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ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken to obtain descriptive information about teachers' perceptions of effective classroom management within an inner-city middle school. Thirteen teachers in one such school in Tennessee were interviewed about their classroom management behaviors. Teachers appeared to have an elaborate system of beliefs related to the themes of establishing and maintaining control over their students, forming teacher expectations, and identifying the influences of the home environment. A central theme was that these teachers put a heavy emphasis on controlling student behavior to establish order and to plan and organize academic concerns, even though controlling procedures had not alleviated or lessened classroom conflict. Although they indicated that they believed teachers should not lower their standards, they did, in fact, lessen requirements for these students. They also indicated that, because of perceived home and community influences, they could not expect these students to perform in the same manner as students from other home environments. The home was regarded as a major source of problems for these students. The teachers did believe that they themselves were doing as well as they could under difficult circumstances. The process of improving inner-city schools could well begin with exposing teachers to training that recognizes the importance of cultural awareness for teachers. (Contains 26 references.) (SLD)

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TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT WITHIN AN INNER-CITY MIDDLE SCHOOL

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Overview of the Study

This study was undertaken to obtain descriptive information about teachers' perceptions of effective classroom management within an inner-city middle school. A group of 13 teachers who were all currently teaching within one inner-city middle school in Tennessee were interviewed concerning their classroom management behaviors.

Initial selection of teachers for the study was based on the recommendation of the principal and on the willingness of the teachers to be interviewed. All teachers who volunteered to be interviewed had served as regular classroom teachers for at least three years; however, those three years of service were not necessarily gained within this one particular inner-city middle school. Pertinent demographic information was acquired at the beginning of each interview by requesting each teacher to respond in writing to survey questions. All interviews lasted from a minimum of an hour to a maximum of two hours, and all interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed for data analysis. Furthermore, a series of field notes was kept as a means cross-checking and clarifying all information gained from the interviews. Data from the interviews were subjected to content analysis (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984) in an effort to discover the patterns or themes in the teachers' responses. Categories that emerged from this analysis underwent a process of peer examination (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984) as a means of ensuring internal reliability.

Major Findings and Conclusions

Introduction

Analysis of the interviews suggested that teachers within this inner-city school based their perceptions of effective classroom management upon an elaborate system of beliefs. These beliefs were in turn reflected in their classroom management strategies. From their discussions of these strategies three major themes emerged from the data. These three themes were concerned with concepts related to the establishment and maintenance of student control, teacher expectations, and the influences of the home environment. The following sections present the major findings and conclusions drawn from three major themes.

Controlling Student Behavior

A central theme that emerged from the data was the teachers' belief that effective classroom management within an inner-city environment hinged first on a heavy emphasis of controlling student behavior to establish order in the classroom and secondly on planning and organizing academic concerns. In this respect this finding concurs with the findings of several other researchers (Rist, 1972; Rist, 1973; Ogbu, 1974; Nespor, 1986; Rothstein, 1986) in that these teachers were overwhelmingly concerned with the construction and enforcement of rules, limiting the verbal and physical interactions between students, restricting students' movement, and maintaining complete power and/or authority over students.

The teachers further indicated that the primary motivation for their actions was founded within the belief that these controlling measures would help in eliminating or decreasing inappropriate student behaviors and student-to-student and/or student-to-teacher conflicts within the classroom and the school as a whole. However, even after professing this belief, most of the teachers went on to state that inappropriate student behaviors and conflicts remained major problems within the school. Many also indicated that within their individual classroom they were constantly trying to cope with students' misbehavior and confrontations. Based upon these findings, it seems evident that the controlling procedures they employed had not alleviated nor lessen classroom conflict.

Teacher Expectations

Another major theme emerging from the data was related to the finding that teachers had significantly lower behavioral and academic expectations for their inner-city students. This finding is consistent with the findings of other researchers (Rist, 1973; Rist, 1978; Grant and Sleeter, 1986; Maeroff, 1988; Grant, 1989) in that teachers within inner-city schools demonstrate a strong tendency to lower their behavioral and academic expectations for students. Although most of the teachers indicated that they strongly believed that a teacher should never lower his or her expectations for inner-city students, all the teachers revealed that in practice they had

modified or adapted their classroom procedures in such a way as to lessen behavioral and academic requirements.

In referring to their academic expectations, many teachers candidly stated that because of perceived home and community influences, they did not expect these students to be able to perform in the same manner as students from other school environments. Consequently, teachers placed a low emphasis on test scores in relationship to students' overall grades and required very little if any challenging homework. Most of the teachers indicated that their students did not perform well on tests, and therefore, if they based a large percent of students' grades on test scores, most of these students would simply fail. Furthermore, homework for these students only consisted of the completion of assignments that had not been finished in class. That is, teachers would often assign work in class with the full intent that students should finish the work before leaving the classroom, and, as many teachers said, students would be given teacher assistance and ample time to complete the work. However, any assignment not completed in class by an individual student became that student's "homework."

Teachers also indicated that even though they placed a heavy emphasis on their behavioral expectations of students, they often found themselves modifying these expectations based upon assumptions about the perceived cultural differences in the students' lives outside the school environment. For example, many teachers reported that they had learned to ignore

students' behaviors that would have been deemed inappropriate behaviors in other school settings. Furthermore, many of the teachers also indicated that they believed some of their students had severe emotional problems stemming from problems arising from the home environment. Consequently, they found it difficult to discipline all students in the same manner, and therefore, consistency, which the teachers had earlier stated that they felt was so vital in the disciplining process of inner-city students, was sometimes lacking in the teachers' own practices in the classroom.

Overall, the teachers' professed classroom practices tended to contradicted any statements given by them to the effect that behavioral and academic expectations should never be lower for inner-city students and that disciplining procedures should remain consistent. It was apparent from the teachers' responses that for whatever the given reasons these inner-city students were not expected nor required to behave or perform at a level that would be expected or required from students in other school settings.

The Home Influence

Another central theme that emerged from the data was the teachers' belief that often the home environment of inner-city students was the major source of many of the behavioral and academic problems manifested by students in the school. All the teachers during the interviews displayed a strong tendency to place the blame for student misbehavior and/or academic

failure on influences drawn from students' home environments. Overall, this tendency to place blame for student failure on outside influences, especially the home influence, permeated and at times dominated the comments of all the teachers. In this respect this finding supports the findings of several other researchers (Ryan, 1971; Rist, 1972; Rist, 1973; Ogbu, 1974; Rist, 1978; Grant and Sleeter, 1986; Nespor, 1986) who also found that teachers viewed most school problems as arising from sources outside the school environment, and, consequently, that any hope of correcting or controlling these problems was beyond the scope of school leaders or teachers to control.

In terms of academic achievement, very often teachers made reference to beliefs that students were not encouraged or motivated within their home environment to do well in school. Teachers further suggested that the home environment of their students often lacked even the basic physical components that would support students in academic study. In many respects, teachers' comments echoed the concept that inner-city students were culturally disadvantaged, and, therefore handicapped in their efforts to succeed academically. The phrase "culturally disadvantaged" is used in this context to indicate that often teachers implied that their students did not come from families with the same values or socioeconomic levels as students drawn from predominantly white, middle-class families. This tendency for "blaming the victim" (Ryan, 1971) for academic failure because of family background was common among the teachers.

Most teachers perceived that there were major differences between the values advanced and reinforced in the home environment of their inner-city students and those values advanced and reinforced in the school environment. However, rather than acknowledging these differences as just differences, many of the teachers seemed to imply that the students' home values were inferior to school values. Many of the comments of the teachers suggested a highly negative judgment of those values that seemed to contradict the traditional white, middle-class values so often prevalent in any school setting. Once again, this finding is consistent with findings of several other researchers (Herriott and St. John, 1966; Lohman, 1967; Rist, 1978; Banks, 1981; Gilmore, 1985; Grant and Sleeter, 1986; Noblit, 1986; Fordham, 1988; Cuban, 1989). Since most of these teachers were from white, middle-class backgrounds themselves, it is possible that at least on an subliminal level they did reflect negative messages to students concerning students' home background and values.

In regard to inappropriate or violent student behaviors, many teachers made reference to a belief that often their inner-city students were merely venting in the school environment the anger and frustration caused by hostile or threatening home environments. Several teachers indicated that they believed that in many cases the students' parents were the true source of inappropriate behaviors. According to many of the teachers, inner-city parents did not demonstrate nor even understand appropriate behaviors themselves. Teachers also

made references to a belief that many of their students were physically and emotionally abused by parents. Furthermore, the teachers indicated that parents were viewed as adversaries to the disciplining process and at times to the entire educational purposes of the school. This finding associated with negative teachers' perceptions of inner-city parents concurs with the findings of several other researchers (Ryan, 1971; Rist, 1972; Nespor, 1986).

In summary, it seemed evident in these teachers' remarks that they firmly believed that for the most part the home influences of their inner-city students acted as a detriment to the goals of the school. It was striking that not one teacher ever made even one distinct positive comment about the home life of these students. On the contrary, all the comments offered on this subject were similar in that these inner-city students were portrayed as being subjected to extremely negative and ultimately destructive home influences.

Closing Remark

It seems appropriate to summarize many of the possibly unvoiced or unconscious, but nevertheless implied, beliefs that emerged from the data analysis of the teachers' responses to interview questions. While not trying to place blame on these teachers, it did seem that just below the surface of their outward remarks were some hidden beliefs on which they based their perceptions of effective classroom management within an

inner-city school. These beliefs seem consistent with those voiced by Rist (1973):

> Middle-class students can learn, lower-class students cannot;...control is necessary, freedom is anarchy; violence works, persuasion does not; teachers can save a few, but will lose many; the school tries, the home will not; and finally, only the naive would dispute these beliefs, as the wise knows. (pg. 241)

Wise or not, one is left wondering if these beliefs can truly assist teachers in facilitating effective approaches to classroom management.

Implications for Practice

The most striking impression that one could draw from these interviews is that the teachers truly believed that they were doing the best they could under very difficult conditions. At times they expressed surprise at the sudden outburst of students and students' resistance to even the smallest requests related to classroom functioning. It was as if on some level they took for granted that students enrolled in this inner-city school, as with any school, should naturally understand and want those things that, traditionally, schools have to offer. These teachers, besides expressing frustration that nothing they tried seemed to work consistently, were obviously perplexed as to why at times nothing they tried seemed to work at all. Consequently, they appeared to retreat into positions which forced them to advocate a heavy emphasis on controlling student behavior, lowering their academic and behavioral

expectations, and blaming the students' home environment for their lack of success in convincing students that school provided those things one would need to succeed in middle-class society. It seems on the whole that these teachers were "...well-meaning people...who were not used to thinking in terms of pluralism and had little, if any preparation for doing so" (Grant and Sleeter, 1986, pg. 235). However, before dismissing these teachers as simply being an unknowing part of the continuing problem of the inner-city school, it would be wise to reflect on the idea that:

> ...focusing just on the abysmal quality of teaching in the inner city minimizes the very real difficulties involved in trying to teach there; difficulties that do have something to do with the kinds of children who are there and something to do with the climate and structure of such schools. Stretch forth your hand in kindness and you may draw back a nub. The same climate that teaches a seventh-grade boy that there is no reason to do homework may teach his teacher that there is no point in trying to reach out. (Payne, 1989, pg. 114)

In responding to questions on the demographic survey and in subsequent answers to interview question, teachers did not indicate in any way that their experiential/cultural background determined or influenced any of their actions within the classroom. However, a few teachers did make verbal references to how very different their backgrounds were from their students, and their written responses on the demographic survey certainly illustrated that point. The majority were white females who had attended predominantly white, middle-class schools. Only two teachers, who were African-Americans,

indicated that they had ever attended at any time in their school career an inner-city school. These facts alone are similar to the statistical information cited by other researchers (Fine, 1986; Graham, 1987; Haberman, 1989), and as Grant (1989) commented about prospective new teachers entering urban schools:

> If it hasn't happened already, urban teachers will soon find that the new teacher across the hall or the new teacher next door will be a white female whose first choice for a teaching assignment was a suburban school. These new colleagues may have some of the knowledge, understandings, and attitudes necessary for teaching urban students, but, for the most part, their backgrounds will be limited and superficial. Their attitudes will have been shaped by a society that is biased along the lines of race, gender, and class. While in college, they probably heard a few lectures on the "minority child," and the "at-risk student," and the "second-language student." But they probably didn't take those lectures seriously...and they probably retained enough information in those lectures to regurgitate it on subsequent exams. (pg. 765)

In short, for this study on classroom management, it is not difficult to see that the teachers working in this inner-city school had little in common with the cultural backgrounds of their students, and if these teachers received the type of training indicated above, it is easy to understand that their backgrounds were so ingrained in them that they simply took for granted the values inherent in such backgrounds. Their biases were probably unconscious, and therefore they were unaware of how those biases affected their functioning within an inner-city school.

The question naturally arises concerning the knowledge that would truly help these teachers understand and cope with the sometimes difficult task of classroom management within an inner-city school. In many respects the answer seems simple. That is, teachers need to examine their own beliefs and values and develop a greater awareness and understanding of the cultural differences that exist between them and their students. Furthermore, they need a chance to begin this examination before they begin their teaching careers. Consequently, the most obvious response to this need would be for colleges of education to provide realistic courses on multicultural education before students actually become teachers. Colleges of education also need to provide those teachers already practicing their profession an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of not only the realization that cultural differences do exist but also the realization that often they, as teachers, have internalized an unconscious resistance to culturally different students.

This call for a multicultural or multiethnic training for future teachers and for teachers already practicing their profession is supported by the works of many researchers (Banks, 1981; Grant and Sleeter, 1986; Noblit, 1986; Haberman, 1987; Burstein and Cabello, 1989; Grant, 1989; Moncero-Sieburth, 1989; Bennett and LeCompte, 1990). This type of training would recognize that future and present teachers need not only a strong foundation in academic subject matter and the methods and skills of presenting that subject matter but also

exposure to a curriculum that helps to develop an awareness and understanding of culturally diverse student populations. As Montero-Sieburth (1989) stated:

> Thus, what constitutes a "good" teacher in urban schools today? Such a teacher cannot be simply skill-oriented and subject-matter knowledgeable; he or she must also be culturally sensitive and sensible. Urban teachers must be able to use cultural information responsibly to discern the quality of such information, and to stimulate student learning through creative multicultural processes... The urban teachers' role in the perpetuation of the self-fulfilling prophecy of failure, prompted by the transmission of lower-order skills and even lower expectations and academic challenge, must be abandoned. Instead, knowledge must be generated that encourages and assists teachers...to convey positive behaviors, skills, and opportunities to urban students. Effective teacher education for the urban context is that which develops teachers who can, in assuming their roles as arbitrators between the demands of mainstream culture and those of underrepresented groups, transform urban school failure into success. (pg. 344)

Transforming inner-city school failure into success, as is already too well known, will not be an easy or quickly accomplished task, but possibly the process can begin by first exposing prospective and current teachers to educational training that recognizes that their awareness of cultural diversity is essential if students within inner-city schools are to succeed.

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