Understanding ‘Problem’ Behavior in Urban Classrooms

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Ed 400 Research Seminar
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Research Question

What triggers behavior problems in urban elementary school classrooms for non-labeled students?
Behavior problems

“Anything that would interrupt the process of learning in the classroom and interrupt with the teaching whether it be making noises, talking out, talking to others, or things that distract students from learning.” (Mrs. Arnold)

Urban schools

- Minorities = Majority
- Many are at-risk schools
- Live in poverty

Non-labeled students

- Students who have not been diagnosed with any mental or physical disability or disorder (the students in general education)
Significance

- An untouched topic for research since the 1990’s
- Behavior and achievement interact closely
- Personally
  - My experience
- Common Misconception
  - Many Teacher’s suggest that in urban schools it is the macro-level factors that cause school failure (Waxman & Padron, 1995)
Background

- Improving The Quality of Classroom Instruction for Students At-Risk for Failure in Urban Schools. (Waxman & Padron, 1995)
  - Quality of teachers
  - Differential treatment
  - Less focus on higher order thinking
- The Student-Teacher Relationship (Schlechty & Atwood, 1971)
  - Reciprocal relationship
Teachers use the students’ home life to justify the students’ classroom behaviors. This leads the teachers to respond in one of two extreme ways: teachers ignore the students’ behavior, or they humiliate the students overtly. Students internalize the teachers’ reactions and act accordingly in future situations.
Methods

- Hartford Elementary school
- Two Fifth grade classrooms
  - Single sex
- Field notes, Informal conversations and Interviews
  - Field notes in two classrooms
  - Interviewed 6 female students & 6 male students – both teachers
  - Informal conversations with students, teachers, and 1 social worker
Context

- Hartford School
  - Total Enrollment 434 students
  - Total Minority 97.9%
- Mr. Hills’ Classroom
  - 22 boys
  - Teaching single sex for 5 years
- Mrs. Arnold’s Classroom
  - 23 girls
  - Teaching single sex for 1 year
Why do behavior problems occur?

- “A lot of issues. One of my most violent boys this year... I went to his house, woke up his mom who was sleeping on the couch with the boyfriend and... you know it’s a small apartment, and there’s mom on the couch with some guy, not his dad, they’re adults and throughout the night they do adult activities. That kid is just... he doesn’t care cause you know he’s probably not comfortable with the situation at home so he really doesn’t care what I say to him or whatever anyone else says to him. When you go and you see it and you see mom and this boyfriend getting up out of bed together I think it really affects these boys real hard.” (Mr. Hills)

- “For most of the reasons, the ones I have are for attention, and there must be lack there of at home, and they look for it and get it in a negative way, I think is the most common thing I have noticed.” (Mrs. Arnold)
Do you think that your students should receive equal treatment?

- “Yes and no. I think that for some students because of their behaviors and they’re strong behavior problems, I kind of let some things slide with them, but based on my relationship with them knowing that... um I do treat some of them differently than others based on their behavior.” (Mrs Arnold)

- He laughs... “that’s an interesting question... they say its equitable and not equal, I guess what they mean by that is no. Every kid needs different treatment, its almost like they learn differently they you know, behave somewhat similar, but differently, their consequences need to be different....” (Mr. Hills)
“I will treat the kids the way I think they can handle it so some kids I’ll get on harder ‘cause they’ll respond to that... You know other kids I sorta ignore, I ignore, I ignore consistently and eventually I just turn to the person and I don’t necessarily pick on him even though it is very clear that he is the one I am talking about and so I talk about how we behave as adults and about men.... at times I just don’t get on them I talk about behavior in general so it is not just an attack on them.. it is different when I have other kids who have different types of issues I may get on them quicker…” (Mr. Hills)
“I think so and I hope that they [well-behaved students] would understand why I allow these particular girls more freedom and leeway. They have bigger problem than the rest of the girls in the class. Outside of school they don’t have a good foundation. They [well-behaved students] shouldn’t have a problem following directions.” (Mrs. Arnold)
What Teachers Said About Students

Bianca
- “Oh you are researching behavior problems then you better keep an eye on her.” (Mrs. Arnold)
- “…with her there is no in-between usually it is easier to ignore her, but sometimes I lose my patience and yell at her. Then I feel bad for yelling because I know that she gets yelled at a lot.” (Mrs. Arnold)

Russell
- “He came to school today with a black eye. I asked him how it happened and he told me his 4 year old brother did it. He lives with a mom who drinks as a hobby and a guy who isn’t his dad; when he creates problems in school; well he needs to get his aggression out somewhere.” (Mr. Hills)
What Students Said

- Bianca
  - “People are who they are, just ‘cause there is a rule don’t mean I change.”
  - “Some rules are fair, I mean other people need to know how to act, but if someone says something bad about me I’m gonna punch ‘em.”

- Russell
  - “I do behave, but I just get in trouble. Other kids do what I do, but teachers think I am more bad that’s not my fault.”
Conclusion

- Teachers use students’ home life to justify classroom behavior.
- Teachers responded to students inconsistently so the students behavior did not change.
- Students that do behave have a strong base provided for them elsewhere.