of education that often reverse their decisions about punishments for student infractions. Many principals have become "gun-shy" in light of the many court decisions about student behavior. In many cases, the courts have ruled that a school must be able to demonstrate a reasonable relationship between the student's misconduct and academic performance. Subsequently, school district administrators need to be wary of imposing academic penalties for misbehavior unrelated to educational performance or evaluation (Kaleva, 1998).

The Solutions to School Discipline Problems

The evidence that schools must be safe and secure before the school can be successful is very clear to our society. As Bennett et al. (1999) pointed out, it is hard to find a successful school that lacks firm discipline. "Numerous studies show that good behavior and academic success go hand in hand. When schools are places of proper conduct, regular attendance, and respect for teachers, students are more likely to learn effectively and get better grades" (Bennett et al., 1999, p. 513). The difficulty for principals and teachers is that options for punishing students to discourage inappropriate student behavior are removed from their repertoire of possible actions. They need to develop other strategies.

There is a growing literature base that contends that not only are schools that use punishments for disciplining students acting in illegal ways, but also are exacerbating the problem of more violence and disruption in the schools. Noguera (1996) pointed out that the legacy of social control profoundly influences school culture. Noguera contended that urban schools were more successful if they were safe; small; related to students as individuals; involved parents; created a supportive, aesthetically appealing environment; and stressed relationships over rules.

Kohn (1998) has long advocated that for schools to help students become ethical people, as opposed to people who merely do what they are told need to act differently. He advocated that we need to help students figure out—for themselves and with each other—how one ought to act. "That's why dropping the tools of traditional discipline, like rewards and consequences, is only the beginning. It's even more crucial that we overcome a preoccupation with getting

compliance and instead involve students in devising and justifying ethical principles” (Kohn, 1998, p. 15).

How we go about solving the problems of making our schools safe and secure places of learning will not be found in simplistic procedures. To think that there will be one right way is rather than involving all stakeholders in a process of making schools secure is not going to work. At the present time there are many theoretical and even commercial systems that are advocated as being able to fix the system.

To list just a few: Glasser’s discipline without coercion; Dreikur’s social discipline; Kounin’s “With-it-ness”; Raths and Simon’s value clarification; Berne and Harris’s transactional analysis “I am OK–You’re OK”; Canter and Canter’s assertive discipline or the “rules-rewards-punishment model”; the behaviorism/punishment model of Engelmann and Dobson “Never smile before Christmas”; and the teacher-student interaction model confronting-contracting. There are numerous discipline programs such as: cooperative discipline, 21st century discipline, discipline with dignity, and several programs called positive discipline. Discipline programs that are described as: gentle, innovative, judicious, tuff, collaborative, commonsense, and creative.

No doubt there are many good things to learn from some of these systems; however, it would be inappropriate to recommend any single one. School leaders need to be involved in a process of seeking alternatives based on norms of the community as well as a rational construct that works for the students in each school. Thompson and Walter, (1998) suggested that everyone connected with the school and district must develop and enforce strategies designed to magnify learning and behavioral expectations and to redirect students unable or unwilling to participate in the activities of education.

At the governance level, educators need to be engaged in the debate about the dynamics and locus of power involving the school system (Fullan, 1995; Goodlad, 1997; Sarrason, 1995). There is evidence that American public schools have become government institutions, buffeted by political decisions and hamstrung by regulations (Malpass, 1994; Ripley, 1997). Goodlad (1997) contended that before replacing the macropolitics with the micropolitics, we need to do more than make charges of inefficiency and personal preferences. Before trashing the present system and adopting new governing systems, we need to examine the reasons for the present failure of reform. As Cuban (1988) warned more than a decade ago, the reasons for the failure of reform are three: (a) they fail to address the problems they were intended to solve, (b) solutions were designed to correct different problems from those identified, and (c) the problems were persistent dilemmas involving hard choices between conflicting values. One author poignantly focuses on the problems that arise because of these conflicting values in the system. She warns that there is a need to delineate real problems from imaginary ones and to ensure that real problems have workable solutions rather than self-referent personal opinion which only adds to the cynicism that already chokes our system.

Much of the debate about the future of our education assumes as Goodlad (1997) observed “. . . that our public school system has failed, not that the people might have failed it” (p. 127). There is no doubt that the public school system is far from perfect. The challenge to the education community is to identify and confront real problems and issues and then develop appropriate strategies that will correct or enhance school leaders’ ability to carry out mandates.

Professors involved in preparing school leaders need to examine their programs. As Culbertson (1964) pointed out, there is a discontinuity between the study of administration and practice that continues today. The results of a 1984-85 national survey of the status of school administration preparation advocates a closer alignment of theory to practice. That national survey found that most preparation programs concentrated on procedural issues rather than on ethics and leadership issues. Based on a survey of colleges and universities involved in preparing school leaders, Leithwood (1996) suggested that these programs contributed significantly to leadership as actually practiced in schools. Leaders must realize that this environment of caring and understanding is essential for an effective workplace (Scarnati, 1994). One way to develop a caring and understanding environment is to possess good listen-

ing skills. Principals need to really listen to teachers and other staff, parents, and students. The administrator gains the respect needed for change by doing so. Good listening allows the speaker to feel valued (Karpicke & Murphy, 1996). Doud and Keller's (1998) study of the K-8 principal showed that the principal's role is now revolving more on student discipline and that it has become increasingly diverse and complex. The evidence of this article is that principals are not understanding or listening to what teachers are saying about the problems of discipline in the schools.

The Importance of the Role of the Principal for School Discipline

The important role of the principal in leading the school is well established. "The key role principals play in schools is well documented and acknowledged" (Buckner, 1997, p. 1). Delaney (1997) stated that the leadership style of the principal is the key to establishing positive school relationships. Daresh (1997) observed that the emphasis on instructional leadership has caused preservice programs to focus on learning experiences that help future school administrators "... oversee the teaching-learning activities in their schools as the primary area of attention and responsibility" (p. 5). This is very different from the role of manager that emphasizes law, finance, personnel, and management theory on which many of the principal preparations programs focus their energy and efforts. As preparation programs move to preparing instructional leaders who have the ability to construct an environment that focuses on student learning, more changes will be required. Added emphasis on working in groups and developing teams will prevail and necessitate knowing and understanding the motivations of people. Learning how to relate to those a principal has to lead also will increase in importance. So will the adoption of a positive disposition in order to enhance the learning environment.

The school reform movement or, as Fullan (1996) termed it, school reculturing, requires that school administrators possess problem-solving skills to handle the day-to-day dilemmas arising in the campus setting. Fullan (1997) also pointed to the importance of the body of research and practice that advises principals to be inclusionary leaders who recognize the need for relationships of caring that are strengthened by collaboration and community-building. As Speck (1999) pointed out, trust is the "... ingredient to developing a learning community. ... Without trust, the learning community cannot function" (p. 59).

Kanter (1997) pointed out that managers whose power derived from hierarchy and who were accustomed to a limited area of personal control are learning to shift their perspectives and widen their horizons. Kanter states, "... the rank, title, or official charter will be less important factors in success at the new managerial work than having the knowledge, skills, and sensitivities to mobilize people and motivate them to do their best" (p. 55).

Methods and Procedures

Data for this study were drawn from The Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS: 1987-88, 1990-91, 1993-94; National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). SASS data have been collected from approximately 134,403 teachers and 35,190 principals through surveys conducted in 1987, 1990. Questions that addressed school-related discipline problems were examined.

Teachers' and principals' perceptions of the degree of seriousness of various discipline problems were assessed through 11 items on the survey. The problems included student tardiness, student absenteeism, students cutting class, physical conflict among students, robbery or theft in school, vandalism of school property, student pregnancy, student use of alcohol, student drug abuse, student possession of weapons, and verbal abuse of teachers. The educators were asked to characterize the problem as either (a) serious, (b) moderately serious, (c) minor, or (d) not a problem. Each of the 11 items was examined across the two groups and the three years and perceptions of the magnitude of the problems were compared.

Results

A comparison was made of the relative seriousness of each of the 11 identified problems by rank ordering the mean scores for degree of problem for both teachers and principals across the three years (Table 1). In all years, both principals and teachers viewed absenteeism and tardiness as their most serious problems, followed closely by alcoholism. Respondents indicated that these three problems were moderately serious. Possession of weapons by students received the lowest rating by both groups for all three years.

Interesting differences from 1987 to 1993 for teachers was the rank shift of verbal abuse as a problem. In 1987, teachers ranked this problem as 6.5 (principals ranked it as 8), but in 1993, verbal abuse was ranked as the number 4 problem by teachers while remaining number 8 with principals. Drug abuse, on the other hand, was viewed as less of a problem in 1993 than in 1987 slipping from the rank of 4.5 for teachers (6 for principals) in 1987 to the rank of 7 for both teachers and principals in 1993 (Table 2).

Overall, principals viewed more problems as “minor” or “not a problem” than teachers. Of the 11 problems principals rated only three as moderately serious to serious in 1993. These included absenteeism, tardiness, and physical conflict. Teachers, on the other hand, rated eight of the problems as moderately serious to serious. Only possession of weapons, pregnancy, and cutting class were rate as “minor” or “not a problem.” These data seem to suggest that the teachers having more direct contact with the students are more impacted by their problems.

Discussion

Identifying the problem and the seriousness of the problem is a critical first step in developing solutions for a problem. As Cuban (1988) pointed out, school reform has failed because solutions were designed to correct different problems than those identified. Teachers and principals need to come to agreement on the seriousness of the problems relating to student discipline if they are to work consistently at correcting the conditions that need to be addressed. Teachers must deal with student behavior on a daily basis and principals can profit from their perspective as to what discipline problems interfere with day-to-day instruction and learning. At the same time, teachers may become myopic in their perspective and focus on their own pet discipline peeves. Seeing the broader perspective of the principal, who sees a wide range of disorderly behaviors eventually end up at his/her desk, can give teachers additional insight. Within a given school, teachers and principal may be carrying different definitions of “serious discipline problems.” Sharing of perspectives can be useful. The results of this study should contribute to the understanding of school discipline. The results should encourage discussion about the strategies that principals and other school administrators can adopt that will ensure safe secure learning environments for our students.

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Table 1
Perceptions of Seriousness of Discipline Problems in 1987

Problem	Teacher		Principal	
	Mean Rating*	Rank**	Mean Rating	Rank
Absenteeism	2.47	1	2.74	1
Tardiness	2.75	2	2.88	2
Cutting Class	3.21	9.5	3.52	10
Physical Conflict	2.99	6.5	3.12	3
Robbery/Theft	3.13	8	3.44	7
Vandalism	2.97	4.5	3.38	5
Pregnancy	3.21	9.5	3.50	9
Alcohol	2.90	3	3.33	4
Drug Abuse	2.97	4.5	3.39	6
Possession of Weapons	3.59	11	3.78	11
Verbal Abuse	2.99	6.5	3.45	8

Table 2
Perceptions of Seriousness of Discipline Problems in 1993

Problem	Teacher		Principal	
	Mean Rating*	Rank**	Mean Rating	Rank
Absenteeism	2.36	1	2.78	1
Tardiness	2.60	2	2.85	2
Cutting Class	3.08	10	3.44	10
Physical Conflict	2.74	5	2.98	3
Robbery/Theft	2.95	8	3.34	9
Vandalism	2.84	6	3.29	6
Pregnancy	3.00	9	3.32	8
Alcohol	2.72	3	3.14	4
Drug Abuse	2.87	7	3.30	7
Possession of Weapons	3.31	11	3.58	11
Verbal Abuse	2.73	4	3.22	5

*Based on Items that were rated on reverse scale: 1=Serious, 2=Moderate, 3=Minor, 4=Not a Problem

**Rankings: 1=Highest or most serious problem

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