Running Head: STUDENT BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

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Abstract

Student behavior problems are challenging at all levels in school. The purpose of this article was to determine the type, prevalence and complex nature of student behavior problem and its impact on teaching and learning. Archival data for discipline referrals in a middle school were examined. Data indicated that “Insubordination” was the most frequent referral reason followed by “Disruption of school/class activity” for both regular and special education students. Referrals for “Use of violence” and “Vulgar language” were infrequent for both groups. More referrals were issued to males (74% regular and 91% special education) than girls. The highest incidence of behavior problems occurred during the lunch period. Parental and school factors that contribute to student behavior problems are suggested and intervention and prevention strategies that have been successful in similar cases are discussed.

The Challenges of Managing Student Behavior Problems in the Classroom

The management of disruptive behavior problems is a familiar concern for many schools. In recent years, behavior difficulties in schools have increased, teachers seem to be unprepared to deal with the problem and the standard classroom management strategies teachers rely on does not appear to be working.

According to C.E.C.P (1998), "Difficult student misbehaviors, reported by teachers included violation of classroom rules, being truant from school, blaming others for problems, irresponsible behavior, and destruction of property." (p. 21). Displays of behavior problems and poor academic progress by children with severe behavior disorders, as well as difficult interactions with parents can place a tremendous demand on teachers. For instance, loss of control and time taken away from instruction to deal with behavior problems have a dramatic impact on a teacher's job, self-esteem and job satisfaction (Jenson, Reavis & Rhode, 1998). Student behavior problems and teacher frustration particularly in the middle schools are such that Tobin & Sugai (1996) suggest that more resources are needed to determine which students need additional services and what type of services.

Given the seriousness of these behaviors, teachers are spending disproportionately more time on behavior problems that take away from instructions, compromising learning for both the student with behavior difficulties and the rest of the class. The *primary purposes* of this article were to determine the type and prevalence of student behavior problems in the middle school and its impact on the teaching and learning environment, to discuss the complex contributing factors to student behavior problems (e.g., parent

and teacher factors), and to suggest prevention and intervention strategies that have been successful in reducing behavior problems..

Many factors seem to contribute to student behavior problems as well as poor classroom management. Some of these factors may be teacher training, parenting, the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), school discipline policies and school funding.

Teacher training and classroom management: Although regular classroom teachers indicate that, in their classrooms, emotionally and behaviorally disordered students have a detrimental effect on students who do not have disability; Knoff (1985) argues that some defiant classroom behaviors are often a function of ineffective classroom management style than the presence of students with disabilities. Rather, another factor that contributes to defiant behavior is suggested to be inadequate pre-service teacher training. Teachers report that they have not had adequate training on how to handle special education students and they do not have adequate support services and assistance in dealing with special education students (Minke and Bear, 1996).

Traditionally, teachers have dealt with student behavior that interferes with classroom instruction by using various kinds of negative consequences (e.g., verbal reprimands, time-out, and suspension). The goal, of course, has been to reduce, if not eliminate the immediate problem (Geddes, 1997). However, Canter & Canter (1993) suggest that research outcomes show that negative consequences usually are not the most effective in eliminating problem behavior. "Reactive" approaches that follow inappropriate behavior, such as punishment, are not only time consuming, but they fail to teach the student acceptable replacement behaviors and also may serve to reinforce the

inappropriate behavior. Jenson, Reavis and Rhode (1998) reiterated, “It is important that positive procedures be used with these difficult students because they usually have a history of punishment to which they have grown immune, they have a high risk for school dropout (estimated at 65%) and will not stay in a negative environment, and in the long run, permanent behavior changes are maintained only by basic positive procedures” (p. 2). Bear (1998) looked at teachers’ resistance to behavioral techniques and attributed it, among other things, to lack of training or understanding and failure to implement strategies correctly. This may exacerbate teachers’ sense of inadequacy and frustration when dealing with difficult students.

Parenting: Many students who demonstrate behavior difficulties come from home environments that lack positive parenting, support and modeling. Reid & Patterson (1991) implicated parents in the development of noncompliance and aggressive behaviors and cognitions in their children. In addition to modeling and reinforcing such behaviors, parents failed to support prosocial behaviors and academic achievement.

IDEA: Under IDEA, school districts must provide and pay for an appropriate education for every child with a disability regardless of cost (Jensen, 1996). This includes inclusion, the integration of the handicapped child as an equal member of the regular education classroom. Inclusion of the special education population, primarily those with emotional or behavioral disorders into the regular education classroom, has added to teacher frustration. Further, as Hehir (1994) pointed out, special education nationwide is excessively concerned about compliance with Federal laws and according to Fuchs & Fuchs (1994) insufficiently concerned about educational outcomes. Marchetti (1991) articulated, “Critics fear that special education students will not get enough attention in

regular classes, that the handicapped students can be disruptive, and that regular classroom teachers are not trained to handle special children's needs." (p. 14)

The preceding highlighted the complex nature of student behavior problems by discussing the role of teachers, parents, and school laws and practices.

Method

Participants

The population from which the data was drawn consisted of all students enrolled at a Midwestern middle school, for one school year. Data was readily available because the primary investigator's role as an assistant principal was to mange data and deal with discipline management. Total enrollment was about 540 students in grades 6, 7 and 8. Participants were 449 regular and 91 special education students and 26 of their teachers, 19 regular and 7 special education teachers and assistants.

Procedure

A record review was completed on student referral for disciplinary action by the classroom teachers during one school year (2 semesters). First, following the school disciplinary code and reflecting the literature on behavior problems in the schools, referral reasons were tallied using the following categories: Aggressive behavior, use of violence, vulgar language, indecent exposure, disruption of school/class activity, smoking, vandalism, theft, extortion, illegal use of firearms, arson, use/possession/sale of alcohol/drug, fighting/assault, weapon possession, insubordination, tardy and other (e.g., behavior problems on the school bus). Second, gender differences, frequency of referrals by teachers, administrative disciplinary decisions (e.g., out-of school suspension and-in-school restriction, expulsion, or alternative school), and the frequency of referrals

per class period and by grade were examined. For instance, we sought to answer such questions as, would there be any relationship between the frequency of behavior problem and time (period) or grade?

Results

Results indicated that 62% of special (n = 56) and 61% of regular education (n = 271) students received referrals for behavior problems. There were a total of 2,057 referrals during the school year (709 special education and 1,348 regular education occurrences). Sixty percent of the student body (n =327) was responsible for all referrals. The number of referrals for a student ranged from 1 to 33.

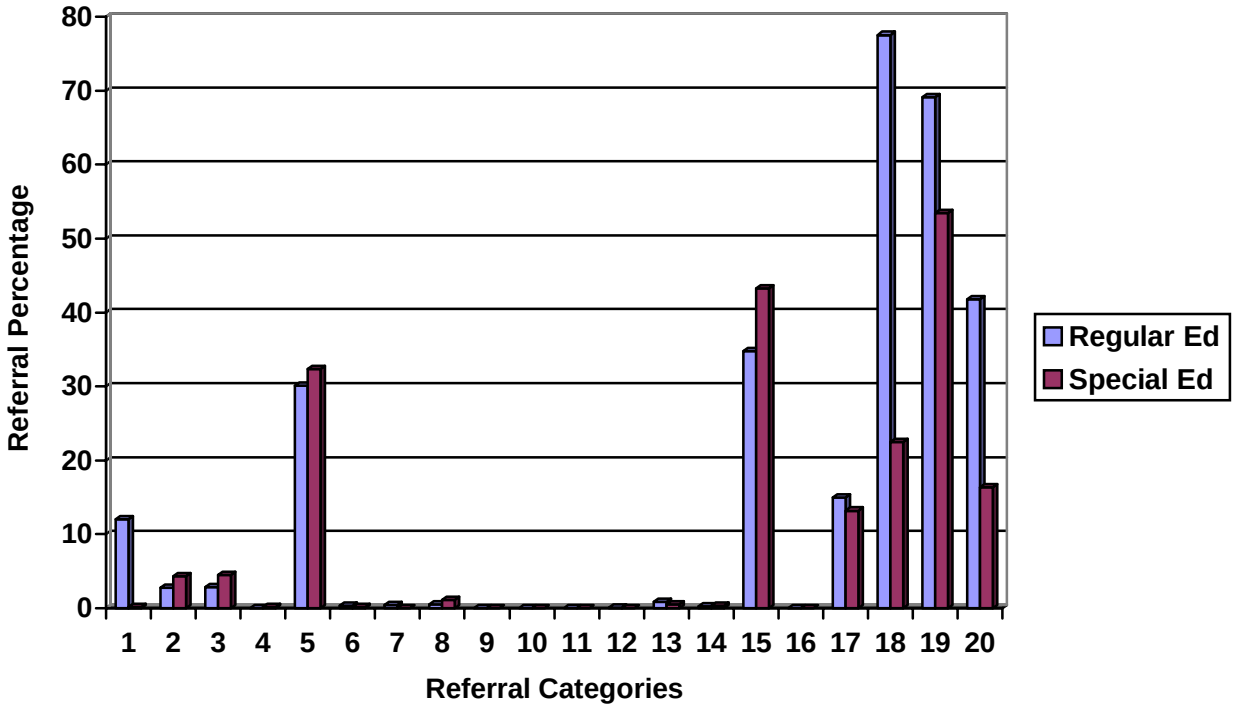
Figure 1 presents the Frequency of Referrals Students Received by Categories. “Insubordination” was the most frequent reason for referring students (35% regular and 43% special education) followed by “Disruption of school/class activity” (30% regular and 32% special education). Fifteen percent (15%) of regular education and 13% of special education referrals fell under the category of “other” (behavior problems at the bus stop and on the bus). More referrals were issued for regular education students for “Aggressive behavior, use of violence and fighting and assault” (15%) and only 5% for special education students. Under the category of “Vulgar language”, 2% and 4% of the referrals were written for regular and special education students, respectively.

Although there were gender differences, the pattern was the same for both special education and regular education referrals. Seventy four percent and 91% regular and special education referrals respectively were for boys and 26 % and 16% for girls.

The frequency of referrals for regular education and special education teachers was also compared. Forty percent of the special education referrals (243) were issued by the 7 special education teachers, while the 19 regular education teachers issued 63% of

Figure 1

Frequency of Referrals by Categories



Note: 1=aggressive behavior 2=use of violence 3=vulgar language, 4=indecent exposure 5= disruption of school/class activity, 6= smoking 7=vandalism 8=theft 9=extortion 10=illegal use of firearms 11=arson, 12=use/possession/sale of alcohol/drug 13=fighting/assault 14=weapon possession 15=insubordination 16=tardy 17=other 18=total 19=boys 20=girls.

the special education referrals (414). Regular education teachers also wrote 1,348 of the referrals (100%) for regular education students.

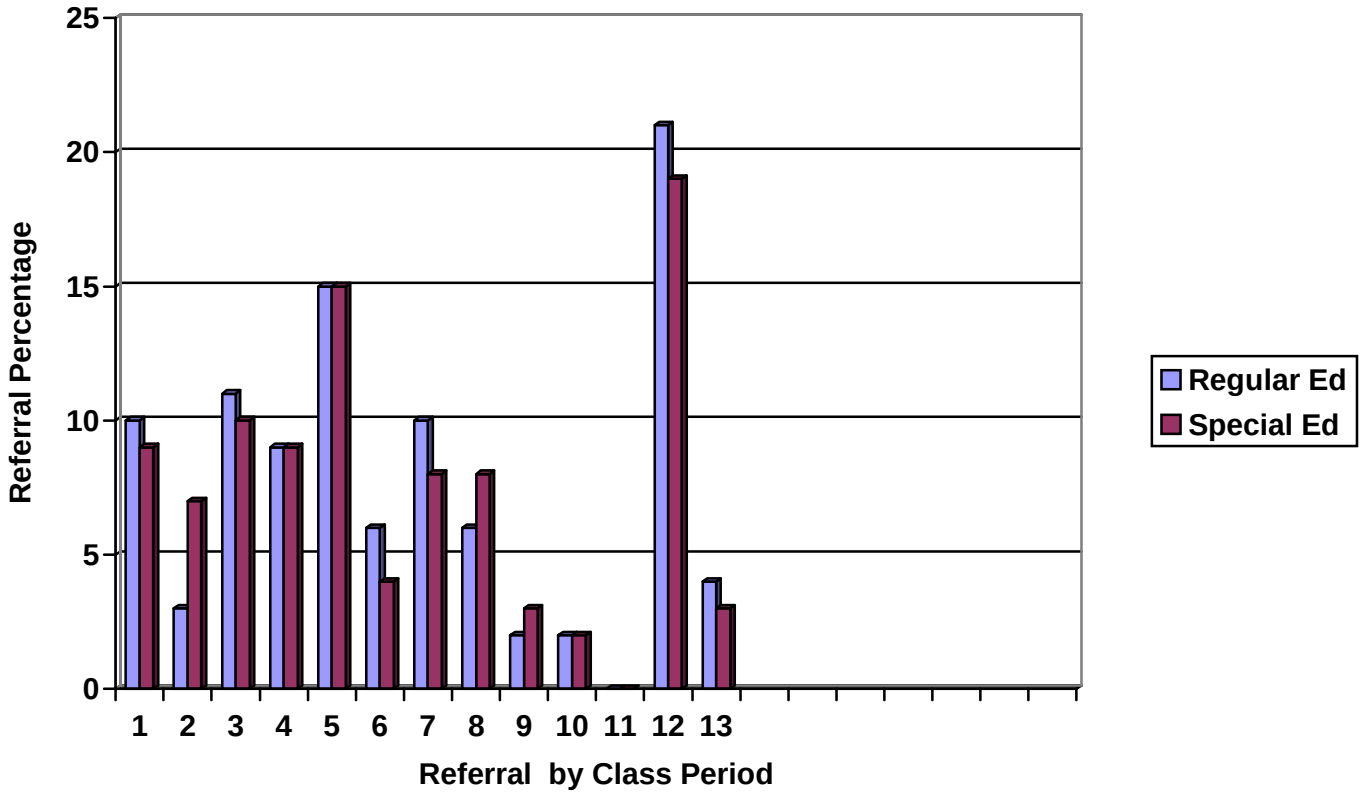
Regarding disciplinary decisions, school administrators seemed to use “Out-of-school suspension” and “In-school restriction” liberally. One hundred sixty four (39%) “Out-of-school” suspensions were issued to special education students while 259 (61%) suspensions were given to regular education students. In addition, 33% (397) of the “In-school suspension” were given to students in special education and 67% (798) to regular education students. A small number of students, 2% (n=12), were expelled from school, while 3% (n=14) were moved to alternative schools. Less than 1% (2 students) ended up in police custody and they were sent to a special school out of the state.

As Figure 2 shows, the prevalence of referrals per class period was also examined. Infarctions occurred regardless of which period. The highest referral occurred during the lunch hour 21% (280) and 19% (133) for regular and special education students, respectively. This was followed by 5th (14%, 184 referrals) and 3rd (11%, 153 referrals) periods for regular education students and 5th (15%, 103) and 4th (9%, 70) periods for special education students. Behavior problems dramatically decreased during Club (<1%), and Star (home room) resulted in fewer referrals as well (2% for both groups). The number of referrals for behavior problems appeared to decrease for both special and regular education categories as students moved up in grades, from 6th to 8th.

It appears behavior problems occur practically all day in all classrooms and among both regular education and special education students, except in a class where students chose to join and earn the privilege to participate.

Figure 2

Frequency of Referrals by Class Period



Note: **1 to 8 = regular class periods**
9 = In-school Restriction (ISR)
10 = Home room (STAR)
11 = Club
12 = Lunch
13 = Other

Discussion

The purposes of this article were to share our experiences and current referral data upon determining the prevalence and type of student behavior problems in the classroom, the impact of behavior problems on teaching and learning, discuss factors that might contribute to student behavior problems, and suggest prevention and interventions. Referral records from a Midwestern middle school, grades 6, 7 and 8, were examined. We narrowed the focus to students who were referred for disciplinary actions by their classroom teachers during one school year (2 semesters).

Both regular and special education groups had higher referrals than anticipated, indicating the need to be proactive in addressing disruptive behaviors in and around the school. Over 60% of both special and regular education students received referrals for behavior problems. In other words, 327 of the student body (N = 540) showed at least one type of behavior problem during the school year, earning a total of 2,057 referrals. This is an alarming rate. It is no surprise that school teachers are frustrated and stressed (Tobin & Sugari, 1996). Phi Delta Kappan (1996) echoed teachers' frustration when it reported that the lack of discipline is the biggest problem facing public schools. In a recent unpublished survey, 50% of cooperating teachers and 35% of student teachers indicated that dealing with disruptive students causes high level of stress, while only15% of cooperating teachers and 30% of student teachers indicated medium stress level.

The number of referrals for a student ranged from 1 to 33. When a student engages in 33 infractions in a school year, it is unlikely that any meaningful learning is taking place. It also suggests that the type of intervention used is ineffective and problems continue to persist, resulting in a "revolving door" discipline problem. Issuing a referral

for a disciplinary action is a form of punishment; and as Canter & Canter (1993) suggested, punishment does not teach the student acceptable replacement behaviors and may reinforce inappropriate behaviors. Further, "Insubordination" was the most frequent reason teachers gave for referring students followed by "Disruption of school/class activity." This is similar to the findings of previous researchers (Geiger, 2000, Tulley & Chi, 1995) who concluded that most of the discipline problems in schools are disruptive type rather than severe behavior problems. Results suggest the presence of less than positive classroom environment and student and teacher interaction.

Research is conclusive that the approach to behavior management most likely to succeed is positive reinforcement and prevention, where the teacher thinks about, anticipates and plans for potential problems before they occur (Doyle, 1980). Unfortunately, Bear (1998) reviewed Brohy's (1996) exemplary study on strategies for school discipline and concluded that positive approaches, such as praise, modeling, contracting, group contingencies, and social problem solving were much less common. Further, he noted that students with externalizing discipline problems receive more punitive and controlling disciplinary actions. The importance of a positive environment was further echoed by Gartrell (1995), who suggested that such orientation aims at establishing a nurturing learning environment by implementing positive approaches for intervention. It is imperative that teachers are well trained to understand the principles of learning and effective implementation of behavior management.

However, the operant learning approach in the schools is not unopposed. Research indicates (Lepper, Keavney & Drake, 1996) that rewards improve behavior in the short-term, but not in the long-term. Students begin to look for external rewards,

lowering intrinsic motivation. To address such concerns, drawing from the social learning theory and research, the social cognitive approach to self-discipline has successfully taught students self-management skills (Elias and Tobias, 1996). Self-management skills enable students to take control of their own behaviors and begin to take responsibility for their success. Jenson, Reavis and Rhode (1998) suggested, "they (students) will need to depend less on the teacher for guidance, reinforcement, and control," also begin to become an "active participant in their own improved performance and perceive themselves as more competent" (p. 114).

Teachers issued more referrals for regular education students for "Aggressive behavior, use of violence, and fighting and assault" (15%) than for special education students (5%). This is inconsistent with Roach's (1994) report that teachers and particularly, parents of students in regular education classrooms have begun speaking out and question inclusion placements, especially of disruptive students. "Parents are saying that the issue should be about a safe environment, not about placing disabled students in a regular classroom environment." (Page 22) In this study, special education students did not pose more threat to safety in the classroom than regular education students. Behavior problems seem to be school wide and not limited to one group. In addition, regular education teachers issued 63% of the special education referrals (414) and 100% (1,349) of the regular education referrals. These data suggest that teachers are experiencing difficulty managing their classrooms, whether students have a disability or not.

More boys received referrals for discipline than girls. Seventy four percent and 91% of regular and special education referrals, respectively, were for boys. Wehmeyer and Schwartz (2001) addressed this gender gap and indicated that (1) boys are more

likely to have higher activity levels and exhibit behaviors that do not conform to classroom expectations and (2) boys out number girls 2 to 1 in special education. It appears the result was consistent with the current phenomena.

It is understood that if students are not in school, formal education does not occur, especially for at-risk students. It is astounding that schools use “out-of-school suspension and in-school restriction” so frequently. Regular education students received twice as many out-of- school suspensions (61%) and in-school restrictions (66%) as special education students. The implementation of IDEA may explain this discrepancy. For special education students, currently suspension cannot exceed 10 days for the school year. As a result, school administrators may be hesitant to suspend special education students.

In-school restriction (ISR) was not an effective deterrent either. Despite strict guidelines and knowing that any infraction in ISR would result in suspension for one day, students continued to receive referrals. It appears that being removed from the classroom or the school may have served as escape, positive reinforcement, for students to continue to engage in behaviors that removed them from the classroom in the first place. A small number of students, 2% (12 students), were expelled from school increasing the likelihood of dropping out of school. Further, students with behavior problems are often rejected or neglected by their peers and are at-risk for dropping out of school, juvenile and adult crime, and childhood and adult psychopathology (Stein & Merrell, 1993). It is clear that discipline procedures need to be evaluated and revised.

Because students with behavior problems have more difficulty managing themselves in unstructured environment, it was no surprise that the highest referral occurred during the lunch hour 21% and 19% for regular and special education students, respectively. Periods 4 and 5 were staggered lunch periods. While some students were taking lunch period others were in 4th or 5th period classes. Whether they were in class or at lunch, both groups showed significant disruptive behaviors throughout the school year. On the other hand, behavior problems dramatically decreased, for both groups, during Club (<1%), and Star (home room) resulted in fewer referrals as well (2%).

Club was a period added to the regular schedule only on Friday. Students chose one club per semester and became members of that club. If students misbehaved on Friday, they lost their privilege to attend club for that day. Fridays turned out to be the best day for the entire school as there were very few referrals. This practice was a good example of positive reinforcement and it was effective. Star (home room) was a 20-minute period at the beginning of each day where students reported to the same classroom teacher throughout the year. It was assumed that Star would present the opportunity for students and the teacher to build relationships and bond, as well as give students the opportunity to complete unfinished assignments due that day. It appears that Star achieved its purpose as few infractions were reported. The question is then, how could schools generalize and practice these models every day?

It was encouraging to note that the occurrences of behavior problems appeared to decrease for both special and regular education categories as students moved up in grades from 6th to 8th. Although many variables may account for this change, maturity may be one of them.

Thus far the discussion has highlighted the overwhelming demands students with behavior difficulties place on the teaching and learning experience and some of the variables that may contribute to student behavior problems. The remainder of the paper is devoted to *prevention and intervention*.

The authors of this article suggest that society's number one goal should be to *prevent* the development of less than positive behaviors in children. Policy makers must give priority to prevention and proactive practices in the form of mandated child development and parenting classes for parents and enrichment and intervention programs for their children. Further, they suggest that poor parenting and lack of support must be viewed as child neglect and abuse, because there is a correlation between poor parenting and behavioral problems in children (Reid & Patterson, 1991). Although this may seem a radical idea, the current situation calls for a radical approach.

For intervention programs for students with behavioral problems to be successful, a comprehensive broad-based approach is needed (Bear, 1998). The goal should be to work as a team to identify how best to promote student behavior that is more socially responsible. Supporting the collaboration of all involved, Bondi and Wiles (1998) suggested that student achievement in schools is higher, among other things, if there is a high degree of parent involvement, a strong guidance program and opportunities for tutorial help from peers, parents, and other adults, positive reinforcement from both teachers and support staff, and maximum time is spent on instruction time on task (p.338).

Consultation and collaboration can lessen the burden for teachers. With the accountability movement, high-stake testing, teacher shortage and budget constraints,

teachers may have even less time to address behavior difficulties. For instance, teachers report being overwhelmed by students who need intensive care and special accommodations. According to Roach (1994), “Teachers are being asked to increase test score, teach to each child’s learning style, wear rubber gloves while attending to small cuts, and take money out of their own pocket to pay for lunch for a child, and embellish self-esteem.” Under such circumstances, immediate solutions to complex problems take precedent over strategies for prevention and long-term development (Reschly & Ysseldyke, 1995 and Bear, 1998). Therefore, teachers must be open to the expertise of other school professionals, and also reach out to parents and communities for more support.

The anonymous African saying, “It takes a village to raise a child,” must be truly practiced. Adelman (1996) pointed out the importance of joining school and community resources for targeting behaviors related to school discipline. Mentoring appears to be one of the untapped community resources that could provide additional support staff from outside (Mayer, et al., 1983). Many more studies have shown the multiple benefits of mentoring, such as the development of emotional support and friendship, improved social network (Fishman et al., 1997), improved self-esteem and confidence (Utley et. al., 1997), increased set of knowledge and skills (Harper et al., 1995), and values such as honesty, sharing, and empathy could be modeled (Miller, 1997 cited in Barton-Atwood, 2000). According Townsel (1997) mentors provide support, control, structured time, and internal assets such as educational commitment, positive values, and social competence. In 1990, Yeats (in Muscott, H.S., 1999) found that mentoring that emphasized

responsibility and self-control resulted in 34% decrease in administrative referrals for serious misbehavior and 49% decrease in observable out-of-control behaviors.

Mentoring appears to benefit academic performance as well. Berry (1991) reported that mentoring results in improved academic achievement, increased attendance, reduced suspension, and increased participation in extracurricular activities (in Campbell-Whatley et al., 1997). In another study, special education students with behavior problems were reported to be more receptive to learning when they received consistent in-school assistance from an adult who served both as a mentor and an advocate (Fishman, Stelk and Clark, 1997).

In conclusion, this article suggests that behavior problems among middle school students are at an all time high, teaching and learning is often compromised and the cause of difficult behaviors is complex and multilevel. Parent factors (poor parenting and lack of environmental support), teacher factors (lack of or limited teacher training in behavior management and collaborative and consulting skills), student factors and inflexible interpretation and implementation of IDEA seem to be some of the contributing factors to behavior difficulties in children.

Thus, the implication of this study is that assessment and intervention of student behavior problems must be viewed as complex. It is imperative that schools support prevention and intervention efforts that include training for parents and teachers, the use of positive reinforcement, social-cognitive problem-solving skills training for students, and mentoring.

The literature suggests the positive contribution of mentoring to student success. However, controlled research is still lacking and it should be considered for future research.

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