

Teacher Perceptions of Behavior Problems in Small and Large Schools

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A total of 144 teachers from rural and urban schools in a midwestern state responded to open-ended questions related to students' behavior problems. Differences between students from rural and urban schools are described in the areas of serious behavior problems, handling behavior problems, and eliminating behavior problems.

Lack of discipline in the schools has been identified as the biggest problem confronting the public schools since 1972 [12]. National reports and public opinion surveys have depicted widespread dissatisfaction with teachers and school administrators handling of students' behavior problems. Teachers and school administrators report that disruptive students drain energy, strain nerves, and stymie the learning process. The way teachers handle students' behavior problems determines the level of order in the classroom, and therefore, can indicate the general health of the school [1; 5; 13].

Psychologists have long recognized that many segments of society - families, schools, and communities - have significant responsibilities for fostering the formation of children's personality and character. Consequently, the educational enterprise cannot be the utopia to right all wrongs [2].

Many Americans have continued to look to the government for solutions to educational problems. The 1983 Report of the Congressional Select Committee on U.S. Children, Youth and Families (Foundation for Child Development, 1983) identified dramatic changes away from traditional norms in the living conditions of families and children. All of these changes likely affect children's behavior because of the increased pressure and stress placed on the parents, thereby reducing their time, energy, and resources available to effectively guide, supervise, and nurture their children.

According to this report, the number of children living with one parent has doubled in the last decade. Today, one in four children do not live with two parents. Fifty-nine percent of all mothers with school-aged children (between the ages of 6 and 17 years) are employed outside their homes. This means that more children than ever in the history of our country are being cared for by non-relatives outside their own homes.

According to the Foundation for Child Development (1983), the number of children living in poverty has increased substantially in the last few years. In 1981, one child in five lived in poverty. The median family income is lower today than it was 10 years ago (when measured in constant dollars). This economic situation is directly related to the significant increase in the number of single-parent families. The median income of children in these families is one-third the median income of children in two-parent families. Child support is received by only a third of these children and averages less than \$2,000 per year.

Public school teachers are asked to educate children who exhibit a wide range of personality traits, attitudes, talents, ability levels, behavior patterns, learning styles, language skills, levels of physical development, and coping styles while managing behavior problems, and without depriving any child of an appropriate learning environment.

In a review of student behavioral problems and management techniques, Weber, Roff, Crawford, and Robinson [12] identified approximately 40 managerial strategies with effectiveness ranging from negative (actually contributing to discipline problems) to highly effective. A common theme present in all effective techniques was the presence of clearly defined rules and clear consequences for breaking those rules, with consistent and fair enforcement. Another effective technique was "teacher withitness," the extent to which teachers were always aware of all happenings in the classroom, detecting and stopping any deviant behavior immediately, overlapping events so more than one activity could be going on without disruptions, and facilitating smooth transitions from one activity to another. Additionally, the important role of school administrators must be acknowledged in good school discipline [9]. The administrator

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must be a strong leader because teachers and students look to him or her for support and direction. According to Lasley and Wayson [5] no person has as great an impact on the school atmosphere as does the principal.

Although there is considerable research on teaching in urban schools, data are lacking about the problems of teaching in small school districts or rural school districts [4]. Until recently, rural schools have largely been ignored [3; 10]. Rural schools have been mainly consumers of new programs and strategies designated for problems associated with urban areas [7]. "Yet nearly two-thirds of all U.S. public schools, and one-third of all teachers in America serve predominantly rural constituencies" [6]. Rural schools will continue to be important in the educational development of our society with the current population shift to nonmetropolitan areas and the decline in school consolidation [10].

This paper describes the results of a survey designed to explore perceptions of teachers in rural and urban schools behavior problems of their students. For purposes of this study, a rural school is defined as one having an enrollment of 250 students or less and located in a sparsely populated area. An urban school has an enrollment of over 251 and is located in an established town or city.

The Study

A total of 144 teachers from throughout North Dakota who were enrolled in courses offered by the North Dakota State University Continuing Studies Division during 1982-83 participated in this study. There were 67 elementary, 25 junior high, 36 senior high teachers, and 16 who reported teaching "all grades." For purposes of comparison in data analysis, the teachers of "all grades" were eliminated. The teachers responded to the following open-ended questions:

1. What do you think is the most serious behavior problem of students you have contact with?
2. How do you handle the problem you identified as most serious?
3. How do you think schools could effectively work toward eliminating behavior problems?

The responses were coded and analyzed by percentages according to size of school (250 or fewer students = rural schools, more than 250 students = urban schools) and according to grade level taught.

Because the teachers who participated in this study were not randomly selected, and because of the relatively small number of teachers, caution should be used in interpretation of the results. However, some rather clear trends emerged and warrant attention.

Most Serious Behavior Problems

Lack of respect for authority and other students, low self-esteem and a lack of responsibility were identified as the most serious problems by teachers in rural (42%) and urban schools (47%) and by teachers of all grade levels (elementary, 46%; junior high, 52%; senior high,

36%). Disrespect appeared to peak during junior high and decrease in senior high.

Alcohol and other drug usage was the second most frequently mentioned problem by teachers in urban schools (26%), but was the fourth most serious problem identified by teachers in rural schools (17%). Alcohol and drug usage was reported as a serious problem by more senior high teachers (28%) than junior high (20%) or elementary teachers (15%).

Disruptive behavior during class and aggressive behavior (fighting, etc.) were reported more frequently by teachers in rural schools (21%) than by teachers in urban schools (11%), and by more elementary (22%) than junior high (8%) or senior high teachers (11%). Likewise, lack of motivation to learn, students' lack of communication with parents and teachers, and inattentiveness were reported more frequently by teachers in rural schools (20%) than in urban schools (16%), they were more common in junior high (20%) and senior high (25%) than elementary level (17%).

Handling Behavior Problems

Teachers in urban schools (39%) most frequently reported handling behavior problems by talking to the individual student and/or the entire class about the behavior and by using a mild desist (saying the student's name and requesting appropriate behavior), than teachers in rural schools (28%). These methods were also more frequently used by junior high teachers (46%) than senior high teachers (32%) or by elementary teachers (30%).

Teachers in rural schools (31%) most frequently reported handling behavior problems by giving positive reinforcement for appropriate behavior, trying to be understanding of the child's problem, allowing time for class discussion, and by giving individual attention. These methods were used by 26% of the teachers in urban schools. Senior high teachers used these methods most frequently (35%), as did the elementary teachers (30%), but only 17% of the junior high teachers reported using them.

Teachers in rural school more frequently (24%) reported separating the disruptive child from the class or by giving him/her a negative consequence (i.e., extra work, detention), than teachers in urban schools (20%). These methods were also more frequently used by junior high teachers (25%) and elementary teachers (24%) than by senior high teachers (16%).

The least frequently used methods by teachers of all grade levels (elementary 19%; junior high 13%; senior high 16% and in large 15% and small schools 19%) was stopping class work until the behavior stopped or trying to ignore the behavior.

Eliminating Problem Behavior

How could schools work toward eliminating problem behavior? Consistent rules, with consistent reinforcement of those rules, was the most frequently reported suggestion of teachers (elementary, 45%; junior high, 44%;

senior high, 33%) in both urban (43%) and rural schools (35%).

In-service sessions, workshops, and related educational methods to make teachers and parents aware of techniques of child management and for dealing with problem behavior were more frequently suggested by senior high teachers (30%) than by elementary (17%) or junior high teachers (16%), in both rural (22%) and urban schools (21%). Such in-service training programs have been recommended by Jacobsmeyer [4], Massey and Crosby [6], and Sanford, Emmer, & Clements [9].

Cooperation between parents and school personnel was perceived as a solution by more elementary teachers (23%) than junior high (16%) or senior high teachers (18%). More teachers in rural schools (24%) than urban schools (15%) suggested increased parent - school cooperation. The importance of cooperation in rural educational practices has been suggested by Rosenfeld [8].

Smaller class sizes and changes in curriculum were more frequently suggested as solutions by junior high (16%) and senior high teachers (15%) than by elementary teachers (6%). Eleven percent of both small and large schools' teachers made this suggestion.

The use of counselors for working toward eliminating behavior problems was suggested by very few teachers (elementary, 6%; junior high, 0%; senior high, 3%), in urban (1%) and rural schools (5%). This may be partially explained by fewer small schools having counselors.

According to teachers, students exhibit clearly different patterns of behavior problems in small rural schools than in urban schools. Teachers in small and larger schools utilize somewhat different behavior management techniques and suggest different solutions for eliminating problem behaviors.

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