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## Middle school teachers' perceptions of their schools' formal and informal administrative policies on children labeled with behavioral problems

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Tierra Danielle Watkins  
Middle School Teachers'  
Perceptions of their Schools' Formal  
and Informal Administrative Policies  
on Children Labeled with Behavioral  
Problems

ABSTRACT

This exploratory qualitative study was undertaken to identify teachers' perceptions of the formal and informal administrative policies that are used to identify children as having behavioral problems. Additionally, it sought to identify their thoughts regarding the administrative policies on children who have been identified as having behavioral problems.

Middle school teachers in the public school system who have at least three years teaching experience were recruited from Philadelphia and New York City Public School Districts. Twelve teachers participated in the study. Participation included answering a demographic questionnaire as well as sitting for a taped interview in which questions were asked pertaining to administrative policy, school setting, classroom placement, students with disruptive behavior, and what happens to kids once they are labeled.

The findings of the research showed that both effective and ineffective formal and informal administrative policies are used when identifying and managing students with behavioral problems. Of further significance to this study was the participants' belief that labeling children as being disruptive affects them developmentally. Suggestions for further research were given that may aid in educators' understanding of mental health issues, as well as teachers being included in the process of policy making.

MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR SCHOOLS' FORMAL  
AND INFORMAL ADMINISTRATIVE POLICIES ON CHILDREN LABELED WITH  
BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Social Work.

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2007

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is dedicated to all of those children who have been labeled as “disruptive students” and to those special teachers who have given them a second chance.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

As a social worker on an inpatient psychiatric unit, this author treated countless adolescents who were deemed “disruptive” in their school environment. This thesis is an attempt to bring forth what the author wished she had known when she was fielding interventions with the adolescents on the inpatient unit and having discussions with school personnel in an attempt to gain the students access back into the school after discharge. How are students with behavioral problems handled in the school environment? How are they identified and treated? What formal and informal policies guide such decisions? How do environments placing such a label onto these children work?

The traditional approach to behavior problems in schools has been reactive and largely negative (Ogilvy, 1994) over the years. Many students attending public schools exhibit discipline problems such as disruptive classroom behavior, vandalism, bullying, and violence. Once these students are labeled as being disruptive, they are often verbally reprimanded, given time-outs, sent out of the room, suspended or expelled from school, placed in special education classrooms, and ultimately, moved to alternative placements. Suspensions and expulsions have been used with increasing frequency despite the fact that the practice has been denounced as ineffective and counterproductive (Arcia, 2006). Many teachers and school administrators expect students to listen attentively, follow

directions, produce correct school work, and control their temper in conflict situations (Lane, Pierson, & Givner, 2003). Yet, teacher and administrator expectations are often unclear, and it is difficult for students to meet these expectations in their current classrooms and school environment. Once these expectations are unmet, it is often up to the individual teacher and/or administrator to implement the disciplinary measure they feel is suitable for the infraction.

Awareness of the problem of disruptive behavior in the school environment seems to be increasing in today's society, and there are a growing number of media reports, books, professional journals, and legislative policies that are seeking to explain the phenomenon and to advise educators as to methods to undertake when faced with such issues. However, there continues to be a dearth in the literature on the actual administrative policies that are being utilized when dealing with students who exhibit behavior problems in the school setting. Furthermore, there is a complete lack of information distinguishing formal policy from informal policy and on which of these policies are being employed by those who discipline students.

Social workers who practice in the public school system need this information because it is important for them to know about the policies and the ways in which they are used, so that they can help to develop and utilize appropriate treatment plans. School social workers can also provide preventive services, to work with students on their social skills, conflict resolution, expression of emotions, self-awareness, self-reflectiveness, and empathy toward others that may prevent such disciplinary measures from being necessary in the first place. Additionally, it is necessary for social workers in the school system to

work with the administration and teachers in order to get a grasp on the problems school systems face today.

This exploratory study will examine the formal and informal administrative policies that are used to identify children as having behavioral problems as seen by 12 experienced middle school teachers. It will also investigate teachers' perceptions of the formal and informal administrative policies on children who have been identified as having behavioral problems. The questions explored in the interviews deal with administrative policy, school setting, classroom placement, students with disruptive behavior, and what happens to kids once they are labeled. A qualitative research method was employed by conducting semi-structured interviews.

For the purposes of this study, the terms "behavioral problems" and "disruptive behavior" will be used interchangeably to apply to any behaviors that interfere with the classroom and learning environment (Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; Little, 2005; Fields, 1986). "Formal administrative policy" will apply to the written policies that are created by the local school boards and passed down to the school administrators, who further develop and operationalize the policies to best suit their individual school setting. These policies are then passed along to the teachers who are expected to enforce such policies in the school environment. "Informal administrative policy" can be understood as those policies that are created and employed by administrators and teachers in a discerning manner, although not supported by the local school board or teachers' union. "Administrators" are the leaders of the school; more specifically, they are understood to be the principals, vice/assistant principals, and deans in a given middle school setting.



This thesis is organized in five chapters. The Introduction will present the problem, rationale, purpose, study questions, and definitions. The Literature Review will follow the Introduction and it will provide further explanation of adolescence, aggressive and disruptive behavior problems, emotional and behavioral disorders, policies, disciplinary actions, and preventative measures. Next, the Methodology will describe the methods of research, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis procedures used. The Findings chapter will provide a general description of the participants and thematically present the findings of the research. Lastly, the Discussion chapter will summarize the findings, present the researcher's concerns regarding the findings and limitations of the study, and offer suggestions for future research on the topic.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will review the current literature on children with behavioral problems in the school environment in order to provide a framework for the investigation into teachers' perceptions of their schools' formal and informal administrative policies on children labeled with behavioral problems. Much of the research on children exhibiting disruptive behavior in the school environment is addressed in regard to their relationship with teachers. This conceptualization has taken shape primarily through the ways in which individual teachers' respond to students with disruptive behavior, rather than through the administrative policies that are used to manage students with behavioral problems. Because teachers are the frontline individuals who implement administrative policies, it is important to understand what informs their decisions when using such policies.

The study of the formal and informal administrative policies on children with behavioral problems is limited, especially in regards to how children are labeled and how they are dealt with once they have been identified. The majority of the literature reviewed in this chapter was based upon investigations of the developmental stages of adolescence, disruptive behavior, emotional and behavioral disorders, disciplinary actions, and preventative measures. Despite the fact that the reviewed research was conducted across the levels of the school environment, it is important for this study to focus on the middle school environment because adolescents undergo significant

developmental changes throughout these pivotal middle school years (Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005; Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, & Iver, 1993). Although there is research on how the role of administrators relates to school policy, it is difficult to locate information regarding how administrators implement formal policies at their individual schools, and there is a complete absence of published literature on the informal policies administrators utilize in regard to students with behavioral problems.

One of the researchers' main challenges in studying the administrative policies regarding children with behavioral problems is that the implementation of such policies is often subjective and dependent on a variety of factors, including how students with behavioral problems are identified, teachers' involvement and relationship with students, administrators' involvement and relationship with students, school district policy, and community demographics. Additionally, the definition and use of the terms "behavioral problems" and "disruptive behavior" differ from author to author. Behavioral problems and disruptive behavior are usually discussed within the context of any behaviors that interfere with the classroom and school learning environment. However, when the concepts of behavioral problems and disruptive behavior are described by authors in reference to emotional and behavioral disorders, they are often referenced in terms of the complexities of the displayed actions.

Administrators are often described as individuals who have the challenging job of maintaining a positive school climate and dictating the specific punishment that will be enforced upon students. However, research has shown that "the extent of disciplinary removal is extremely inconsistent from school to school" (Skiba & Peterson, 2003, pp. 68-69). Therefore, it is logical to assume that administrators develop their own

interpretations of policies and how they will be implemented across the school setting. Consequently, the question remains as to how school administrators' formal and informal policies are used by teachers and administrators when identifying children with behavioral problems and how these policies are carried out once a child has been labeled by the administrators and/or teachers. In short, what are middle school teachers' perceptions of their schools' formal and informal administrative policies on children labeled with behavioral problems? The following review of literature will address the limited information available on this question.

### *Theoretical Framework*

#### *Systems Theory*

Nichols and Schwartz (2006) state that “the greatest challenge facing anyone who treats families is to see past personalities to the patterns of influence that shape family members' behavior” (p. 91). It would appear that what is displayed as one person's behavior may be related to the actions that occur within their relationships. Although it is relatively easy to notice themes in two-person relationships, it is more complex to see patterns of interaction in larger groups, such as whole families or an entire school. Family therapists have regarded systems theory as being so useful for that specific reason (Nichols & Schwartz).

“Systems theory had its origins in mathematics, physics, and engineering in the 1940s, when theoreticians began to construct models of the structure and functioning of organized mechanical and biological units” (Nichols & Schwartz, 2006, p. 91). Theorists such as Bateson and his colleagues found systems theory to be an ideal method for illuminating the ways in which families operated as organized units. Systems theory

purports that, “the essential properties of an organism, or living system are properties of the whole, which none of the parts have” (p. 91). They occur from the interactions and relationships among the elements. When the system is concentrated to separate elements, these properties are destroyed. Hence, “the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts” (p. 91). Consequently, systems perspective tells us that it would be illogical to try to comprehend a child’s behavior outside the context of her family. When trying to conceptualize systems theory, it is important to move from examining individuals to taking into account the family as a system, which ultimately means changing the focus from individuals to the occurrences of their relationships. “From a systemic perspective, the family is more than a collection of individuals; it is a network of relationships” (p. 91). Although the research of Nichols and Schwartz discusses systems theory in terms of family therapy, the theoretical base is applicable to the school system. Rather than view the student with a behavioral problem as an individual, it is important to examine the entire school as a whole unit, thus shifting the focus to interactions rather than personalities. Since a student with behavioral problems exists within the context of the school system and the network of relationships within it, it is important for teachers and administrators to use systems theory as a guide when dealing with these students.

### *Ecosystemic Theory*

The literature suggests that several researchers contributed to the field of knowledge regarding ecosystemic approaches. The research conducted by Molnar and Lindquist (1989), however, was pivotal in the utilization of ecosystemic approaches. Their research, along with others’, presented an ecosystemic approach to providing teachers, school psychologists, school counselors, school social workers, and school

administrators with an opportunity to examine and constructively rethink their commonsense ideas about problem behavior (Molnar & Lindquist; Cooper & Upton, 1990; Tyler & Jones, 2000). Molnar and Linquists' orientation toward change was strongly influenced by the work of family therapists who, drawing on diverse sources such as cybernetics, system theory, and hypnosis, have evolved a body of practical knowledge about how to help people solve their problems. Since ecosystemic ideas seek to "offer teachers the means to change the problem behaviour, not by challenging the behaviour overtly, but utilizing the systemic principles which sustain interactional patterns" (Cooper & Upton, 1990, p. 307), they can be used in a large number of very different problem situations in schools. Researchers call the approach to problem behavior an ecosystemic approach because they "view problem behavior as part of, not separate from, the social setting within which it occurs" (Molnar & Lindquist, 1989, p. xiv). In other words, classroom behaviors influence school behaviors and vice versa. Regarding schools and classrooms as ecosystems means that the behavior of everyone in a classroom or school in which a problem occurs influences and is influenced by that problem behavior (Molnar & Lindquist; Cooper & Upton; Tyler & Jones). "From this perspective a change in the perception or behavior of anyone associated with a problem has the potential to influence the problem behavior" (Molnar, & Lindquist, 1989, p. xv). The ecosystemic approach developed by Molnar and Lindquist has a number of distinctive characteristics:

1. It focuses directly on change in the problem situation rather than on the diagnosis of problem individuals.

2. It does not require elaborate or exhaustive plans either to replace or to supplement current practice. The ideas can be readily and comfortably employed by educators who have different styles and work in a variety of settings.
3. It enables educators to start small with manageable aspects of problems.
4. It encourages divergent explanations for problem behavior.
5. It encourages lightheartedness and open-mindedness in the face of chronic problems.
6. It is designed to build on strengths, not to overcome deficits.
7. The ideas can be mastered without any specialized background knowledge. (p. xv)

In school, problems are characteristically described in terms of individuals, deficiencies, and past events. Explaining a problem in this way has several negative consequences. First, although much of what might be said about the child may be true, it is often unhelpful as a guide to positive change. The information does not give much practical guidance about changing the problem behavior. Second, the educator is denied the opportunity to do something about the problem. Third, attention is directed away from the social interactions in the school and classroom. Finally, by focusing on the behavior of one individual who is regarded as having deficiencies in a problem situation virtually precludes consideration of what the individual does well, what is right with the school and classroom, and what can be changed in the present to make things better. “From an ecosystemic perspective, problems are not seen as the result of one person’s deficiencies or inadequacies. Instead, problems are viewed as part of a pattern of

interpersonal interaction” (Molnar & Lindquist, 1989, p. xvi). Viewed this way, attempted solutions to problem behavior that do not change things for the better are part of the problem. Approaching school problems ecosystemically will, therefore, help educators to see problems within their interpersonal contexts and to change their responses in chronic problem situations. Ecosystemic theory has the potential to create an entirely new school environment, but first, it must be adopted by school administration and implemented into a formal policy.

### *Adolescence*

At the age of 11 or 12, the child has “consolidated the developmental accomplishments of middle childhood” (Davies, 2004, p. 385) and is beginning the transformation to becoming an adolescent. Adolescence is a developmental period that is characterized by many changes, “including the biological changes associated with puberty, important changes in relations with family and peers, and the social and emotional changes related to transition from elementary to middle school” (Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005, p. 112). Additionally, adolescents experience the emergence of sexuality, as well as cognitive development (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, & Iver, 1993). According to the literature, these rapid changes can have a significant impact on a variety of developmental outcomes, including academic achievement, self-concept development, and achievement motivation (Wigfield et al., 2005). Although the majority of these individuals experience this developmental period without markedly high levels of chaos and stress, some individuals do experience difficulty during this period. Research conducted by Eccles et al. (1993) suggests that “the early adolescent years mark the beginning of a downward spiral that leads some



adolescents to academic failure and school dropout” (p. 90). Perhaps the change in the learning environment that is associated with the transition from elementary to middle school is a probable explanation for the declines in the school-related measures which are associated with the middle school transition. Thus, it is important for this study to focus on the administrative policies that are related to students with behavioral problems because these behaviors are often prominent during the developmental period of adolescence.

#### *Biological Development During Early Adolescence*

Another important aspect of adolescence to consider is the biological changes that individuals undergo. Because girls enter puberty approximately 18 months before boys do, during early adolescence, girls and boys of the same chronological age are at quite different points in their physical development, which can complicate their relationships (Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005). There are also gender differences with respect to when children enter puberty; while some enter puberty considerably early, there are others that are considerably late in comparison to their peers of the same age. It appears that the two groups that require the most attention from adults are early-maturing girls and late-maturing boys. Wigfield et al. (2005) found that in each case, and perhaps particularly for early-maturing girls, there is a chance that pubertal development may interfere with early adolescents’ focus on school, as it has the potential to impact their social relations and overall adjustment.

#### *Cognitive Development During Early Adolescence*

Not only do adolescents experience biological changes, their thinking also changes in significant ways during this phase of development. Keating (2004) found that

adolescents increasingly engage in abstract thinking, consider the hypothetical as well as the real, engage in more sophisticated and elaborate information-processing strategies, and reflect on oneself and complicated problems. During this time, adolescents' reasoning skills and decision-making abilities also increase. However, adolescents are also more prone to engage in perilous behaviors than are young adults. Researchers are now beginning to connect changes in brain structure and functioning to cognition and behavior, with decision making being one area of special interest (Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005; Keating).

#### *Development of the Self During Early Adolescence*

The development of the self is a major component during early adolescence. Due to the fact that sense of self is so important during adolescence, it is necessary to define key terms that will help add to the discussion. Wigfield and Wagner (2005) define self-concept as

individuals' beliefs about and evaluations of their characteristics, roles, abilities, and relationships. Self-esteem is the individual's sense of his or her overall worth or value as a person. Identity is a term broader than either self-concept or self-esteem, referring to individuals' general sense of themselves and their psychological reality that includes many different beliefs and attitudes about the self. (p. 228)

The formation of adolescent identity includes the successful negotiation of a variety of activities and relationships during adolescence, "including school achievement, social relations with others, and development of career interests and choices, along with a great deal of exploration of different activities and roles" (Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005, p.

113). Being as such, an adolescent's ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation are all important aspects to the development of their identity. A challenge that individuals will inherently experience lies with incorporating these experiences and characteristics into a coherent sense of self, which is fundamental to identity formation. In regard to self-concept, there seems to be a decline during the early adolescent years in children's beliefs about their ability in different school subject areas. Research shows that adolescent's self-esteem is lowest directly after the transition into middle school, but increases during students' seventh grade year (Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991). Self-esteem appears to be highest when adolescents believe they are proficient in activities that are important to them, in addition to when social relations are positive.

#### *Peer Relationships During Early Adolescence*

Friends can help each other through significant life transitions, such as the school transitions that adolescents go through (Rubin, Coplan, Chen, Buskirk, & Wojslawowicz, 2005). Due to the period of time in which middle school occurs, early adolescents' friendships are sometimes sadly interrupted as they go to new schools, which are often different from those of their friends and peers from elementary school. Once they arrive to middle school, adolescents are then separated into classrooms and groups, which further divide them from their elementary school classmates. It is often a concern that children will succumb to peer pressure and end up in the "bad" peer group; however, it has been argued that for many adolescents, peer groups serve more as reinforcement to predispositions, rather than changing adolescents' characteristics in a significant way (Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005). Unfortunately, middle school children will have greater exposure to bullying and peer violence than they did during their elementary

school years. This issue is of great concern because being bullied has been associated with numerous developmental outcomes, including loneliness, depression, and social anxiety, as well as lower school performance (Wigfield et al., 2005).

#### *Teacher Relationships During Early Adolescence*

Since adolescents' relationships with their parents may become more strained during this time of development, relationships with their teachers can become a significant source of support for many individuals. Despite this fact, middle school students have often reported that the quality of their relationships with their teachers has declined since their time in elementary school (Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005). The explanations commonly given for such a negative shift are the differences in the amount of time that both levels of teachers spend with their students (middle school teachers see their students for one period each day), as well as the number of students that middle school teachers are required to teach. "Teacher support appears to play a significant role in the amount of academic effort that adolescents exert, their positive social behavior (such as the extent to which they follow classroom rules), and their well-being" (p. 115). These supportive relationships are extremely important to those individuals who are struggling to adjust to the middle school environment, while coming from comparatively disadvantaged backgrounds or those who are suffering through stressful life events.

#### *Educational Environments During Early Adolescence*

Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, and Iver (1993) purport that there are developmentally inappropriate changes in a number of classroom organizational, instructional, and climate variables, including task structure, task

complexity, grouping practices, evaluation techniques, motivational strategies, locus of responsibility for learning, and quality of teacher-student and student-student relationships. (pp. 92-93)

These changes appear to be a contributing factor to the negative change in students' motivation and beliefs that are related to achievement, which are assumed to coincide with the transition into middle school. It has been argued in the literature that adolescents need a relatively safe, as well as an intellectually challenging environment in order to be able to adapt to these shifts (Eccles et al., 1993). Ultimately, this environment needs to provide an atmosphere of comfort, in addition to thought-provoking new opportunities for growth. Although light has been shed on these needs, the environmental changes often associated with the transition to middle school seem particularly harmful in that they

emphasize competition, social comparison, and ability self-assessment at a time of heightened self-focus; they decrease decision making and choice at a time when the desire for control is growing; they emphasize lower level cognitive strategies at a time when the ability to use higher level strategies is increasing; and they disrupt social networks at a time when adolescents are especially concerned with peer relationships and may be in special need of close adult relationships outside of the home. (p. 94)

It is true that adolescents long for more freedom from adult control than they did as young children; however, they do not want total freedom, nor do they want to be emotionally detached from their parents. Rather, they long for a gradual enhancement in

the opportunity for self-determination and participation in decision making and rule making.

The literature has shown that early adolescence is an extremely delicate time of a child's life, full of changes and new experiences. Middle school is one such place where an adolescent ventures out to experience life through a completely different lens. The relationships a child encounters in the school setting are a key component to how they will continue to develop. Not only are the relationships with peers important, but those bonds with teachers and administrators are equally essential to establish and foster. Therefore, it is imperative to elicit information from middle school teachers in order to understand the impact that formal and informal administrative policy has on these children.

#### *Aggressive and Disruptive Behavior Problems*

The following section focuses on the distinction between aggressive and disruptive behavior problems. More specifically, the divergent types of behavior problems can be witnessed in the school environment and the reviewed literature will show how the factors correspond to one another.

#### *Aggressive Behavior*

The literature suggests that reactive aggression and proactive aggression are the two different subtypes of aggression. Reactive aggression is characterized by “‘hot-blooded’ anger, menacing hostile attacks, defensive postures in response to even minor threat, and intensive patterned autonomic activation” (Dodge, Lochman, Harnish, Bates, & Pettit, 1997, p. 38). It appears that youths showing signs of reactive aggression are lacking familiar relationships with adults, such as parents and teachers; therefore, they are

unable to show empathy and take others' intentions into account. On the other hand, proactive aggression is "highly organized, 'cold-blooded,' appetitive in nature, and characterized by little autonomic activation" (p. 38). For proactive aggressors, aggression has become a central aspect of their character, which serves the purpose of attaining for themselves what caregivers have denied them, such as personal security, competence, and control (McAdams & Lambie, 2003). "Due to its predatory, remorseless, and internalized nature, proactive aggression is often considered the more serious of the two subtypes" (p. 123).

The development and promotion of aggressive behavior has been contributed to the school environment (Thomas & Bierman, 2006). During children's first three years of elementary school, their exposure to aggressive classrooms is a critical factor contributing to their behavioral development in the school setting (Thomas & Bierman). This is particularly relevant to those children that are vulnerable to attending large schools in areas of low socioeconomic status:

Because of a number of social stratification variables, including economic disadvantage and discrimination, African American children, in particular, are more likely than other children to live and attend schools in risky, inner-city neighborhoods, where the risk of victimization by peers is high and where aggressive behavior may be sanctioned by peers as an effective strategy for self-protection and interpersonal conflict resolution. (p. 473)

In support of this fact, Thomas and Bierman (2006) report that African American students more than Caucasian students were placed in perilous school and classroom environments, mainly due to the community demographics. Additionally, urban schools

that serve large populations of disadvantaged youth were shown to have classrooms with excessive rates of student aggression.

### *Disruptive Behavior Problems*

For many years, the media has portrayed behavior problems in the school environment, such as aggression, bullying, and violence, as being significant areas of concern (Little, 2005). McAdams and Lambie (2003) have conducted research to support this claim. These researchers found that “school administrators across the country have been urged to expand and intensify violence prevention, risk assessment, crisis planning, and intervention activities” (p. 123), due to the number and gravity of crises involving physical violence. This urgency appears to stem from school administrators reporting that since the beginning of their professional careers, they have witnessed a noteworthy increase in the numbers of aggressive incidents (McAdams & Lambie). Although these aggressive and violent behaviors are seemingly the most troublesome, the literature revealed that the most pressing problems plaguing educators in the school environment is disruptive student conduct (Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997). Research has shown that talking out of turn and hindering other children were the most problematic and frequent behaviors, as purported by secondary school teachers (Little, 2005). This supports prior research that was conducted in which “repeated infringements of class rules and procedures,” (Fields, 1986, p. 56) and minor behaviors such as poor attention and off-task behavior were found to be the most common disruptive behaviors (Fields, 1986). It is noteworthy to mention that children’s behavior at school can differ depending on the teacher; therefore, it is essential to take their perceptions into consideration when identifying problem behaviors.



As shown in the cited literature, aggressive and disruptive behavior problems are often a major concern in the school environment. Consequently, it is essential to examine how administrative policies affect students with aggressive and disruptive behavior problems since they can have a major impact on the student's development and progression through the school years.

### *Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*

Administrative policies guide school personnel in a number of ways; one such instance in which administrative policies are utilized is when individuals display problems resulting from emotional and behavioral disorders. In an effort to contain such disturbances, various levels of policies are employed. Thus, it is important to examine the following literature in order to understand why these problems elicit such a strong reaction.

### *Assessment of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*

During the 1990s, important federal legislation and reports shed light on the growing concern surrounding the assessment of children with emotional and behavioral disorders. The 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) highlighted issues relating to assessment, learning disabilities, and discipline practices for students with disabilities (IDEA, 1997). It has been shown that "IDEA identification rates of children with emotional disturbance remain far below the estimates of the prevalence of severe childhood mental disorders" (Olympia, Farley, Christiansen, Pettersson, Jenson, & Clark, 2004, p. 839), indicating that there are numerous children with impairments who are not receiving proper services.

Additionally, in 1999, the United States Surgeon General released a statement on the status of mental health in the country; focusing on the need to improve not only the diagnosis, but also the treatment of children with emotional and behavioral disorders (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 1999). The report expressed that there is a need for the use of contextually relevant assessment, which will serve as a means to improve diagnosis and treatment (HHS, 1999). Contextually based assessment methods address the problems of more traditional assessment procedures, such as symptom checklists, by “examining specific phenomena that occur within a particular situation or across many situations and by requiring respondents to report similar behaviors across multiple situations” (McDermott, Steinberg, & Angelo, 2005, p. 121). The Adjustment Scales for Children and Adolescents is an example of such an assessment tool (McDermott et al., 2005).

One important, yet often problematic aspect of assessment is determining if a child meets criteria for special education services based on what the literature describes as unclear, poorly defined, and professionally defenseless criteria (Olympia, Farley, Christiansen, Pettersson, Jenson, & Clark, 2004). Further complicating matters, is the “exclusionary clause” included in the current definition of serious emotional disturbance, which “excludes children who are socially maladjusted (unless they are also emotionally disturbed) from the definition of emotional disturbance” (p. 836). Researchers have found that the “problems associated with the use of social maladjustment (SMA) as an exclusionary concept have continued to plague those charged with responsibility for assessment, eligibility determination, and provision of services to students with emotional and behavioral difficulties across the nation” (p. 835). The literature also suggests that

organizations such as the American Psychological Association (APA), Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders (CCBD), and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) have continued to debate the specific phrasing of the definition of social maladjustment (Olympia, Farley, Christiansen, Pettersson, Jenson, & Clark, 2004). Due to the lack of consensus of a formal definition, individuals who are formulating assessments must be aware of the intricate subject matter while evaluating children with emotional and behavioral disorders. Although educators, school mental health workers, district administrators, and state policy makers have responded to the issue of social maladjustment, their responses “fail to consider the significance of the complex nature of emotional and behavioral disorders and the impact of [the] failure to reliably identify all students who are entitled to special education services and protections” (p. 844).

### *Instructional Interactions*

Once children are properly assessed for emotional and behavioral disorders, it is imperative that teachers present classroom materials to such individuals in a positive manner. Gunter and Shores (1994) assert that “aversive stimuli can result in escape and avoidance behavior that may be exhibited as disruptive behavior in classroom settings” (p.1). Although the means by which a teacher presents materials to his or her students may be unintentional, results similar to those found in the literature will be the likely result, especially when dealing with children with emotional and behavioral disorders. However, if a teacher provides an instructional sequence that is designed to supply the student with information needed in order to complete a task, prior to asking the student to do such a task, research shows that student’s disruptive behavior will decrease (Gunter, &

Shores); thus, displaying the significance of the instructional interaction on the performance of students.

### *Behavior Management*

Control and containment tend to be teachers' main goals when working with students who have emotional and behavioral disorders (Meadows & Melloy, 1996). Teachers must make an effort to run their classrooms in an effective manner, which Meadows and Melloy found to usually consist of the implementation of "behavior management systems" (p. 1) that tend to overstate the consequences for inappropriate behavior and understate the effects of appropriate behavior. Rather than responding to all behaviors when they occur, teachers in such systems only respond to inappropriate behavior in a reactive and reductive manner, and only when the behaviors have gotten to the extremely intense, unremitting stage (Meadows & Melloy). It is logical to reason that teachers must establish themselves as the leader of their classroom in order to be effective instructors. With that said, it is important that teachers communicate their expectations to students through classroom policies and procedures, in addition to being prepared to adhere to the consequences if such policies and procedures are not followed (Meadows & Melloy). "Rules must be enforced by the consistent application of specific and logical consequences so that students clearly understand the results of inappropriate behavior" (p. 125). Not only should teachers enforce appropriate consequences, they should also recognize and reinforce appropriate behavior. The literature shows that when they do so, students are more likely to be motivated to display appropriate behavior and utilize prosocial skills, which will ultimately create a positive classroom environment (Meadows & Melloy). Meadows and Melloy found this concept to be particularly important to

students with emotional and behavioral disorders because in order to improve the chances of these individuals utilizing the skills they have been taught, they need to learn and practice social skills while in less structured environments, and through exchanges with the teachers and peers who will ultimately serve as significant figures in their lives. Ultimately, crises, particularly those involving students with emotional and behavioral disorders, arise in schools due to the lack of clear cut policies and procedures, “inconsistent follow through for rule violations, insufficient support systems in place for students and teachers, and limited allowances for individual differences in social behavior” (p. 128). Therefore, if effective behavior management was of the utmost importance to school personnel, student behavior would not reach explosive levels and dire consequences would not have to be employed.

### *Policies*

According to Osher and Quinn (2003), “policies are general principles or courses of action that are operative in a venue over which the policymaker has legitimate authority to make and operationalize policy” (p. 52). Policies related to the school setting are developed and operationalized at many levels. Even though teachers may attempt to evade the impact of state and federal provisions mandating testing, how they perform in the classroom is affected by school administrators whose actions are determined by demands to improve test scores. Local individuals, such as superintendents, have the ability to decide when and how to interpret rules; therefore, policies may not always achieve its original goals. Individual schools can alter policies or regulate their impact by being discerning when implementing the policies. Although the intent of Public Law 94-172 was to improve the quality of treatment of children with disabilities, the literature

shows that “children with emotional disabilities did not fare well under the legislation” (Osher & Quinn, 2003, p. 54). For this reason, those who are responsible for implementing policy, such as teachers, should be knowledgeable about the original intent of the policy before taking part in dialogues regarding how to implement change. Ultimately, effective implementation of policy can lead to better learning opportunities and more productive teaching. However, it is unclear whether administrators are implementing policies in an effective manner, more specifically; it is unknown whether formal policies are being used across the board or if informal policies are implemented when managing students that exhibit behavior problems.

### *Zero Tolerance*

An example of a school-related policy is zero tolerance. The term “zero tolerance” refers to “policies that punish all offenses severely, no matter how minor” (Skiba & Peterson, 1999, p. 373). Such policies were derived from state and federal drug enforcement policies in the 1980s and from the beginning, the strict punishments given out due to zero tolerance policies caused significant controversy. By 1993, these harsh policies were being implemented by local school boards across the nation, not only for infractions involving drugs and weapons, but offenses that related to tobacco and school disruption. Over time, researchers have found that “increasingly broad interpretations of zero tolerance have resulted in a near epidemic of suspensions and expulsions for seemingly trivial events” (p. 374).

### *Disciplinary Actions*

The disciplinary actions utilized by teachers and administrators are imperative to examine because these measures are often a result of the policies that are enforced.

Furthermore, it is essential to glean information that focuses on whether disciplining actions are carried out systematically, or if they vary when geared toward handling students with disruptive behavior.

### *Teachers' Response to Misbehavior*

It is often the case that teachers feel overwhelmed when misbehavior occurs in the classroom; consequently, they report misbehavior to be a chief concern that faces them in the classroom (Martin, Linfoot, & Stephenson, 1999). Unfortunately, teachers often feel inadequately prepared to deal with misbehavior. Accordingly, there is a concurrent increase in the occurrence of teacher stress. "Frequent harshness, less attention on positive behavior, and more punishment of particular students can perpetuate misbehavior in the classroom" (p. 347). Additionally, teachers' responses to student misbehavior may be mediated by their beliefs about themselves, how efficient they are in dealing with the misbehavior, and their beliefs about what causes students' misbehavior. Martin et al. (1997) suggest that the only imperative and systematic predictor of teachers' personal efficacy was the degree to which they felt they could effectively manage their students' behavior. The literature indicated that "the greater teachers' concerns about misbehavior in the classroom, the less confident they felt in managing their students' behavior" (p. 354). They also found that the most probable support teachers were to utilize was school-based support, as opposed to non-school professional support and that teachers were likely to refer the disruptive child to other school personnel as a way to manage behavior, especially when they felt less confident in managing students' behavior. All of which suggests that many teachers prefer to deal with problematic behavior in-house, rather than consulting outside agencies for guidance.

### *Reasons for Referral*

The literature contends that behaviors that often led to office referral were those that suggested noncompliance (Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Bibou-Nakou, Kiosseoglou, & Stogiannidou, 2000) or disrespect (Skiba et al., 1997; Skiba & Peterson), rather than those that threaten safety, which has been a growing public concern in recent years (Mendez & Knoff, 2003). The most recurrent problems tend to be problems with authority figures, instead of behaviors that put others in danger. Skiba et al. found that “noncompliance and defiance are among the least well-tolerated of student behaviors in the classroom” (p. 299). These behaviors often significantly interfere with student’s own learning, with other student’s learning, and with the teacher’s capability to function in an effective manner (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2000). In regard to development, middle school students are under pressure due to issues of identity and authority; as a result, it is unsurprising that problems with authority embody the most widespread reason for disciplinary referral at the middle school level. Although the media suggests that serious behaviors, such as weapons possession or drugs and alcohol are of the utmost concern, the literature suggests that these extreme behaviors appear to be at a low frequency at the middle school level (Skiba et al.).

### *Who’s Being Punished*

Studies show that males receive the vast majority of all discipline referrals (McFadden & Marsh, 1992), more specifically; it has been asserted that those over-represented in suspensions across almost all infraction types are Black males (Mendez & Knoff, 2003). The literature also shows that “Black females [are] suspended at a much higher rate than White and Hispanic females at all three school levels” (p. 30).



Moreover, minority students are more likely to receive disciplinary action for minor offenses, and with “disproportionately higher levels of punishment or intensive intervention” (p. 32). Overall, the literature purports that Black students have been and continue to be, hugely over-represented when rates of suspension, (Mendez & Knoff; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; McFadden & Marsh) expulsion, and corporal punishment (Skiba & Peterson, 1999) are compared.

### *Suspensions, Expulsions, and Corporal Punishment*

The predicament of disruptive student behavior has been, and continues to be, among the most critical problems facing those in the education system. Corporal punishment was an early tradition of reprimand that was generally accepted in the school environment until the 1970s, and although it continues to be used as a disciplinary measure, it is not used as widely as it was in the past (McFadden & Marsh, 1992). More common traditional disciplinary methods, such as detention and suspension have been “consistently identified as the most frequently imposed disciplinary reaction to student infraction” (Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997, p. 295).

Suspension is delivered to punish an already-committed inappropriate act or behavior; it rarely has a logical, functional, or instructive connection to the offense or infraction; and it usually occurs in the absence of additional interventions that focus on teaching or reinforcing students’ more prosocial or appropriate responses to difficult situations. (Mendez & Knoff, 2003, pp. 30-31)

The highest rates of out-of-school suspension tend to be at the middle school and early high school levels. Suspension is often recognized as one of the more extreme responses to student behavior that is available to administrators within the range of disciplinary

options; administrators typically intend suspension to be punishment and students also perceive it as such (Mendez & Knoff). Furthermore, researchers have found that “school disciplinarians report that suspension is sometimes used as a tool to ‘push out’ particular students, to encourage ‘troublemakers’ or those perceived as unlikely to succeed in school to leave” (Skiba & Peterson, 1999, p. 376). Skiba and Peterson (2003) report that school characteristics, such as overall suspension rate, teacher attitudes, administrative centralization, quality of school governance, teacher perception of student achievement, and racial makeup of the school appear to be more strongly predictive of school suspension than student attitudes and behavior. (p. 68)

### *Effects of Suspension*

There has been much disagreement about the already high and steadily increasing use of suspension as a method of discipline. “Suspensions and expulsions are used widely and at increasing rates despite the fact that the practice has been denounced as ineffective and counterproductive” (Arcia, 2006, p. 359). Suspension has been linked to several unwanted outcomes, including rising levels of grade retention, successive suspension, expulsion, and dropping out of school. In addition, “the lost instructional time and reduced opportunities to learn resulting from suspension places students who are suspended at increased risk for academic failure” (Olympia, Farley, Christiansen, Pettersson, Jenson, & Clark, 2004, p. 841), which is among the strongest predictors for students dropping out of school (Olympia et al., 2004; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997). Research has confirmed this assertion; Arcia (2006) found that there were “marked associations between suspensions and delays in reading achievement” (p. 367) as well as significant educational differences between suspended and non-suspended

students. Furthermore, Arcia found that there is prevalent and increasing use of suspensions, which ascended sharply during the middle school grades and continued to ascend into senior high grades. Another negative aspect of suspension is that there is an association between increased rates of juvenile crime and the amount of time students are out of school while they are suspended (Olympia et al.). For a large number of students, suspension serves the purpose of reinforcement, rather than punishment, and often strongly predicts subsequent suspensions. The literature suggests that there is not a reduction of serious or recurrent behavior problems due to suspensions; rather, some students' behavior problems actually intensify.

Therefore, this study is important because it will examine those administrative policies that are being used when disciplining these students, especially those with the propensity to reoffend.

### *Preventative Measures*

This section presents the literature that focuses on the preventative measures that can be used in the school setting. Shedding light on preventative strategies is critical because such measures have the potential to be implemented into administrative policy and could make a drastic difference when disciplining students with disruptive problems.

### *School Climate*

School climate can be defined as “the feelings that students and staff have about the school environment over a period of time” (Peterson & Skiba, 2000, p. 122). Since these feelings will ultimately vary between respondents, school climate can also be considered as a likeness of the positive and negative feelings individuals have in regard to the school environment and these feelings may directly or indirectly affect numerous

learning outcomes. The literature suggests that the school administration feels that it is best to maintain a certain climate in the school (Kelley, 1980). One way to foster positive school climate is by involving parents. When schools create parent involvement programs, they actively engage parents by including them in a number of activities that allow them to participate in their children's education in both the home and school environments. Peterson and Skiba (2000) suggest that parent involvement is positively connected to student success, elevated attendance rates, and lower suspension rates. Additionally, it has been shown that increased parent involvement results in "increased student success, increased parent and teacher satisfaction, and improved school climate" (p. 123).

Another factor that can lead to improved school climate is developing character education programs. Character education is a term that is often used to describe the "general curriculum and organizational features of schools that promote the development of fundamental values in children at school" (Peterson & Skiba, 2000, p. 124). Many schools have chosen to recognize a group of value statements that are used throughout the school and are intended to give the school setting a foundation of expectations for student behavior. Furthermore, a number of schools add these value statements to their overall "Codes of Conduct" and school discipline policies, by emphasizing behavior in agreement with the values and by developing other consequences for disobedience of these values.

Lastly, the literature suggests that violence prevention, conflict resolution, and peer mediation curricula are significant preventative measures that can be used to promote positive school climate (Peterson & Skiba, 2000). Violence prevention and

conflict resolution programs teach students to use substitutes to violence when handling their interpersonal and personal conflicts. These programs usually attempt to supply knowledge about violence and conflict, to augment students' comprehension of their own and others' feelings, and to instruct students how to employ the personal and interpersonal skills essential to avoid violence. In addition to violence prevention and conflict resolution, peer mediation programs teach student mediators negotiation-based strategies to help resolve discrepancies among their peers. "Peer mediation teaches students (mediators and disputants) an alternative set of skills that they can apply in conflict situations" (p. 126). Researchers have found that both students and teachers think that peer mediation vastly improved their school climate. Furthermore, the literature suggests that for the student mediators themselves, being taught the mediation process increases their self-esteem and even enriches their academic performance (Peterson, & Skiba).

### *Teacher Expectations*

Many educators have the expectation that students listen carefully, follow instructions, turn in acceptable schoolwork, and utilize self-control skills. More specifically, research has shown that teachers (particularly those who teach middle school) regard cooperation and self-control skills as "equally important for school success" (Lane, Pierson, & Givner, 2003, p. 426). Students who are unable to demonstrate competence in these areas may be referred to undergo an intervention process in order to help them improve their behavior in the classroom setting (Lane et al., 2003). However, researchers have found that students are not always referred to participate in an intervention process; rather they are simply "disciplined." In common

vernacular, discipline seems to include the utilization of punishment, most often exclusion from school, in order to “enforce student conformance with established standards, as expressed by school discipline codes” (Skiba & Peterson, 2003, p. 66). Nevertheless, the literature suggests that there are alternative preventative techniques to use, instead of the aforementioned reactive methods of discipline.

One such preventative measure is recognizing that there is a social curriculum in every school and classroom, which serves as a guide for student behavior throughout each school day. The expectations of such a curriculum must be “explicitly taught to students” (Lane, Pierson, & Givner, 2003, p. 426) because they are an essential source of information for students, and teachers should dedicate a substantial amount of time at the beginning of the school year in order to clarify their expectations. In classrooms and schools that are administered using insufficient management strategies, “inconsistency among expectations, rules, and consequences provides less opportunity for learning and implicit expectations of the social curriculum” (Skiba & Peterson, 2003, p. 67) and may even leave students feeling unclear about teacher expectations regarding the appropriate way to behave in the classroom and school setting (Lane et al., 2003). Most students arrive at school with the ability to recognize teacher expectations and succeed in changing their behaviors in order to fit the classroom, despite how well the expectations are presented by the teacher. However, students who exhibit behavior problems will find learning the social curriculum to be more troublesome. When these students are faced with unstructured classroom settings, it is possible that they will act disorderly, in an attempt to understand the limits of the situation (Skiba & Peterson). Thus, “it is important that teachers be clear in their behavioral expectations for student performance

and cognizant of how their expectations converge and diverge with other teachers” (Lane et al., p. 426). Ultimately, when educators decide to teach the social curriculum, they are basically drawing upon their greatest knowledge as a means to teach children the behaviors that are needed to be successful in school.

#### *What Teachers Can Do to Prevent Problem Behavior*

Over the years it has become evident that detection and intervention strategies have the potential to be the most prevailing course of action for improving life-long troubles associated with children in jeopardy for developing emotional and behavioral disorders. Once a child begins school, significant factors such as “the quality of the classroom instruction, the quality of the teacher-child interaction, peer influences, and the child’s social communication abilities” (Hester, Baltodano, Hendrickson, Tonelson, Conroy, & Gable, 2004, p. 6) start to influence their behavior. Therefore, it is important that teachers play an active role in the student’s overall development and to be cognizant of when intervention is needed. Although some teachers may fear that they will falsely identify a child, it is important to implement prevention and intervention techniques in the school setting because children are most responsive to intervention when they are young (Hester et al., 2004). Teachers must utilize direct observation measures in order to “provide more objective data and a broader understanding of child behavior in specific settings” (p. 6). The literature suggests that in order to achieve positive educational outcomes, teachers must play an instrumental role in making changes in the school environment that will support student’s “social, academic, and emotional development” (Hester, 2002, p. 34) and impede the growth of behavioral problems (Hester et al., 2004). When implementing the changes that will foster positive behavior and student learning in

the school environment, teachers must explicitly inform students of the things that are expected of them and acknowledge appropriate student behavior. Additionally, teachers must collaborate with other teachers so they can share positive interventions for exact behaviors and then reinforce those interventions across classroom settings. “It takes a collaborative effort to transfer and maintain positive results for a child across settings, persons, and time” (p. 9). Overall, teachers typically find out that when students experience greater feelings of success, combined with elevated rates of positive peer-student and teacher-student interactions, their disruptive behavior subsides (Hester; Hester et al.).

### *Positive Behavior Support*

Numerous school administrators are spending an astonishing amount of time focusing on issues related to student discipline (George, Harrower, & Knoster, 2003). The concern about disciplining students has resulted in “many intervention and prevention-focused programs to improve character and moral development, promote exemplary social skills, reduce anti-social behaviors, and strengthen academic competencies” (Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, & Feinberg, 2005, p. 184). Current principles of positive behavior are incorporated into systems-based behavioral interventions in the school environment. Such an intervention is called positive behavior support, and it includes team-based, behavior support plans that are created for individual students, but have the key goal of implementing prevention practices that focus on the whole school population (Oswald, Safran, & Johanson, 2005; Luiselli et al., 2005). Researchers have found that student discipline problems have decreased and academic performance has improved following the implementation of a positive behavior support intervention in the



school environment (Luiselli et al.). Moreover, researchers utilized positive behavior support intervention strategies in school hallways, and found that positive change can be obtained (Oswald et al., 2005). Nevertheless, it is believed that “positive social and character development in schoolchildren, reduced prevalence of antisocial behavior, and improved social climate are likely to be the product of large-scale, multi-component, skill-building, and preventive interventions,” (Luiselli et al., 2005, p. 185) such as positive behavior support interventions.

#### *Functional Behavioral Assessment*

In order to determine the function of a behavior, a functional assessment needs to be conducted. “Functional behavioral assessment attempts to identify environmental events that are linked to the problematic behavior” (Myers & Holland, 2000, p. 272). Those who support functional behavior assessment believe that educators need to uncover the purpose of the behavior during the consultation process, in order for them to choose an intervention to effectively deal with the students’ disruptive behavior. The literature suggests that functional categories often include the terms: escape, attention, tangible, and sensory (Myers & Holland). By distinguishing events “contributing to, or maintaining the challenging behavior,” (p. 272) suitable intervention techniques become more apparent. Unfortunately, teachers often attend training programs where they are briefly presented with a large range of classroom management techniques, and they ultimately leave the training insufficiently equipped to implement any specific method of discipline. Rather than perpetuating a closed system of knowledge by deliberating with other teachers who attended the same training, proponents of functional behavioral assessment believe that teachers should use functional assessment methods that can

determine the purpose of a specific behavior, which will then uncover appropriate intervention strategies (Myers & Holland). This body of knowledge provided tremendous insight into measures that can be utilized, rather than those that are merely reactionary. Examining teachers' perceptions of administrative policy is of importance because it will show whether any preventable measures are actually utilized at the middle school level of the public school system.

### *Conclusion*

As the literature shows, dealing with children with behavioral problems in the school environment, especially at the middle school level, can be a complex problem due to how educators utilize the various forms of assessment and treatment modalities. Additionally, contextual factors such as developmental stages, behavior problems, emotional and behavioral disorders, policies, disciplinary action, and preventative measures all add to the complexities of working in the middle school setting. What has been interesting and revealing in the literature on children with behavioral problems in the school environment has been the limited discussion of how administrative policies are operationalized once children are labeled as being disruptive in the school environment. It is understood that both teachers and administrators are often responsible for enforcing disciplinary measures when children exhibit disruptive behavior, yet, in the literature, the policies that dictate the consequences have been omitted or overlooked, thus making it appear that their way of handling students' behavioral problems are both arbitrary and inconsistent. Furthermore, whether the administrators adhere to a set of formal policies or if they diverge in regard to students with behavior problems are absent in the literature. If the context for enforcing disciplinary measures is the relationship between student,

teacher, and administrator, then the conversation of how administrative policies impact students with behavioral problems should involve a candid discussion between the student, teacher, and administrator regarding how policies regarding disciplinary measures affect students with behavioral problems. Simply put, if the student understands the consequences of his or her actions, then he or she can understand the consequence given. The ultimate goal then, of administrative policies, is to mandate or prohibit behavior, utilizing rewards and sanctions (Osher & Quinn, 2003), all of which must be explicitly stated. Additionally, it is important to uncover how these policies are carried out in reference to students with behavioral problems and the role they play in labeling students with behavioral problems.

The current study seeks to address one gap in the research on children with behavioral problems in the school environment: identifying middle school teachers' perceptions of their schools' formal and informal administrative policies on children labeled with behavioral problems. It is important to explore the perceptions of middle school teachers because they have direct contact with students and are able to see firsthand how the administrative policies affect them. The study hopes to aid schools in moving away from the traditional approach to behavior problems that has been critiqued by scholars such as Ogilvy (1994) as being reactive and largely negative, and provide schools and school administrators with adequate assessment tools to determine students' needs. This study is relevant to social work practice in the public school system because it is important for school social workers to help identify the needs of those individuals exhibiting disruptive behaviors, so that an appropriate treatment plan can be developed and utilized. School social workers can effectively work with students on their social

skills, conflict resolution, expression of emotions, self-awareness, self-reflectiveness, and empathy toward others. Additionally, it is necessary for social workers in the school system to work with the administration and teachers in order to get a grasp on the problems school systems face today.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study explored teachers' perceptions of the formal and informal administrative policies that are utilized when identifying children with behavioral problems in the school setting. A deductive approach was used; family systems theory, general systems theory, and ecosystemic approaches inform the study. As the literature review revealed, much has been written on adolescence, aggressive and disruptive behavior problems, emotional and behavioral disorders, disciplinary actions, and preventative strategies. However, there continues to be a gap in the literature regarding the role formal and informal administrative policies play in the identification of children with behavioral problems and on how these policies are carried out once a child is labeled. This chapter will present the methods of research, including sample selection, data collection, and data analysis procedures used in this study.

#### *Sample*

Twelve participants comprised the sample for this study. Study participants were limited to public school teachers over the age of 21, more specifically, those individuals who currently teach middle school students fulltime or those who recently retired from teaching middle school students in the last three years. It was important for teachers to be familiar with the written policies implemented by their specific school systems' administrators, as well as the informal policies that the schools' administrators utilized.

Participants also needed to be conversant in English (the language used when conducting interviews) as translation services were not available.

The participants for this exploratory study were recruited via snowball sampling procedures. The researcher began the recruitment process by contacting individuals who worked in the field and served as key informants throughout the course of the sampling process. The researcher explained the purpose of the project to the key informants and provided them with a recruitment letter (see Appendix A), that included pertinent information, such as a statement of purpose, her role as researcher, as well as the nature of the study. The researcher expected the key informants to inform their colleagues about her research and distribute the provided recruitment letter as a basis for providing information to potential participants. Then the researcher asked her key informants to notify the potential participants that they should contact the researcher directly if they were interested in participation. Once contacted by each potential participant, the researcher conducted a screening interview (see Appendix B) by email and/or telephone, which consisted of the researcher collecting demographic data such as school district, level of school, length of time working in this capacity, and length of time working in the school system. The screening also provided an opportunity for the researcher to further explain the nature of the study and to use the exclusion and inclusion criteria in order to narrow the sample. The small sample size meant it was not possible to ensure diversity among participants regarding gender, age, race/ethnicity, or religious affiliation. However, every effort was made to obtain a representative sample of participants that came from different school districts.

### *Participants*

The sample was comprised of nine women and three men. Eight participants self-identified their race as being African American and/or Black; all other participants self-identified as being Caucasian and/or White. Participants self-identified their ethnicity as African American and/or Black (n=2), European American and/or White (n=2), American (n=1), Hispanic (n=1), Irish/Italian (n=1), Haitian/American (n=1), Jamaican (n=1), African American/Native American/German (n=1), Italian/Syrian (n=1), and one participant did not respond to the question. Average number of years teaching was 16.2 (ranging from 3 to 40 years). Average number of years teaching middle school was 13.3 (ranging from 3 to 36 years). Average number of years teaching in the public school system was 14.8 (ranging from 3 to 40 years). Average number of years teaching at their current school was 8.8 (ranging from 3 to 36 years). Participants taught various middle school grades including fifth grade (n=1), sixth grade (n=3), seventh grade (n=1), eighth grade (n=2), a combination of sixth and seventh grade (n=2), a combination of seventh and eighth grade (n=1), and one teacher reported teaching grades sixth through eighth. Participants taught in a number of school districts including Philadelphia (n=5), New York City District 29 (n=4), New York City District 19 (n=1), New York City District 6 (n=1), and New York City District 10 (n=1).

### *Data Collection*

Data was gathered via semi-structured interviews conducted at mutually convenient and private locations, usually the teachers' classroom. A qualitative design was chosen because the researcher was interested in examining the participants' interpretations of the proposed study.

Procedures to protect the rights and privacy of participants were outlined in a proposal of this study and presented to the Human Subject Review Board (HSRB) at Smith College School for Social Work before data collection began. Approval of the proposal (see Appendices C and D) indicates that the study was in concordance with the *NASW Code of Ethics* and the Federal regulations for the Protection of Human Research Subjects. Prior to each interview, participants were given an informed consent document describing their participation in the study and their rights as human subjects, as well as any potential risks or benefits of participation (see Appendix E). The participant and researcher each kept a signed copy of the informed consent document, and the researcher will keep these documents in a secured location separate from the data for three years after the conclusion of the study as mandated by Federal regulations.

In order to assure participant confidentiality, demographic information, researcher notes, transcripts, and audio tapes are kept separate from informed consent documents and are identified by number codes rather than names or other identifiable information. Any names or other identifiable information from participants that were recorded during the interviews was removed or disguised during transcription and for use in the final thesis project. The transcriber that aided in transcribing tapes and analyzing data also signed a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix F).

Participants were first asked to read and sign the informed consent before the interview began. Once this was completed, 26 interview questions were asked sequentially. The questions were intended to elicit the participants' knowledge and perceptions regarding their school administrators' formal and informal policies on children labeled with behavioral problems (see Appendix G for interview guide). At



times the researcher clarified questions, gave time for participants to elaborate on questions, and occasionally asked for further ideas regarding a question. Each interview as audio taped and the researcher took written notes. The entire interview process ranged in length from 13 minutes to one hour and four minutes. All interviews took place between February 21, 2007 and March 28, 2007.

### *Data Analysis*

Data collected during the taped interviews were transcribed and then analyzed to identify information relevant to the specified research areas, including, administrative policy, the public, middle school setting, and students exhibiting disruptive behavior. Transcripts were also analyzed for significant themes or ideas that had not been targeted by the semi-structured interview guide, but which participants raised during the interviews.

A spreadsheet was designed in order to depict the pertinent data by compartmentalizing the questions asked to all participants; ultimately providing a visual representation of the data, which allowed the researcher to clearly identify themes and patterns. Direct quotes of participants' narratives were used to corroborate the aforementioned themes and ideas. Data were also compared to determine similarities and differences with respect to the participants' responses throughout the interview, and then placed into categories based on these occurrences.

Due to the small sample size, restricted geographic location of participants (Philadelphia and New York City), and selected research design, generalizations cannot be made from the results of this study. Rather, the findings present an in-depth look at the perceptions of middle school teachers who work with administrative policies on

students labeled with behavioral problems on a daily basis. It is hoped the data gathered through this study and presented here will provoke and inform others when conducting future research.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### *Introduction*

Although much has been written on disruptive behavior exhibited in the middle school setting, the literature reveals a scarcity of reports regarding how administrative policies are used by teachers to manage students with behavioral problems. Furthermore, there is a complete absence of published information regarding the informal policies teachers and administrators utilize when dealing with disruptive behavior. As a framework for the interviews, participants were informed that the researcher would be asking questions in an attempt to elicit their perceptions regarding administrative policy utilized at their school and its relation to students with disruptive problems. The interview questions were structured to glean information regarding middle school teachers' perceptions of their schools formal and informal administrative policies on students labeled with behavioral problems. More specifically, questions were posed to gather information regarding policy, to discuss the school setting, and to gain insight to teachers' perceptions regarding dealing with students with behavior problems.

The findings from these 12 interviews are presented according to themes that emerged from data analysis. Thus, the data are presented in the following order: administrative policy, school setting, classroom placement, students with disruptive behavior, and what happens to kids once they are labeled.

### *Administrative Policy*

This section contains participants' reports of the policies utilized in the school setting, as they relate to disruptive behavior. The data are presented in the following subsections: formal policy, informal policy, and their effectiveness, or lack thereof.

#### *Formal Policy*

The majority of participants mentioned that there was a formal written policy implemented by the administrators regarding discipline. Seven of the participants referred to this written policy as a "Code of Conduct," "classroom rules," "agenda book," or "hierarchy of offenses." Five of these participants also mentioned that the written policy is reviewed verbally and given to students and their parent(s) at the beginning of the year. Three of the remaining participants described the formal list of procedures that are adhered to when dealing with discipline problems, in addition to one of the respondents in the aforementioned group of individuals who discussed both aspects of the formal policy. This finding is interesting, considering all four of said participants taught at the same school and responded in a uniform manner. The last participant reported that there is a lack of clarity when it comes to defining formal policy:

I probably couldn't rattle off the top of my head all of the specific school rules, but they're really concerned about minor things, like gum chewing and food and drink in the classroom, with the idea that if you nip tiny things in the bud, then there won't be larger problems. But when it comes to larger scale problems like cursing, gross disrespect toward the teacher, physical contact between students, they have a detention room that winds up being a place where students play cards, on the computer with their favorite teacher, so it's kind of a joy. And really

there's not much more that can be enforced, unless something warrants suspension and what warrants suspension is not clearly defined.

In regard to the efficacy of their administrations' formal policies, participants' responses varied from the policies being effective, meaning that they were able to successfully address the situation at hand, "for the most part" effective, somewhat effective, and "ineffective." Five participants mentioned that their administrations' formal policies were effective; one of these participants' rationales for her response was "Honestly, they're like our bible...we pretty much stick to what is written." Three participants mentioned that the formal policies were somewhat effective and one individual added

There should be a...overall, consistent policy...[inappropriate behaviors] shouldn't be tolerated, ok, we have zero tolerance of certain things, but they say that, but I don't always see it happening, you know what I mean...I see that they're other people who are intervening and giving people...I believe in, I think people should have a chance, but I think that if you say zero tolerance, then you mean zero tolerance and that sends a message to everyone...that it won't be tolerated, so therefore, it won't happen...you won't see it happen. But what's reoccurring is people are still allowing other people to continue and they make their own decision...it's not across the board. You know, and that confuses people, so it confuses the kids too...it's confusing...it's like oh wait a minute, so and so did this and they are not here, but so and so, they're here, why? It shouldn't be allowed.

Formal policy was not always considered to be effective by any means. In fact, two teachers clearly stated that their administrations' formal policies were "ineffective." One teacher reported, "No, I think they're ineffective because they don't...they're not actually followed, or they're followed pretty arbitrarily."

### *Informal Policy*

Unlike formal policies, informal policies are not found in a written code, nor are they passed down from the Board of Education. Rather, informal policies are carried out by teachers and administrators as they see fit, and they typically derive in response to daily interactions. All participants reported that their administration used informal policies. Many participants gave examples of informal policies; more specifically, three participants mentioned how their school has adopted an informal uniform policy that allows children to diverge from the stipulated code, mainly due to the varying temperatures throughout the school building. Five participants discussed how their schools' administration does not "treat all students the same," and differing informal policies are used depending on the situation. One participant discussed how informal policies are used at her school:

I do see a lot of differentiation in terms of the way, I guess, discipline is applied to different students. With students who are perceived to be most at risk in terms of their home situation, their age inside of the middle school, the 16 and 17 year old kids, the kids who are gang involved often get much softer punishment than other kids. I don't know if that's because they think it's harder to enforce with them because physically we can't keep a kid on campus who doesn't want to be or if it's sort of my particular administrators way of trying to get through to them. But,

she seems to think it really works and I think it really perpetuates misbehavior.

They sort of rule the roost...I have students who cut class, who will walk out of the room cursing, who will really do far more outrageous things on a regular basis and they're asked by the AP to sort of like carry books up the stairs, to be her helper and nudged on the shoulder, oh you. It's kind of...it's really imbalanced, I think.

After acknowledging that their schools' administrators used informal policies, most participants reported that they believed that these informal policies were effective. One teacher mentioned, "Yes, it is effective because if it means being able to get a time out from the situation, on the teacher's part, as well as the student, that's effective." Other teachers mentioned that informal policies were effective because they allow children to understand why rules and regulations are put in place; additionally, they ensure that "there is a consequence for inappropriate behavior." Of those remaining, two participants reported that they did not find the informal policies implemented by the administrators at their school to be effective. One teacher discussed her opinion about the lack of efficacy when using informal policy and said that "it would be much more effective to have a program in place that was about community building and respect and peace keeping," rather than making so many idle threats in regard to disciplining students.

Considering that all participants taught at different schools in the past, they were all qualified to discuss whether they felt that the use of informal policies seemed pervasive. The researcher used the terminology "pervasive" to depict a phenomenon that is persistent and spread throughout; however, whether the participants utilized the same

definition can be left to interpretation. All but one of the participants mentioned that the administrators' use of informal policies was pervasive; some even described the use of such policies as being "inevitable." One participant shared her sentiments and reported that she witnessed informal policies being used more in settings where the overall school climate "wasn't so friendly."

What the teachers' believed to be their administrations' rationale for using informal policies was also discussed. Five participants reported that their schools' administrators implemented informal policies because problems needed to be taken care of "right away," and "whatever works" and needs to be done out of "necessity" should be carried out. Three participants mentioned that their administrators employed informal policies in an attempt to maintain a "safe climate" within the school, as well as for the "betterment of the children," so the day would "go by more smoothly." Other participants reported that "being flexible" and alleviating the "tension on the parents" are reasons why informal policies are used.

#### *Policy Teachers Found Most Effective*

When asked which policies they found to be more effective- formal or informal- five participants responded that they found their schools' formal policies to be more effective because they were "backed better" due to the fact that they are "guidelines" that are written in "black and white." One teacher mentioned,

Well...with really severe discipline issues, I like the support and the documentation that goes with the formal policy, I like having that back-up...here's the dates the things happened, here's my record of it...it's been signed by this person, this person, you know, the parent, and these administrators. When



children have been suspended, I think it creates a bigger impact; it creates more of a hassle for their families so that maybe something extra's going to happen at home to help stop the behavior. I think a lot of the informal things are just really...it's not even an adequate punishment...it's just...it's really not taking anything away from the child. So they don't get to stay in class all day or they don't get to go to recess, which involves sitting on the gym floor in the winter months because they can't go outside. It's like not a punishment to miss that, so I think it makes a bigger impact to follow the Code, but I'm not sure that it's effective in the long run.

In contrast, two participants reported that the informal policies were more effective because they were "more expedient" and "all the children are not the same, so you have to adhere to their needs...set the base, and then let's work around it." Yet, other participants felt that both the formal and informal policies were effective, and "it's the way that it's implemented that is the key to your success and the school." Out of the 12 participants, only one came to the conclusion that neither the formal nor the informal administrative policies were effective.

### *School Setting*

#### *School Systems*

There are numerous types of schools that encompass those in the American education system. From public to private, parochial to charter, there is a vast range of school systems that one can choose to work in. All of the participants in this study currently work in the public school system; five individuals teach in the Philadelphia Public School System, and seven teach in various districts in the New York City Public

School System. Most had primarily worked in public schools throughout their career, teaching solely in their respective geographic location, Philadelphia or New York City, although six participants reported working in various parts of the cities throughout their career. Additionally, 11 of the participants reported that they have worked solely at the middle school level or in both middle and elementary school settings. Only three participants reported that they worked outside of the public school system at some point in their career.

Most participants reported that they have seen personnel changes within the schools' administration, among both principals and vice/assistant principals (commonly referred to as AP's). Three participants suggested that the administrative staffing at their school is "pretty consistent" and responses varied from having experienced one change in principal and/or AP to three changes in either of the specific administrative roles. Of these participants, some gave an explanation for the turnover of the administrative staff as being due to promotional purposes, leaving to start a charter school, or retiring.

### *School Demographics*

The demographics of the schools' student body varied considerably; a noticeable difference was found between geographic locations. Four teachers representing the Philadelphia Public School District specified that their student population was "diverse;" one participant even declared that the demographics of the students were "National nations, international...we have them all...We have everybody and the school is quite unique in their situation because not too many schools can say that they have that type of a population."

While the researcher noted similarities among certain ethnic groups reported by the Philadelphia participants, the teachers from New York City painted a different picture when discussing the racial makeup of their student population. There appeared to be a fairly equal distribution (+/- 10%) of African American and Caucasian students in the Philadelphia schools. Few New York City teachers, however, mentioned the presence of a Caucasian population, and those that did reported that Caucasian students made up less than 1% to 3% of the student population. Depending on the school district, either Latino students or African American students were reported to be the largest population. Other New York City teachers clarified that in addition to a large African American population, they also have a sizeable West Indian and/or first generation African population.

Four participants discussed the socioeconomic status of the student population. Only one teacher from Philadelphia described the student demographics as being lower to middle class, while three participants from New York City discussed the socioeconomic status of the students as being lower class. Two teachers commented on the free lunch program at their schools to illustrate the student body's low socioeconomic status. One teacher reported, "It's like a 98%, maybe not that high, 97% free lunch school, so...the income across the board is very low."

Participants also commented on the demographics of the teachers and administrators. Unlike the student demographics, there were no significant differences between Philadelphia and New York City on this item. Two participants- one from Philadelphia and one from New York City- reported that the demographics of the teachers and administrators were the same as that of the students. Three participants discussed that there are "predominantly White teachers" in their schools, while two

individuals described their teaching staff as “mostly African American,” and two participants noted the large number of Jewish teachers that work in their schools. Several teachers also reported that there are quite a few Latino, and Indian teachers and the majority of the New York City teachers discussed the presence of West Indian teachers and administrators working in their schools. Two teachers commented on the diversity in teacher demographics, and one teacher reported that part of the diverse teaching staff is due to “technically the way they hire teachers. It has to be racially balanced, so the school district has policies for that.” In addition to the racial components of the teachers and administrators, one teacher pointed out that there is “a lot more female ratio, than males. I think that’s probably a concern too because we need some more male imagery here.”

*School Climate*

Participants’ responses about school climate, how it is defined by their schools’ administrators and how they personally define school climate ranged greatly. Both positive and negative feelings were described. Some positive feelings about school climate were

- |                            |                                       |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| “pretty good”              | “interactive, reasonable, supportive” |
| “nice climate”             | “comfortable”                         |
| “desirable place to work”  | “not a lot of animosity”              |
| “day goes pretty smoothly” | “safe environment”                    |
| “well-respected”           | “progressively improving”             |

Some of the more negative feelings about climate were as follows:

- |                   |              |
|-------------------|--------------|
| “feeling on edge” | “oppressive” |
|-------------------|--------------|

“it stinks”	“fear-based...negative”
“pressure”	“it’s pretty negative”
“very, very desperate feeling”	“morale is super low”
“we all feel like we want to vomit”	“little freedom or creativity”

Many participants believed that their administrators defined climate as being the “atmosphere of the school” and the “tone of the building.” Other participants went into more detail and reported that their schools’ administration would define climate as being “a safe environment,” not only in the sense of the “physical environment,” but also in regard to the “emotional support” that is provided within the school.

Although only a few participants mentioned that they viewed climate in the same way as the administrators, the majority did not disagree, rather they contributed more information when discussing their perception of their schools’ climate. Many participants expanded on their definitions of “the atmosphere in the school” and the “school environment.” One participant stated,

...it’s my classroom, I’m in control of this classroom, I control everything that goes on, pretty much...it has to be comfortable for me and the kids, and it needs to be a safe environment for the kids and I feel that I have to make sure that it’s safe for all the kids or else they shouldn’t be here and the administration should back me up on that, like if I think another kid is threatening another child, he shouldn’t be here. And I don’t tolerate any of that...I think that that should be worked out before you get here, ok and when you come in there’s respect.

As with the administrations’ definition of climate, some teachers discussed the relationship amongst the individuals in the school building. One teacher reported climate

as being “the relationship between teachers, administration, and teachers and students, and even peers; teachers, other teachers, colleagues.”

Five participants reported the climate at their school as being better than that of other schools where they previously taught. But while one teacher reported that when she came to teach at her current school she “died and went to heaven,” some participants seemed to be living in a “nightmare” at their current school. One teacher described the climate at her school:

I don’t remember schools being so militaristic, you know, in the sense that...drill sergeant-esque shouting at the kids constantly in the hallway for stalling to say hi or chewing a piece of gum. So maybe there is a parallel between how the teachers are feeling and how the students are treated, actually...yeah...This year, there’s something really oppressive about it and I feel like if I were a kid in that situation, I would feel like I had very little freedom or creativity, which is I think how the teachers are feeling too.

Another teacher made reference to the school running like the military when she stated, “we all want a little army.” Some teachers mentioned reasons for why they feel the climate is so negative at their school and that there is “little room for teaching.” One teacher reported,

...we have a new district superintendent. So school climate has changed here a little because she’s brand new this year and she’s only in this region and she will tell you that the way she runs this region may be different than other regions, but this is the region she’s responsible for. So no questions asked and everything with her is black or white; it’s her way or no way. So school climate has changed

and I think it comes from the top so, when our principal, when our administration feels pressure put on him, then the pressure's put on us. So this year the school climate has changed in that people feel more pressure like this thing with test taking is really the focus and people really feel like they can't get down to the business of teaching.

A different participant made a similar reference to pressure coming from the higher ranks of the school system when she stated,

There's a last minuteness to everything that happens that just keeps everyone on edge and I know that this comes from the top of the system on down. It's just this...you pass on...it's very stressful, that's the climate at the school. The stress is passed on from the Board of Ed to the regional people to the administration of the school to the teachers and then I do my part in passing it on to my children as well, which is bad. It's just very, very desperate feeling.

#### *Classroom Placement*

When participants discussed whether all teachers or simply a select few teachers had the responsibility of having disruptive children in their classrooms, five teachers reported that all teachers taught these students. One teacher stated that "disruptive children are a universal phenomenon" and others mentioned that children are "evenly distributed" amongst the classes, so everyone will experience teaching a disruptive student sometime during their career. Three participants discussed how there has been an influx of more difficult children "now more than ever," so in today's society teachers are especially prone to managing a classroom with disruptive students. Three participants mentioned that in their school, there is one class that tends to accommodate all of the

students with behavioral problems and the teachers that are able to “handle” students with problems are likely to be assigned to those classrooms. One teacher stated,

Well there are teachers that are known to be really good disciplinarians, they consistently get really difficult classes because they can handle it and they complain about that for sure...now, they just have one top class and the rest are all supposed to be heterogeneously grouped, but it usually works out that there are...there’s like one class where there’s just an overload of behavior problems.

One participant mentioned that she has “heard of situations in other schools where someone will really get slapped with a doozy of a class and they’ve got every kid on their roster who’s ever done something outrageous or continues to do outrageous things all the time.”

Nine of the participants specified that classroom placement was ultimately a decision made by the schools’ administrators. Five participants pointed out that discretion is used when placing students, particularly in seventh and eighth grade, and that “things get moved around” due to factors such as parents requesting that their child be taught by a specific teacher. One teacher stated that if the administration finds out that “there is a clique of children in one class that is being disruptive,” they will make a notation to ensure that the children will be separated for the following year. Four participants discussed a process whereby teachers gather together at the end of each school year and “play cards,” meaning that they make an articulation card for each student, rank them by numerous factors, including gender and academic standing, as well as write comments about behavior and which “children should not be together.” Another factor that was shown to be a determinant in assigning children to classrooms was the



results of the students' test scores. One teacher found this practice to be particularly ineffective and mentioned,

Classroom placement is unfortunately, has become unfortunately, more and more dependent upon assessment examination. Math and reading scores...unfortunately again because of the restructuring of the whole cultural dynamic, this whole politically correct, over concern for self esteem and not hurting someone's feelings, the assessment tools have been watered down and restructured to the point where getting a math score or reading score is not as objective now as it used to be... The kind of "standardized," that's the term they throw around a lot, "standardized math test, standardized reading test, statewide standardized math, statewide standardized reading test" that they're giving now, lacks both reliability and validity.

### *Students with Disruptive Behavior*

#### *Labeling Students*

The participants unanimously reported that it is through teacher observation that a child is identified as being disruptive. Six participants agreed that children are labeled disruptive when their actions are frequently repeated; one of these teachers noted,

There are disruptive behaviors and then there are kids who frequently do those behaviors that would have them labeled disruptive...I think that the kids who get the label do that is in common is that there's something deliberate about their disruption.

Three teachers mentioned how frequent conversations between teachers contribute to the labeling of students. Four participants discussed the Comprehensive Student Assistance

Program (CSAP) and/or the three tier process children undergo in order to receive an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Several teachers commented on students' behavior once outside of the classroom and two teachers reported that not only do teachers identify students as exhibiting disruptive behavior, but cafeteria staff and noontime aides (cafeteria supervisors) are also able to label students based on their behavior in the cafeteria and hallway.

Seven participants reported that children are labeled as being disruptive in a fair manner and the identification of students with behavioral problems is seen across the board when it comes to race and/or ethnicity. Interestingly enough, one of said participants suggested that she would typically believe that a child's race, gender, and/or socioeconomic status would make a difference in how they were being labeled; however, she did not see this trend at her school. Two participants reported that students accuse teachers and administrators of labeling them due to their race and "use the race thing whenever they want."

On the other hand, three participants mentioned that they noticed race as being a determinant in labeling children as being disruptive, either currently, or in the past. One participant pointed out, "I feel like there's a disproportionate number of Black kids in my school that are labeled behavior problems." Another participant talked about research and how statistics revealed that Black boys and/or minorities were "typically singled out, more likely to be suspended, more likely to be expelled from school" and how schools overtly reduced the number of those children that would have once been tested due to having these reports exposed. She went on to comment about a Jewish student that she once taught who constantly used foul language, and was able to do so because his mother

was an attorney and attributed his behavior to having Tourette's. However, "if a person of color on the other hand, would even attempt to say, not even an eighth of some the terms that this kid would use in class, in a minute, suspended with not a benefit of the doubt, not one."

Shifting from racial components, it is noteworthy to mention that three participants reported that they see an "influx of males" being labeled as disruptive students. One teacher attributed the classification of males as being behavior problems to an imbalance in the ratio of girls and boys, especially on the eighth grade level.

#### *Characteristics of Disruptive Students*

When mentioning the characteristics of disruptive students, participants' responses varied considerably. The characteristics discussed were based on teachers' individual classroom experiences. Some characteristics of students exhibiting disruptive behaviors were

- |   |                                       |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| "impulsiveness"   | "oppositional"                        |
| "lack of impulse control"                                       | "who cares attitude"                  |
| "trying to steal the show"                                      | "they're moody"                       |
| "they're not being compliant"                                   | "people that constantly come in late" |
| "hyperactive"   | "from a...broken home"                |
| "a child who's constantly bullying another child"               |                                       |
| "they have stronger personalities and they usually are leaders" |                                       |

Many teachers talked about the prevalence of bullying during the middle school years and how "people that are not in their cliques are different and are at times teased and harassed...they crack jokes and point out deficiencies and weaknesses of each other."

They also noted that disruptive students were constantly displaying attention-getting behaviors and were always trying to “grab attention in whatever way, shape, or form that [it] takes.” Three participants reported that these students come from “broken homes” and “the underlying root of all their problems [is] not having someone at home that cares.” Another three participants mentioned that being late to class was a common characteristic exhibited by disruptive students. While only noted once or twice each, participants also stated characteristics of disruptive children to be cursing and disrespectful speech, throwing objects across the classroom, constantly being out of their seat, not being cooperative, and lacking self-esteem and self-confidence.

Participants were unanimous when they responded that the label of being a disruptive student undoubtedly follows the child through middle school. Nine of these participants mentioned that one of the reasons why the label is perpetuated is due to “word of mouth” and conversations between teachers. One of the newest teachers among the participants reported, “When I came to this school, I didn’t even know any of the kids, I just had a list with names, and pretty much I was told who to watch out for.” Although there may be an opportunity for an individual to change their reputation, as noted by one participant, another teacher reported that teachers “will either try to reach out to them or they may treat them a certain way because of their behavior or expect certain things from them without even giving the student a chance.”

### *Disruptive Behavior*

A common response to the question regarding teachers’ perceptions of how their school administrators defined disruptive behavior was when children created an interference, thus, “preventing others from maximizing their learning experience.” One

participant mentioned that her administrators would define disruptive behavior as “when your actions impact those around you and not just yourself.” Yet another frequent response to this question was fighting or harming another student as being factors that constitute disruptive behavior from an administrative standpoint. One participant stated, “Fist fighting, that’s about really the only thing you can do to get a big reaction...you know, like big gang fights in the hallway.” The next most frequent response was that cursing or using a “dirty word” warranted the label of being a disruptive behavior. Also, participants mentioned that being late to class would be regarded as a disruptive behavior.

One interesting differentiation that came up when discussing how the participants themselves defined disruptive behavior was, not only did they believe that it was disruptive when children inhibited the learning of others, but they also reported that it was disruptive when students disrupted their “ability to teach.” One participant noted disruptive behavior as being “anything that would interfere with my plan of my particular objective in my classroom.” Another teacher reported that “anything that stops me from doing my job...I find that disruptive,” while a different teacher added, “any behavior on the part of the child that makes it impossible or difficult for a teacher to teach” is disruptive behavior.

Two teachers commented on disruptive children learning “your triggers” and one went on to say, “They give you eye contact and that’s suggesting that this person’s waiting for this negative reinforcement, but it’s still an attention-getting behavior and they know that it’s an irritant.” Some participants discussed the “anti-social” nature of disruptive students, their tendency to be “non-compliant,” as well as how disruptive students are often not productive in the school environment.

Talking to disruptive children to see why they are acting out was what a few teachers reported as being a part of their methodology when identifying disruptive behavior. One teacher reported that she makes it her “business to know” her students “because if you know your students then these children feel comfortable coming to you to talk to you. And then you can further assist them.”

#### *What Happens to Kids Once They Are Labeled*

Participants discussed how children come to carry the label of being a disruptive student and they also commented on the traits that would lead to this distinction. In this section, participants delved into topics discussing what actually happens to students once they have been identified as having behavioral problems.

#### *Administrations’ Role*

When participants were asked about what administrators do with disruptive children once they have been labeled, their answers varied considerably. However, the most prominent response was that students are placed on either in-school or out-of-school suspension. Although none of the teachers mentioned suspension as being the first line of action that is taken, it was talked about by several teachers. One teacher commented on the in-school suspension program at her school:

...when someone’s disruptive with consistently disruptive children, they’ve been more and more recently removing them from the classroom, putting them in a SAVE room in the school with a substitute teacher, typically or with other teachers covering it during periods and they’re just removed from class for the day or for a period of days...it’s the whole like, banishment from their classroom.

Three other participants also discussed how administrators “escort” disruptive children out of the classroom, in order to remove them from the classroom setting.

Six teachers suggested that administrators “call home” once a student has exhibited behavioral problems, which sometimes leads to a meeting or conference with the parent(s). The next most frequent response was that children are given detention, whether it is served in the morning, during lunch, after school, or on Saturday. These participants mentioned that detention is often served with the teacher, disciplinarian/Dean of Discipline, and/or the AP.

Despite the fact that the majority of teachers reported that the administrators at their schools will step in to “solve the problem the best way they can,” one teacher gave her perspective on how her schools’ administration leaves handling disruptive students up to the teachers:

The teachers are expected to handle it in our rooms and the more frequently that those complaints about certain students come to administrators, the more likely it is that the administrator will begin to view you as incompetent...it’s your job to make sure that they do what they’re supposed to do.

#### *Involving the Parent(s)*

Participants were asked to weigh in on how parent(s) are involved if it is determined that their child exhibits disruptive behavior. By using “parent(s),” the researcher intended for the term to apply to any individual serving as a guardian or “parental figure” for a child. Some of the responses overlapped with the comments made regarding how administrators are involved once a child is labeled as being disruptive, such as calling parent(s) and scheduling conferences. Two interesting differentiations

that came up when discussing how parent(s) are involved were the different ideas of the teachers' role in contacting the parent(s) and the function of today's parent(s).

All of the participants reported that parent(s) are contacted by the teacher, via phone and/or letter when a child displays disruptive behavior. Seven of these individuals discussed how parents are brought in for conferences to discuss the behaviors of the student. Three teachers discussed "daily" or "weekly behavior reports," which are expected to be signed by the parent everyday.

Regardless of the measures taken to involve the parent(s), eight participants commented on the challenges they face as teachers when it is determined that involving parent(s) is necessary, especially when parenting skills are questionable. One teacher reported that he has dealt with "parents that expressed frustration and basically told me that they don't know what to do." Another teacher commented,

...there's more fragmentation...a lot of our kids are products of the so-called broken home, they're single parent families...it seems that a lot of our parents appear to be overwhelmed with their own issues, that a lot of the kids are left on their own to deal with or struggle through their academics. A lot of them aren't getting help and the expectation is, I guess it's your job while you're in class...which is consistent with the No Child Left Behind because the trend is regardless of how kids come to you, whether or not they've eaten breakfast or if they're being abused, if they're from a broken home, it doesn't matter, you're expected to teach these objectives until they learn it, otherwise you're not an effective teacher and so that's a source of tension, frustration as well, which I think comes from the No Child Left Behind...administration...Bush.



### *Specialized Testing*

The entire group of participants reported that children undergo testing procedures; however, only five of these participants reported that testing can be done solely based upon a child's behavior. One teacher stated, "If a child exhibits over and over and over and over again [the] propensity to be disciplined and all that stuff, then they would be testing them to see if anything else is going on." On the other hand, five participants reported that children are not necessarily tested due to the fact that they are exhibiting behavioral problems; instead, if they are referred for testing, it is to determine if they have a learning disability. One participant reported that "a lot of times it's because of a learning disability that they do exhibit behavior problems because they're frustrated or things like that."

Three participants mentioned that children cannot be tested unless there is parental involvement and consent; however, they did report that there are stipulations to this rule. Some of the participants reported that the referral initially comes from the teacher, and four of these individuals reported that the teacher will refer the student to an outside agency if they exhibit "serious problems" because their school does not have the resources to contain extremely disruptive children or those with emotional issues. One teacher pointed out that several students are not getting the testing that they need: "A lot of our kids are slipping through because, either on the part of the teacher, as well as the parent, there are no prompts to get it done or to suggest it."

### *Student Resources*

Participants unanimously mentioned that as teachers, they served as a resource to students. One teacher commented on the relationship she has developed with her

students: “Even though it’s a big school...it’s kind of family based because I know a lot of my students, they come to me...they talk to me...they’ll stop by and tell me what’s going on.” Subsequently, the most frequent participant response was that the administrators served as a resource for disruptive students. Often participants described guidance counselors as being an excellent resource for students to utilize when exhibiting disruptive behavior, and a few participants also mentioned school social workers who can help children.

### *Labeling and Developmental Considerations*

When asked whether students are affected developmentally if they are labeled as being disruptive, 11 out of the 12 participants responded in the affirmative. Seven of the 11 participants mentioned how children will “act in turn” or “try to live up to that” because they are aware of the label that has been placed upon them. Three of these participants used the phrasing “self-fulfilling prophecy” when describing how children are affected developmentally. One of these participants reported how children are affected: “Some people just being labeled and once they’re labeled they’re going to just do everything in their power to show you, to prove to you, that’s ok, that’s what I am now. It’s kind of like a self-fulfilling prophecy.” Another teacher commented,

...if you label a kid disruptive, part of it is that they are and they might not change... but it does reinforce that self perception and then...what’s happening for me this year is that I have a group of children where there’s lots of behavior problems and they just bring that tone to the entire class and there’s lots of other kids that are being...pulled in to it and they reinforce each other...so that their

disruptive behavior becomes like a badge of coolness, instead of something they want to overcome.

A teacher described how the middle school environment perpetuates the ways in which children are being affected:

I mean you can tell which kids those are the first day they come into your classroom because they've already got like a big chip on their shoulder, they respond to you differently than the other kids do and frankly I think it's because they're preparing for you to sort of attack them or to get them into trouble...And the most successful way that I can be with those kids is to constantly remind them that, or try to constantly remind them that if I'm disapproving of a particular behavior, I'm not disapproving of them as a person...at this age in particular, middle school, I just really feel like that's when they kind of either embrace something about themselves and go for it, or they really just sort of give up. And so it's so important to not decide for them that they're a bad kid, but some of them are already pretty convinced of it. And they do a pretty good job acting it out, but the job of the adult in the room is to...remind them that that's not necessarily the case.

Only one participant reported that he did not believe children are affected developmentally, rather, he purported that "they're labeled disruptive because they're affected developmentally." He went on to say,

To think of it the other way goes to that politically correct mindset that has turned everything upside down and has created the disaster that is the public school system in the United States of America where there is...there's this constant push

to absolve the perpetrators of anti-social, disruptive, destructive behavior of any responsibility or accountability and find some other external cause or reason for it and blame that.

### *Summary*

This chapter has presented the findings from 26 questions asked to 12 middle school teachers who are familiar with the formal and informal administrative policies implemented by their schools' administrators. In most areas, there were an array of answers that supported each other. Nonetheless, in some areas the responses varied extensively, such as what constitutes disruptive behavior and the characteristics of a student exhibiting behavior problems. This may be due to differences among teachers individual tolerance for certain behaviors, their specific experiences as a teacher, including the grades taught currently and in the past, as well as the unique cultures of Philadelphia and New York City.

Both informal and formal policies were recognized as being utilized by the teachers' school administrators; furthermore, all of the participants that were best suited to reply, reported that the use of informal policies was pervasive throughout the public school system. Many responses overlapped when participants commented on which policies they found to be more effective- formal or informal. The range of how one regarded the climate of the school environment depended on their personal reflections about their specific school and whether they were positively or negatively impacted by their experiences. The determination of classroom placement and which teachers are assigned to teach disruptive students had common characteristics as well, and it was noted that although administrators attempt to evenly distribute students across all

classrooms, there are instances when the teachers who are known to work well with certain students, will be inundated with a classroom full of behavioral problems. Moreover, because school administration was instrumental in assigning students to specific classrooms, the classification of whether a student was disruptive or not had an impact on where that child was placed. The participants noted that students are labeled when they exhibit disruptive behavior and the overwhelming majority of participants found that this labeling affects children developmentally. A significant challenge in working with students with behavior problems is that their label follows them throughout middle school; therefore, it is difficult to work with children who assume they will be treated in accordance with their negatively designated title. Also, it is difficult to work in an environment where both formal and informal policies are arbitrarily enacted, thus, leaving room for misinterpretation and misuse.

In analyzing the data from this study, significant pieces of information regarding participants emerged. One such finding was that participants varied when utilizing language that referred to themselves, as opposed to administrators; moreover, their use of language served as a tool to distinguish themselves from their schools' administrators, or it was used in order to align them with the administration. Additionally, many participants were reluctant to confirm that informal administrative policies were used; in fact, one participant attempted to gain insight into the researchers' views on informal policies and stated, "I don't know if you're thinking it's a bad thing...I wanted to make sure we weren't thinking that was a bad thing." Other participants emphatically denied that informal policies were used; however, during the course of the interview they came to contradict themselves as they described the use of informal policies in their schools.

Some participants treated the topic of labeling students with equal fervor although they too ultimately wavered and came to the conclusion that a label was indeed placed upon disruptive students. Lastly, participants appeared to have a difficult time when responding to questions about climate, despite the fact that the terminology was found on numerous occasion when reviewing the literature (Kelly, 1980; Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, and Iver, 1993; Peterson & Skiba, 2000; Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, & Feinberg, 2005).

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This qualitative study explored the formal and informal administrative policies that relate to children labeled with behavioral problems in the middle school environment. A review of the literature reveals that current research on children exhibiting disruptive behavior in the school environment is addressed in regard to their relationship with teachers. This knowledge base has developed primarily through how teachers respond to students that exhibit disruptive behavior, rather than through the administrative policies that are used when dealing with students with behavior problems. Despite the fact that there is research on school policies it is difficult to find information regarding how administrators implement formal policies at their respective schools, and there is a complete absence of published literature that discusses the informal administrative policies that are used in regard to students with behavioral problems; hence, the need for this study to fill in the gaps in the literature. The findings of this study emerged in five separate themes: (a) administrative policy; (b) school setting; (c) classroom placement; (d) students with disruptive behavior; and (e) what happens to kids once they are labeled.

Although administrative policies are used in school settings, their implementation varies considerably depending on the school personnel that are interpreting the policies and the circumstances that elicit the use of formal or informal policies. It seems that both formal and informal policies can be viewed as effective or ineffective for various reasons.

In accord with research conducted by Lane, Pierson, and Givner (2003) and Skiba and Peterson (2003), some administrators implement formal policy by distributing a written “Code of Conduct” to teachers, students, and parents. Such a process was seen by some of the participants as being effective because it gives teachers and students a “formal list of guidelines” to follow within the school environment; further, the use of formal policy is “backed better” by school officials. Others viewed the use of formal policies at their school to be “arbitrary” and “inconsistent;” therefore, there was little efficacy in using such policies. On the other hand, the participants agreed that the use of informal policy was pervasive; however, there were mixed opinions about using informal policy when disciplining students. Furthermore, there were several inconsistencies noticed in the participants’ accounts when speaking about informal policies. Although the consensus amongst the participants was that informal policies are used in the school setting, many participants wavered in their responses and seemed reluctant to acknowledge the existence of unwritten policies. This hesitancy seems somewhat appropriate considering the nature of informal policies, which are not governed by any specific set of guidelines. It appears that informal policies are adopted over a period of time; more specifically, once they are found to be useful, they are utilized on an “as needed” basis. Some participants found informal policies to be effective because they helped school officials to alleviate problems immediately and they allowed more flexibility when working with parents. Although the majority of participants regarded the use of informal policies to be effective, nonetheless, it was also mentioned that informal policies are unproductive because they allow staff to diverge from school policy.



The positive and negative feelings evoked when participants discussed school climate corresponded with Peterson and Skiba's (2000) definition of school climate. In addition, several participants discussed their administrations' desire to maintain a positive climate within the school, which goes along with Kelley's (1980) research on school climate. Some participants experienced difficulty in answering questions about school climate in that they appeared to be unsure about the meaning of the terminology. This point is noteworthy because there were numerous references to school climate in the literature (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, and Iver, 1993; Kelly, 1980; Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, & Feinberg, 2005; Peterson & Skiba, 2000); however, many teachers were unclear when the subject matter was introduced in the discussion. The theme of school setting also emerged from participants' discussions about the school systems they have worked for, with the vast majority of participants having made careers working solely within the public school system. During the time that they have worked at their current school, many participants reported that there have been changes within the schools' administration, which may or may not have an impact on school climate and the use of formal and informal policies. Participants also discussed the racial/ethnic makeup of their school personnel and students; additionally, a few teachers elected to discuss their students' socioeconomic backgrounds.

All teachers taught disruptive students at some point in their career, but individual teachers were known to be able to "handle" students with behavioral problems, and were consistently given the responsibility of having these students in their classrooms. Several participants mentioned that classroom placement was ultimately determined by the administration, while others discussed how teachers are involved in the process by way of

producing articulation cards for each student. It was mentioned that there is an attempt to distribute the students, especially those with behavior problems, evenly across the grades, although this appeared to be a futile effort in many instances.

Another area of intersecting beliefs within the findings was that participants described themselves as being the individuals that observe disruptive behavior firsthand, and therefore, also being the individuals who identify students as having behavioral problems. This finding is upheld by the literature that suggests that teachers use direct observation when trying to understand students' behavior (Hester, Baltodano, Hendrickson, Tonelson, Conroy, & Gable, 2004). Some teachers mentioned how frequent conversations between teachers about the students contribute to the labeling of students, while other teachers contended that students are labeled as being disruptive through the IEP process.

Participants discussed a broad range of beliefs in regard to what constitutes disruptive behavior, including students displaying attention-getting behaviors, coming from "broken homes," and bullying others. All of the participants agreed that once a student has been labeled as being disruptive, the label will follow the child through the middle school years.

A particularly interesting finding was that many participants believed that students were fairly labeled as being disruptive, regardless of their racial/ethnic background. Only a few participants agreed with the literature that suggests that Black students have been and continue to be widely over-represented in regard to who is being punished within the school setting (Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; McFadden & Marsh, 1992; Skiba & Peterson, 1999). This may be attributed to the

participants' fear of retribution from their administrators if they did not depict the administration in a positive light. The reports of participants who mentioned gender as a factor in the labeling of students, were consistent with McFadden and Marsh (1992) who found that males receive the bulk of all discipline referrals.

When asking participants about what happens to students once they are labeled as being disruptive, the researcher expected that the answers would be focused on the punishments that children receive, as well as ways that school personnel attempt to intervene and understand the behavioral problem. Consistent with the researchers' expectations, participants reported that their administrators stepped in to enforce consequences such as suspension, detention, and meetings with parents, in addition to describing how students are referred for specialized testing. The researcher believed that displaying behavioral problems could serve as the basis for psychological testing; however, none of the participants mentioned this as a likely outcome. Participants varied in their responses about testing; reporting that students received specialized testing when they exhibited disruptive behavior, but in many instances, the referrals were made solely based on a perceived learning difficulty. The variance in the referral process could be due to the school personnel's lack of knowledge regarding the presence of mental health issues.

In many instances the participants spoke strictly in terms of how parents are involved once their child has been labeled disruptive, whereas, others discussed parental involvement in terms of the challenges they faced when working with parents of disruptive students. Many individuals reported that parents are overwhelmed and often unsure when it comes to parenting their child. Teachers often attempted to give

suggestions to those parents that were willing to hear them; however, a number of teachers reported that parents are often uninvolved and working with them can be just as difficult as working with the students.

Participants mentioned the resources available to students with behavioral problems, namely, themselves as the teacher of these students, in addition to school administrators, counselors, social workers, and outside agencies. Lastly, participants mentioned that students are affected developmentally when they are labeled as being disruptive; a few teachers used the terminology “self-fulfilling prophecy” when describing how students try to live up to the label that is placed upon them.

By choosing a qualitative methodology, the researcher intended to shed light on the policies being utilized in the middle school environment through teachers’ narratives on the ways in which such policies are being used when disciplining students who exhibit disruptive behavior. Several participants noted their appreciation for the flexible design, as they found it helpful in venting some of their frustrations or in singing praise about their wonderful school. The semi-structured interviews allowed for the participants to discuss their perception of the intricacies of the school environment, as well as offer suggestions as to how their school setting could improve. Although the majority of participants were pleased with the interview structure, a few of the participants suggested that the researcher use surveys rather than interviews because they would be less time consuming for the teachers. Following the interview, one teacher mentioned that she was hesitant to participate due to the audio recorder and would have been able to give more detailed information if she had not been recorded.

The semi-structured interviews were primarily conducted in the teachers' own classroom and the method provided direction in the discussions, without limiting the conversations with strict confines on relevant information. Each participant was asked and encouraged to discuss the questions outlined in Appendix G, with no expectation that labeling students and informal policies were used at their individual schools. The disadvantages of conducting the interviews in the classroom setting were there were often interruptions by students and/or staff and participants might have been hesitant to share information that had the potential to evoke retribution from administrators.

Generational differences arose in conversation around disciplining practices through descriptions of how to deal with disruptive children in the school setting. While some of the older participants discussed how disobedient children used to receive physical means of punishment either by the teacher or the parent, the younger participants discussed how they try to relate to their students and talk to them when they are exhibiting disruptive behavior. While some of the difference might be due to generational differences, the disparities may also reflect shifts in society, namely the implementation of child abuse laws and the proliferation of lawsuits. Older participants were more likely to assume that children needed to receive harsher discipline in the home, seemingly attributing children's behavior to ways they relate in the family system. Some of the participants mentioned working with the parents and helping them to "develop consequences and rewards" to be used in the home, which are based on the actions and work that are displayed in the school environment. The responses of these participants correspond to Wigfield, Lutz, and Wagner's (2005), and Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, and Iver's (1993) findings that emphasize the

importance of teacher support and quality of relationships during the stages of adolescence.

The sample was diverse in regard to years of teaching experience and grade currently taught, and was also diverse in racial/ethnic background. However, the limitations of this research are that the sample size was relatively small with only 12 participants, and the researchers' decision to recruit solely from urban cities prevented her from reaching individuals in different communities, as urban settings differ quite drastically from suburban and rural areas. Since the participants only represented two metropolitan areas, reported experiences of administrative policy and disruptive behavior may be influenced by the local community issues that create the need for various school policies; therefore, limiting the generalizability of the study.

While the researcher would have liked to have a larger and more geographically diverse sample size, time did not allow for a more thorough selection process and additional interviewing. As suggested by some of the participants, a quantitative study addressing administrative policy and disruptive behavior with a larger number of participants might yield more generalizable results. Nonetheless, the research does provide a solid beginning for further research in the field of administrative policy and a preliminary sense of where auxiliary investigation needs to take place. The main point that one can glean from this study is that both formal and informal policies are used when disciplining students with behavioral problems. While these policies are extensive and there is much to be understood from the findings of this study, there is also opportunity for further research. Future research should continue to recruit participants of varying racial/ethnic backgrounds, and may benefit from integrating discussion of the

implications of race and racism for teachers of color. It is also recommended that further research seek to explore educators' understanding of mental health issues and how this knowledge informs their work with children. Furthermore, teachers and administrators should be required to attend continuing education courses with information pertaining to identifying students with mental health needs and intervention techniques to utilize with said students so that new educators can be aware of the intricacies of mental health issues and experienced teachers can determine whether they are using the most effective set of skills when working with students. Lastly, since teachers are the frontline for implementing policies, they should be included in the process of policy making so they can know the original intent of the policies.

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## Appendix A

### Recruitment Letter

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Tierra Watkins and I am currently a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a study exploring middle school teachers' perceptions of their schools' formal and informal administrative policies on children labeled with behavioral problems. Data from this study will be compiled into a thesis, which will be submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work.

If you have been a practicing, fulltime middle school teacher in the public school system for at least three years, or if you have retired within the last three years, have become familiar with the written policies implemented by your school systems' administrators, as well as the informal policies that the schools' administrators utilize, then I hope you will consider participating in my study.

Participation in this study will be confidential and involve allowing me to interview you for about one hour, at a time and place that is private and convenient for us both. The interview will be audio recorded and I will also take notes during the course of the interview. Your name, the name of the school, and any names that you may mention will not be mentioned in the study.

If you think you may be willing to participate and want to know more about this research project, please contact me at the provided email address and/or phone number with any questions.

Thank you for your time and support.

Sincerely,

Tierra Watkins  
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Mail Stop 950  
Philadelphia, PA 19102  
[twatkins@email.smith.edu](mailto:twatkins@email.smith.edu)  
(215) 762-6689

## Appendix B

### Screening Interview Guide

#### Demographic Questions:

1. How long have you been teaching middle school?
2. How long have you been teaching at this school?
3. How long have you been teaching in the public school system?
4. What grade do you teach?
5. What school district do you teach in?
6. How many years have you been teaching?
7. What is your gender?
8. With what race do you identify?
9. How do you identify ethnically or culturally?

Appendix C

Human Subjects Review Board Approval Letter

December 13, 2006

Tierra Watkins  
232 Morris Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19148

Dear Tierra,

Your very careful and thoughtful revisions have been reviewed and all is now in order. We are happy to give final approval to your very interesting project.

I do think your one stumbling block will be some teachers' concern that somehow the Administration will learn about their participation and you did a nice job with your very strong statement about your commitment to confidentiality.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

We wish you all success with your very useful project.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Yoosun Park, Research Advisor

Appendix D

Human Subjects Review Board Amendment Approval Letter

January 18, 2007

Tierra Watkins  
232 Morris Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19148

Dear Tierra,

Your very careful and thoughtful amendments have been reviewed and all is now in order. We are happy to give final approval to your very interesting project.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Yoosun Park, Research Advisor

## Appendix E

### Informed Consent

Dear Potential Participant:

My name is Tierra Watkins and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a study exploring middle school teachers' perceptions of their schools' formal and informal administrative policies on children labeled with behavioral problems.

The purposes of this study are to 1) identify teachers' perceptions of formal and informal administrative policies that are used to identify children as having behavioral problems, 2) identify teachers' perceptions of formal and informal administrative policies on children who have been identified as having behavioral problems, and 3) present a rationale and conceptual framework for teachers' perceptions of these activities.

Your information will be very helpful to social workers, particularly those working in the public school system. Data from this study will be compiled into a thesis, which will be submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work, as well as used in professional publications and presentations on this topic.

#### **The Nature of Participation**

You are being asked to participate in an interview with the researcher for the purpose of contributing and sharing your experience and knowledge pertaining to the formal and informal policies that school administrators utilize in relation to middle school students labeled with behavioral problems. Study participants will be individuals over the age of 21, who have been middle school teachers in the public school system for at least three years or who have recently retired from teaching middle school students. It will be important for you to be familiar with the written policies implemented by your specific school systems' administrators, as well as the informal policies that the schools' administrators utilize. The researcher hopes to obtain a representative sample that comes from various school districts. Those not conversant in English (the language used when conducting interviews) will be excluded from the study. The sample will consist of approximately 12-15 participants.

Once you have indicated an interest in participating in the study, the researcher will conduct a screening interview by email and/or telephone, which will consist of the researcher collecting demographic data such as school district, level of school, length of time working in this capacity, and length of time working in the school system. Once you have been selected as a participant in the study, the researcher will contact you by email and/or telephone. During this correspondence, the researcher will explain the details of the study and answer any questions that you may have. After this email/telephone correspondence, the researcher plans to offer that she and the participant meet at a mutually convenient location in order to conduct the interview. Possible



locations include neighborhood coffee shops or local university libraries. During the course of the approximately one hour interview, the researcher will utilize a list of interview questions that will serve as a guide as she asks you both closed and open-ended questions.

The interviews will be audio taped using a digital recorder. Notes will be taken by the researcher during the course of the interviews with participants. These notes will become part of the data collected and analyzed. The researcher will hire a professional to transcribe the data and she will then analyze the transcriptions.

### **Risks of Participation**

Minimal risk from participation is anticipated. You may experience distress when reflecting on the practices that occur in the public school environment, in addition to how such practices affect your students. You may be uncomfortable expressing your thoughts about this topic due to fear of your job security and retribution from school administrators. Additionally, you will be asked not to identify students or co-workers by name, and to the best of your ability, not disclose individuals' identities during your interview.

If you find anything unsettling about participation, the researcher will request that you bring this to her immediate attention. The researcher will also provide you with a list of referral sources.

### **Benefits of Participation**

There will be no financial benefit for participating in this study. However, you may gain new insight into your work as an educator in the public school system that will be useful for your direct work with administrators, students, and families. You may also gain a better understanding as to the importance of formal and informal administrative policies, in addition to the role of the school environment in relation to students. The information gained from these interviews will help the researcher find a way of conveying this work in a useful manner. Although you will not be paid for your involvement in this study, it is possible for you to be provided with a snack if the interview is conducted in a neighborhood coffee shop.

### **Precautions Taken to Safeguard Confidentiality and Identifiable Information**

The researcher is committed to protecting participants' confidentiality and she fully understands that you may fear that your school administrators will learn about your thoughts on this topic. This study consists of interviews that will be audio taped, and because the researcher has a commitment to protect confidentiality, she will listen to the audiotapes in private, as will another transcriber who will also listen to the tapes privately. The transcriber will be asked to sign a confidentiality pledge. Data in this thesis and professional publications or presentations will be presented in the aggregate without reference to identifying information.

Data, audiotapes, notes and consent forms will be kept secure for a period of three years as stipulated by federal guidelines, after which time they can be destroyed or continued to be maintained securely. In order to assure participant confidentiality, demographic information, researcher notes, transcripts, and audio tapes will be kept separate from informed consent documents and will be identified by number codes rather than names or other identifiable information. Any names or other identifiable information from participants that could potentially be recorded during the interviews will be removed or disguised during transcription and for use in the final thesis project.

**Voluntary Nature of Participation**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw before the study begins. You may refuse to answer any question or stop participation at any time during the interview. There is no penalty for withdrawal from the study and should you choose to withdraw, all materials pertaining to you will be destroyed. You may contact the researcher at the email and/or telephone number listed on this consent form for questions or concerns about this study, before, or after the interview. In the event that you decide to withdraw from the study, you will need to contact the researcher no later than April 1, 2007.

**YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE ABOVE INFORMATION; THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.**

Signature of Participant:

Date:

Signature of Researcher:

Date:

If you have any questions or wish to withdraw your consent, please contact:

Tierra Watkins

Drexel University College of Medicine Outpatient Psychiatry Service

1427 Vine Street, 8<sup>th</sup> Floor

Mail Stop 950

Philadelphia, PA 19102

[twatkins@email.smith.edu](mailto:twatkins@email.smith.edu)

(215) 762-6689

Please keep this copy for your records so you can contact me later or use the referral numbers!

## Appendix F

### Transcriber's Confidentiality Agreement

#### **Volunteer or Professional Transcriber's Assurance of Research Confidentiality**

##### **STATEMENT OF POLICY:**

This thesis project is firmly committed to the principle that research confidentiality must be protected. This principle holds whether or not any specific guarantee of confidentiality was given by respondents at the time of the interview. When guarantees have been given, they may impose additional requirements which are to be adhered to strictly.

##### **PROCEDURES FOR MAINTAINING CONFIDENTIALITY:**

- All volunteer and professional transcribers for this project shall sign this assurance of confidentiality.
- A volunteer, or professional transcriber should be aware that the identity of participants in research studies is confidential information, as are identifying information about participants and individual responses to questions. Depending on the study, the organizations participating in the study, the geographical location of the study, the method of participant recruitment, the subject matter of the study, and the hypotheses being tested may also be confidential information. Specific research findings and conclusions are also usually confidential until they have been published or presented in public.

It is incumbent on volunteers and professional transcribers to treat information from and about research as privileged information, to be aware of what is confidential in regard to specific studies on which they work or about which they have knowledge, and to preserve the confidentiality of this information. Types of situations where confidentiality can often be compromised include conversations with friends and relatives, conversations with professional colleagues outside the project team, conversations with reporters and the media, and in the use of consultants for computer programs and data analysis.

- Unless specifically instructed otherwise, a volunteer or professional transcriber upon encountering a respondent or information pertaining to a respondent that he/she knows personally, shall not disclose any knowledge of the respondent or any information pertaining to the respondent's testimony or his/her participation in this thesis project. In other words, volunteer and professional transcribers should not reveal any information or knowledge about or pertaining to a respondent's participation in this project.

- Data containing personal identifiers shall be kept in a locked container or a locked room when not being used each working day in routine activities. Reasonable caution shall be exercised in limiting access to data to only those persons who are working on this thesis project and who have been instructed in the applicable confidentiality requirements for the project.
- The researcher for this project, Tierra Watkins shall be responsible for ensuring that all volunteer and professional transcribers involved in handling data are instructed in these procedures, have signed this pledge, and comply with these procedures throughout the duration of the project. At the end of the project, Tierra Watkins shall arrange for proper storage or disposition of data, in accordance with federal guidelines and Human Subjects Review Committee policies at the Smith College School for Social Work.
- Tierra Watkins must ensure that procedures are established in this study to inform each respondent of the authority for the study, the purpose and use of the study, the voluntary nature of the study (where applicable), and the effects on the respondents, if any, of not responding.

**PLEDGE**

I hereby certify that I have carefully read and will cooperate fully with the above procedures. I will maintain the confidentiality of confidential information from all studies with which I have involvement. I will not discuss, disclose, disseminate, or provide access to such information, except directly to the researcher, Tierra Watkins for this project. I understand that violation of this pledge is sufficient grounds for disciplinary action, including termination of professional or volunteer services with the project, and may make me subject to criminal or civil penalties. I give my personal pledge that I shall abide by this assurance of confidentiality.

_____	Signature
_____	Date
_____	Tierra Watkins
_____	Date

## Appendix G

### Interview Guide

#### Interview Questions:

1. What are the formal policies regarding discipline and/or the Student Code of Conduct set forth by the administrators at your school?
2. Do you feel that there are informal policies implemented by the administrators at your school?
3. If so, what are they?
4. How are children labeled (identified) as being disruptive? When? By whom? Is there a reason given as to why the child was labeled?
5. What does administration do with disruptive children once they are identified?
6. What teachers have these children in their classrooms? All teachers? Some teachers?
7. Who determines classroom placement?
8. How are parents involved if it is determined that their child exhibits disruptive behavior?
9. Do children get testing if they continue to exhibit problems?
10. Who can kids go to? Are there resources?
11. Does this occur across the board? Does the child's race, gender, and/or SES make a difference in how they are labeled?
12. What are the demographics of the school?
13. What are the demographics of the teachers and administrators?
14. Are the administrations' formal policies effective? Why or why not?
15. Are the administrations informal policies effective? Why or why not?
16. How is climate defined by the administrators?
17. How do you define the climate at your school?
18. If you've taught in different schools, does use of informal policies seem pervasive?
19. What other types of school systems have you worked in?
20. Do you think children are affected developmentally if labeled as being disruptive? If so, in what ways?
21. What are the characteristics of those that are labeled?
22. Does the label follow the child through middle school?
23. If informal policies are used, what is the administrations rationale?
24. Which policies do you find to be more effective? Formal or informal?
25. How does the school define disruptive behavior?
26. How do you define disruptive behavior?
27. How many administrators has your school had since you have been working there?