

4-1-2007

Understanding Behavior 'Problems' in Urban Elementary Schools

Alex Miller
Trinity College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Miller, Alex, "Understanding Behavior 'Problems' in Urban Elementary Schools". Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2007.
Trinity College Digital Repository, <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/42>

Understanding Behavior 'Problems' in Urban Elementary Schools
Alexandra Miller

Ed400 Senior Research Project
Professor Andrea Dyrness
Trinity College
December 2006

Understanding “Problem” Behavior in Urban Classrooms

Introduction

The field of education faces many challenges. There is a strong disparity between urban and suburban schools. Urban schools have many struggles; the population attending urban schools is commonly experiencing limitations because of poverty, there could be a language barrier, as well as little resources or funds to use. Urban schools are mainly occupied by minority students. All of these macro-level factors make the success of education a bit more challenging in urban areas (Waxman and Padron, 1995). . One trend for urban education is low achievement. This is a highly researched topic in the field of education because it is so prevalent among minority students in urban schools. This achievement research suggests that low achievement could be correlated with the amount of behavior problems that occur in urban school classrooms. Teachers are spending more time disciplining their students and not teaching them (Waxman and Padron, 1995). There are many urban schools and one common theme throughout most of them is behavior problems.

Every school provides clear rules that explain what is expected of their students on school property, and each teacher is expected to create classroom expectations that clearly explain the ways their students should and should not behave, yet many students still demonstrate behavior problems. Teachers do not have the tools to create a learning environment with few behavior problems. A solution to a learning environment without behavior problems is something that needs to be discovered in order to create equality for education.

Research Question

Understanding behavior problems and the relationship that behavior problems have to the child and their achievement was something I was interested in. Most importantly I wanted to understand why children have behavior problems in the classroom. This led me to my research question; what triggers behavior problems in urban elementary school classrooms for non-labeled students? This research will further uncover the mystery of why children behave the way they do in the classroom.

Significance

Urban classroom behavior problems have been an issue that schools and teachers have been dealing with for a long time. It has been correlated that classroom behavior problems can lead to poor academic achievement (Perkins, 1965). There needs to be some combat to this correlation because each child deserves equal opportunities to succeed in school, and behavior problems should not prevent this success. To be able to understand classroom behavior problems would allow educators to adjust their methods and then create a classroom environment that would facilitate a better learning environment. In urban classrooms there tends to be a trend of substituting teaching time or learning time for behavior management, and actions of discipline, and this clearly takes away from a child's education.¹ If there are triggers that create behavior problems, then being able to prevent them is imperative to benefit each child's education and well-being. This research could determine many changes in classroom the environment, such as discipline, teacher-student interactions, as well as teacher expectations of students.

¹ Social worker from the school I researched 11.1.2006

Personally I have worked with many children in the urban area of Hartford in schools as well as outside of schools and one common theme that I found among many of the children was inappropriate behavior. I found that children seem to respond with explosion to situations that could be handled calmly or rationally.

Lastly, a common misconception that is still fostered by many teachers is that macro-level factors of urban areas somehow cause behavior problems in the classroom. My research found that teachers do believe this, but research has found that these factors such as; poverty, single parenting, language barriers etc... are all alterable when referring to a child's education (Waxman and Padron, 1995). This misconception came up multiple times throughout my research, it is important to remember throughout this paper,

Thesis

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.

Literature Review

The research that has been done solidified my findings, as well as found some consistent things. Research validated teachers as a strong factor, as well as the children themselves as part of the behavior problem dynamic. Waxman and Padron (1995) argued that teacher quality was an issue to be considered. They suggested that the teachers in urban schools had pre-conceived notions of the students who attended urban schools, and associated minorities with under-achievers. This leads the teachers to a) treat the students differently, and b) keep the lessons on a basic level that does not require higher-level

thinking. These are two things that deter from students learning. Urban schools faced the challenge of teachers placing judgments about levels of academic abilities on students and teaching in ways that directly reflected their perceptions.

The relationship between the teacher and the student was extremely important. Teachers are directly and indirectly responsible for their classroom, including the behavior that took place. It was interesting to see how much teachers forget or just did not know how much control and power/influence they had in their classroom and on their students. The relationship that the teacher had with their students was reciprocal. This suggests that students have an influence on their teacher, but in turn the teacher has influence on their students. Susan Klein (1971) mentions in her study, the influence the student had on their teachers, "...the results show a systematic relationship between positive teacher behaviors and positive student behaviors, and between negative teacher behaviors and negative student behaviors." It was not just the interaction that took place between the student and the teacher but the quality of the interaction. Because the relationship was reciprocal, it was influenced by the perceptions of both the teacher and the student (Schlechty and Atwood, 1977).

Children's behavior has meaning. Many teachers responded to children without consciously thinking about how they are responding. Teachers' frequently responded inappropriately to children's behavior which instigated a child to behave inappropriately. Research admits that reading into every behavior demonstrated by a child could be a difficult task, but a great teacher can do this well and will experience less behavior problems in their classroom (Lipton, 1971). Lipton also implies that a child's perception of their teacher was a major influence of behavior. If a child perceives that the teacher

thinks he/she was not a smart child they are likely to perform badly; this carries over to behavior. If a child believes that his/her teacher thinks that they behave badly then the child was more likely to behave badly. Most of the research implied that teachers can be a positive influence on children, but they also had the same opportunity to create problems for their students as well. Being aware of students and their likes and dislikes as well as things that are tough for the child will also help the teacher to make the best decisions in how to interact with their students as well as allow the teacher to form a positive relationship.

Last and most recent, Ann Arnett Ferguson (2001) wrote a book on boys and how they are labeled behavior problems, and how the label affects them throughout their education. Her book was relevant to my research because she discusses punishment. In the school she researched there was a room called the punishing room, which students went to if they misbehaved in their classroom. The students and teachers called this room the 'jailhouse'. This suggested that teachers associated these children with jail. As students who are sent to the 'jailhouse' hearing this often gave these boys little hope that a place like jail was not in their future. It demonstrated the perceptions of the teachers to be true

"I think that the year that they are in my class I help them and I influence them. Do my students come back and visit me, all of the time. But no, I don't save them from jail or fighting or the shit that happens at their house, so do I influence them I don't know, but they respect me." n the students' behavior. ²

It was important to recognize that there had been a lack of recent education research done on classroom behavior, there was research discussing gender differences of

² Informal conversation with Mr. Hill 10.27.2006

behavior, and adolescents behavior (not classroom), but little done on what went on inside a classroom, and what triggers the behaviors.

Methodology

For the purpose of this research there are three words that the reader needs to be clear about in order to read further; Behavior problems, Urban elementary schools, and non-labeled student. Throughout my research I defined behavior problem as; anything that would interrupt the process of learning in the classroom and interrupt with the teaching or anything that distracts students from learning.³ An urban elementary school is a school in a city that is populated with the majority of it students being minorities, and the majority of the minority students experience poverty. Lastly, a non-labeled student is a child that has not been diagnosed with any physical or mental disability or disorder, and is not special Ed.

Throughout my ethnographic research I used qualitative methods to record and analyze my data. I observed two classrooms, had twelve student interviews and two teacher interviews, as well as multiple informal conversations with many students, teachers, and one social worker at an urban elementary school.

I observed two fifth grade classrooms in an elementary school in Hartford, CT called Roger-Smith Elementary School. Throughout my paper I use pseudonyms for all names including the school, to assure confidentiality. The two fifth grade classrooms were single sexed; one male and one female. I was interested in behavior when observing, but I recorded everything about the time I observed; when recording these problems it was important to record the entire episode, what happened before, during and after, as well as how the non-involved participants responded to the situation. I observed

³ Interview with Mrs. Arnold 11.28.2006

each classroom for three hours a week for three months. I kept two separate journals/notebooks, one for each classroom. In the front of the notebook I recorded observations during the class and the actual interactions that took place and conversations that occurred; it was all factual. In the back of the journal when I left the school I recorded my own thoughts, feelings, and reactions to what I observed.

I was able to interview six female students and six male students, and the two classroom teachers that I observed. All of the interviews were tape recorded. The students' interviews lasted around 45 minutes and the teachers' interviews were about 30 minutes. They all took place in a room of just me and the interviewee with limited distractions. In order to carry out these interviews I needed to acquire informed consent forms from each student and teacher that I interviewed. Many students showed interest in participating in an interview, but it took time to actually receive the informed consent form from students. In the end about eight students from each class returned the form, it was only because of time that I was unable to interview them all. The purpose of student interviews was to try to understand the student perspective, and to give the students a voice. To understand the child is to better understand why the child behaves the way they do. The purpose of the teacher interviews was to understand how teachers perceive behavior, and what they believe are the reasons for urban classroom behaviors. I wanted to match up the teachers actual actions in the classroom to what they said. Also, the interview was to get the facts about their classroom and expectations.

I was also engaged in many informal conversations with students, teachers, and one social worker. This type of interaction allowed people to let their guard down. I had lunch with the students many times which allowed for good conversation and really

allowed me to get to know the students. Before, after, and during class both teachers engaged in conversation with me to inform me of certain things that had been going on which gave me a window to ask further questions. In passing a social worker had asked me what I was doing in the school and we then had a conversation about many things focusing on my area of research. These conversations were particularly helpful for my research because unedited conversation is usually honest and personal.

Context

The Roger-Smith Elementary school that I carried out my research in was grades kindergarten through sixth grade. The schools total enrollment for 2005-2006 was 434 students and the number of minority students was 97.9%. 73.3% of the students at this school were eligible for free reduced lunch. The school had a dual language program 25.5% of the students participated in this program. 68.8% of the students speak a language other than English at home. This elementary school deals with many behavior problems. When casually speaking to a social worker she said “there is a line of students that I have to deal with, or that ask to talk to me, I can’t through them all in one day...”⁴ This urban elementary school has a security guard walking around the school constantly who reinforces the rules, as well as deals with any students who are out of control. Finally, the vice principal was very involved with his students. Every time I was visiting the school I saw him more than once. His presence was very powerful and he had a strong relationship with many of the students.

I carried out my research in two fifth grade classrooms, Mr. Hills’ all male classroom, and Mrs. Arnold’ s all female classroom. The two classrooms were the only single sex classrooms in the school. This was done because when Mr. Hills started

⁴ Informal conversation with the Social worker at the Hartford elementary (11.3.2006)

teaching at this school 6 years ago, he believed in single sex education, especially for male students. Mrs. Arnolds has been teaching for a total of two years and this was her first year teaching the all female class. There was a coed classroom for fifth grade or the option of single sex. The children are placed in the single sex classrooms for one of two reasons, either the parents' request it or teachers from fourth grade suggest that a student should be in the single sex classrooms.

Teacher and Student Profiles

Mr. Hills

Mr. Hills has been teaching the all male classroom for five years. He strongly believes in this for young men because he feels that fifth grade boys need a male role model and are willing to take more chances in the classroom which benefits their achievement in the classroom:

10 year olds 11 year olds, fifth graders are getting to that stage of liking girls and the girls are a little bit more developed physically and socially. They [the boys] are not sure what is going on with their body and they aren't sure that everyone else has the same feeling and this makes them uncomfortable...some of them have no father to talk to about this kind of stuff, so it will hopefully provide the comfort level to discuss things to feel comfortable...These boys definitely discuss things; they talk about how they are more willing to take chances in the classroom because it's just their boys... having grown up without a father, knowing how to act like a man was more important than anything, I didn't care about school I just wanted to know how to be a man, and I try to provide that for them.”⁵

Mr. Hills tries to create a calm and motivating working environment. In the back of the classroom there is a carpeted area for 'chill out' time for students to gather themselves or for the entire class to discuss non-academic issues like morning council, the president elections, fighting, or anything that Mr. Hills finds important. The lights in his classroom

⁵ Interview with Mr. Hills, 11.27.2006

were usually off. When I asked him why he told me it was to keep the students quieter and focused. The walls were covered with reminders for the students, like posters about how to write an expository paper, or math hints, as well as the work that the students have done. Overall the classroom environment was not over stimulating, but provided a comfortable atmosphere to learn in.

Mr. Hills. is a man in his forties, he is very strong physically as well as his physical presence. He comes across stern with high expectations for his students. Mr. Hills is very respected by his students. It seems as though he is viewed as a father-like figure. He recognizes that many of these boys do not have fathers and he can relate to this, he lost his father at a young age. He believes that this helps him relate to his students and he is responsible for providing a strong male role model for them. Mr. Hills tries to teach his students how to be men.

This classroom is run like a community. Mr. Hills believes in discipline, but under his perceptions of the student as well as the situation. He believes that discipline is not about punishing, but about teaching students that life is about decisions and students need to take responsibility for their actions and accept their consequences.

“When a student throws something at another student, I don’t care, but the kid needs to know that he chose to throw something and that it affects others in the classroom and it is totally distracting, so I don’t let him get away with it. Most of the kids think that it is stupid to get in trouble for throwing something, until it someone gets hurt, and then they are yelling at the person who threw it. These boys need to realize that they can’t just do something and get away with it, especially where they come from.”⁶

Mr. Hills tries to create a classroom that provides an empowering environment. His goal it to teach these students that education is the answer to becoming better people and their way out.

⁶ Interview with Mr. Hills, 11.27.2006

One thing that is sacred to the boys in Mr. Hills class is ‘workout’. Everyday before lunch the boys go to the gym and have ‘workout’. There is the same routine each day, but it is something that only his class gets for some reason. They run around the gym a few times throwing a football to Mr. Hills who stands in the center and then go through some basic workout drills. This is a time that the boys support and push each other.

Russell

Russell was one of the boys in Mr. Hills’ class. He was a tough boy on the outside, but very insecure and young on the inside. Russell’s favorite thing to say was “I don’t care.” But after observing him for three months I know how much he did care. Russell lived with his mom and his little brother and on occasion a man that was not his father. Russell’s mom had a drinking problem so he ended up taking care of his little brother as well as his mother most of the time. The guy that hung around occasionally was physically abusive to Russell and his little brother. Russell had come to school with a black eye and bruises on his legs. In class Russell never had his homework done or participated. He was usually the kid who threw things across the room while Mr. Hills was trying to teach or the kid who just walked out of the classroom because he felt like it. Though Russell proved to be smart based on his tests, he was not focused on school at all, and in the lunch room he got into fights. Russell always had his guard up and did not trust very many people so it was hard for him to make close friends.

Brandon

Brandon was a great kid, but always caught up in the ‘drama’ as Mr. Hills puts it in his class. Brandon was very immature socially and physically which forced him to be noticed in other ways. He was not interested in girls at all yet which he made very

apparent in his interview, and specifically asked me not to mention that to his friends. Brandon was always talking, and he needed to know everything that was going on. Whenever Mr. Hills asked a question about a situation Brandon always volunteered information. Brandon meant well, but he was always being talked to or asked to stop doing something.

Mrs. Arnold

Mrs. Arnold has been a teacher for two years total, and this was her first year teaching the all female class. I asked her why she was teaching this class and she said “they asked me to do it and I thought, why not give it a try.” Three teachers have been through this class in five years not counting Mrs. Arnold. She enjoyed teaching the class and will teach it again next year. Mrs. Arnold was a new teacher and it showed in her teaching strategies as well as her discipline approach. It was obvious that she was still developing her own style.

Mrs. Arnold was a very sweet and warm woman. She had a very soft voice and came across as someone who would have a hard time raising her voice at her students. This proved to be true from my observations, even when she was yelling at her students it was hard for her to remain serious and follow through with her threats; “I have really hard time yelling at my students, even when I should yell at them I try not to, it just isn’t like me to yell.” This is not always bad, but I got the impression that her students did not have respect for her.

Her classroom was set up similarly to Mr. Hills’ classroom. The desks were set up into groups to promote group discussion, the walls had the same things posted up, and the lights were off often to create a calm and quite atmosphere. There was a carpet space in the back of the classroom, but she used it for morning council and for game space, she said that she rarely had

time to just talk to the students about important non-academic issues. Her biggest daily challenge was “I have trouble with time management and getting in everything that I have to as well as things that I feel is also important and transition time. Wow that is hard for them and I try many different ways but there is still room for improvement.”⁷

Mrs. Arnold’s classroom based on observation was very similar to any regular classroom. When I asked her if she had any views about the single sex classroom having an affect on the girls she said “I see the benefits of both, I don’t think either one is better for the girls.” She did not feel as strongly about this idea of single sex classrooms as Mr. Hills did which I think effected the way she teaches. The classroom was separated; the students were close with each other, but within that closeness there were certain divisions. There was also a strong separation between the teacher and the students. I did not sense closeness between Mrs. Arnold and her students.

One part of the day that I always observed was bathroom break. This took place each day after math. Bathroom break for the single sex classrooms were hard because the school has a rule that you cannot refuse a student when they ask to use the bathroom. To avoid the constant request each class had a time for bathroom break. Because Mrs. Arnold has all girls it took twice as long to use the bathroom because 23 girls need to use the bathroom. After math Mrs. Arnold assigned math problems for the girls to work on during bathroom break. So the entire class goes outside and sits on the floor in front of the lockers and was supposed to work on the math problems. This time of day was when many behavior problems took place.

Mrs. Arnold loved her job, and her students, but through her actions, her teaching style was still not secure and she had not created an environment that provided security or

⁷ Interview with Mrs. Arnold, 11.28.2006

strong community for her students. Mrs. Arnold worked on her weaknesses daily as she said in her interview, “I know I am not the best teacher yet, but I am working on it and watching my colleagues to improve.” She recognized that there was room for improvement and instead of ignoring it each day she was trying to become a better teacher.

Bianca

The first day that I arrived at Mrs. Arnold class I told her what I was researching and her response was, “Oh you are researching behavior problems then you better keep an eye on her.” Pointing to Bianca. Bianca is African-American, tall and was more developed physically and socially than her classmates. Bianca instigated a lot of the trouble that went on in Mrs. Arnold class. Bianca visited the social worker everyday, and she had been suspended three times for bullying. Bianca was one of the smartest girls in her class, but her grades were poor because she was always getting sent out of the room and was unable to participate in the lessons or did not turn in her homework. One day I was working with her during math and she behaved well, and it was obvious that she was grasping the information better than her classmates. I asked her why she didn’t always behave like that, and she told me, “I don’t want to, and I don’t have to, why are you asking me this, you always want to know stuff about me.” Bianca was the leader of one group of girls within Mrs. Arnold’s class. Many girls looked to her for approval mostly because they were scared of her. One girl said in her interview with me, “Bianca is mean and she is always getting in trouble, but if she wants to be your friend and you say no, she will make you cry so I guess we are friends.”⁸ Most of the bullying that Bianca did was secret, or kept quiet. Bianca was one of the girls that I observed closely. She created

⁸ Interview with a girl from Mrs. Arnolds class, 11.7.2006

many problems in Mrs. Arnold' s class and focusing on her allowed me to begin to understand what triggered some behaviors.

Ali

Ali was another student in Mrs. Arnold's class who was a part of the behavior problems that took place. Ali was different than Bianca. It seemed that she didn't have very many friends at all, and it didn't seem to upset her. No one was mean to her or even showed that they didn't like her, but no one was especially close to her either. Ali craved attention, from her teacher from other students and from anyone that was willing to give her attention. Ali came across as annoying. Her behavior was completely inappropriate. During a lesson she would just make loud noises with her mouth or scream out a word like "Candy". Most of her behaviors were not towards any of her peers. The only person they were ever directed towards was Mrs. Arnold and then when Mrs. Arnold said something to Ali about it, Ali would just say "Sorry miss". Her behavior was not harmful unlike Bianca's but extremely disruptive to class. Ali's mother worked in the lunch room at the school. Whenever Ali would enter the lunch room she would run over to her mother and her mother would reluctantly hug her and then push her back towards her class. It seemed that Ali was looking for attention at all times of the day.

Analysis and Interpretation

Through observations I have found that classroom time is spent mostly on dealing with behavior and second to that is academics. There was not a single time during a lesson in Mr. Hills or Mrs. Arnolds classroom that was not interrupted because of some behavior issue. Though each teacher had very different classroom environments and teaching styles, their response to behavior were similar in most respects.

Interpretation of Teacher's Interviews

One question I asked during the teacher interviews was; why do you think behavior problems occur? Both teachers gave answers leading directly to problems from home. Mr. Hills said:

“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.”⁹

Though Mr. Hills is referring to one boy in this quote he is also saying that home for any student has a huge impact on school behavior. This may be true, but there needs to be something that triggers these emotions at school. Teachers create a relationship with their students individually and this relationship tells their students if the teacher likes them or not, and what the teacher expects from them academically and behaviorally. If the child thinks that the teacher expects them to be bad then they will be.

“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.”¹⁰

Mrs. Arnold recognizes that many of the girls are searching for attention because it is missing from home. This quote, like Mr. Hills' quote suggests that home factors create school behaviors as well.

After finding out what teachers thought about why behavior problems occur, I asked them if they treat their students the same, and I was extremely surprised by their answers. Both teachers admitted no, they do not treat their students the same, and explained their answer. Mr. Hills said:

⁹ Interview 11.27.2006

¹⁰ Interview 11.28.2006

“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...”

From this quote it is obvious that Mr. Hills believed that he could be the judge of how his students should be treated. He treated kids the way he thought was appropriate, which meant that he treated many of his students differently. This sent students different messages about what he expected from certain students. This also implied that he was harder on the students who could handle it which was something that was determined by him, and he determined this based on many of the students home life. Mrs. Arnold’s response to the question about treating her students differently was explained:

“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.”

This quote confirmed my thesis by stating that she treated children who have bigger issues at home differently from those students who have a strong foundation. Mrs. Arnold expected that students who came from a solid home should know how to behave, and she would hold them accountable. The students who did not have the foundation were likely and excused from following the directions when asked.

Interpretation and Analysis of Field Notes

Based on the interviews and what the two teachers said about the influence of a students home life, directly effect the way that both Mr. Hills and Mrs. Arnold treat their students. In Mrs. Arnold’s classroom Ali threw a piece of paper across the room attempting to get it in the trash can. Mrs. Arnold looked at the piece of paper that missed

the trash can and then continued to teach, as if nothing had happened. Ali then threw another piece of paper aiming for the trash and missed again. This time Mrs. Arnold stopped teaching and turned to the class and loudly said

“Ali, first of all we do not EVER throw things across the room, for many reasons, one being that it is very distracting to me and the rest of the class, and two you know the rule about throwing things in the trash. We do that at the end of the day, so please get out of your seat and pick up both of the things you threw and bring them back to your seat and then at the end of the day you can throw your trash away with everyone else.”¹¹

This was an example of Mrs. Arnold completely humiliating Ali in front the entire class. Ali responded to Mrs. Arnold by, slowly walking to the trash picking up the two pieces of trash and throwing them both away and walking back to her seat. Once she returned to her seat she stood up again and walked over to the trash and took out the two pieces of paper that she threw away. Mrs. Arnold asked “Ali, what are you doing? I don’t understand, you threw the paper away and now you are taking the paper out of the trash? You need to have a seat now.” With the two pieces of paper Ali walked back to her seat rolling her eyes at Mrs. Arnold. Ali was annoyed by Mrs. Arnold’s reaction. This was obvious because after she sat down she was whistling and randomly yelling out words like “Whatever” or “Hello” or “Cha Cha” at random moments. Ali internalized this behavior and behaved like this a lot. I asked Ali if she liked Mrs. Arnold and she said “I don’t know, she is nice, but I don’t think she likes me.” I asked her why she did not think Mrs. Arnold liked her and Ali said, “Well she is nicer to other girls, she yells at me, but other girls she lets them do whatever they want even if they are meaner than me.” Ali recognized the differential treatment that went on in the classroom, and she internalized it, by repeating this behavior. Ali was one of the girls that Mrs. Arnold talk about when discussing ‘needing attention’ and the only way that Ail could get attention was to behave in ways she had gotten attention in the past.

¹¹ Field notes 10.25.2006

During bathroom break all of the girls were doing their math problems. For the most part everyone seemed focused today. Bianca got up and went into the classroom, which was against the rules, no one was allowed in the classroom unless the teacher was there. Bianca went in and didn't come out for about five minutes, and a few of the other girls asked Mrs. Arnold where Bianca was, and why was she allowed in the classroom without permission. Mrs. Arnold told the girls not to worry about it. When Bianca came out Mrs. Arnold asked her why she was in the classroom, and Bianca said that she was getting a pencil, but was not holding one. *I thought to myself it took over five minutes to get a pencil?* Then a girl named Marissa came out of the classroom with a math book in her hand and Mrs. Arnold asked her why she was in the classroom and Marissa responded, "I just had to get my math book Miss." And Mrs. Arnold said "Marissa, you know the rules, and you should have asked me if you forgot something in the classroom. You lose five minutes of recess today." And Marissa quietly sat down and did her work. This example demonstrated Mrs. Arnold ignoring Bianca's behavior and getting upset with Marissa for the same thing. Marissa was being honest and, Bianca came out of the classroom empty handed, and was in the classroom for longer than five minutes. Bianca got away with something because it is justified by her home life that she would not follow directions, yet Marissa who is a well behaved girl who was doing something productive got reprimanded because she had a stable life at home and it was expected that she would always follow directions. Mrs. Arnold told me later that day about Bianca: "...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.”¹²

Mrs. Arnold avoided yelling at Bianca because she got yelled at, at home. This was also demonstrated in the above example when Bianca went into the classroom during the bathroom break. Mrs. Arnold had a tendency to ignore the more obvious behavior problems that Bianca created. I think this was because it was easier to ignore her. Bianca would normally snap at Mrs. Arnold so it seemed that she avoided confrontation with her at all costs.

Another time at the end of the bathroom break, Mrs. Arnold started counting “1 get ready, 2 stand up, 3 get in line.” Everyone except 2 girls got up and got into line, I was standing near the two girls, Bianca and Anna who were still lying on the floor so I asked the girls quietly to please line up. They completely ignored me and continued what they were doing. I then said louder and with a stern voice, “Girls please line up.” Bianca responded to me quickly and with attitude in her voice, “We will in a minute Miss.” Mrs. Arnold again spoke loudly, “Girls you need to line up now so we can go into the classroom.” The two girls again ignored her. I bent down to their level and looked them in their eyes and said, “Excuse me, I have asked you twice and your teacher has asked you twice, so please get into line.” Both girls laughed, and Anna got into line, but Bianca stood up and got into my face and said “Yo stop standing over me like I am a dog!” and she smacked her lips. I was shocked I responded, “I am not standing over you like you are a dog and please could you now follow directions and get into line.” At this point the class began going into the classroom and Mrs. Arnold was standing at the door as the girls passed her. Bianca then continued, “F_ck you, you aren’t my teacher.” and stormed

¹² Field Notes 11.1.2006

off into the classroom. Mrs. Arnold was watching the entire thing and as I walked into the classroom Mrs. Arnold just gave me a look like: It happens all of the time.¹³

Mrs. Arnold completely ignored the extremely inappropriate behavior displayed right in front of her by Bianca. Ignoring behavior is something that Mrs. Arnold did a lot and it sent messages to the students. In this case the message sent to Bianca was that her behavior was ok because the authority figure did not express disappointment. I had been there for a few weeks and Bianca and I have had multiple positive interactions. Excusing this behavior allowed Bianca to internalize that Mrs. Arnold allowed this behavior. In other instances Bianca reacted in similar ways. This was only one example of her attitude and her language, and this was not a juicy example, this was a normal interaction any person could have with Bianca on a daily bases.

Mr. Hills has a very different teaching style when compared to Mrs. Arnold, yet his response to his students' behaviors was not very different at all. One day at lunch Russell got into a verbal fight with another boy named Albert. Albert was a chubby boy who thought he knew everything about everyone. At lunch Albert was making fun of Russell for lighting the tips of his hair, calling him a fairy. Russell responded and called Albert a fat ass. This really upset Albert so he made a comment about Russell's mom being ugly and Russell walked around the table and got into Albert's face. Russell had tears built up in his eyes, and Albert was just laughing at him so Russell punched Albert in the face and gave him a bloody lip. Russell got sent to the office and Albert got sent to the nurse. When Mr. Hills came to pick up his class from lunch he noticed that the two boys were missing and asked what happened. Brandon was very willing to tell the whole story. Both boys returned to class later at separate times Albert came back first. Mr.

¹³ Field Notes 11.8.2006

Hills was in the middle of a science lesson when Russell came back and he stopped the lesson and said:

“How nice of you to join us Russell, I hope that while you were in the office you had enough time to think about what you did, because I have already called your mother to tell her what happened. Do you have anything that you would like to say to your classmate?”

Russell quickly and still frustrated responded, “You what? You called my mother, no no.” and slammed his hands onto the desk and then buried his face into his hands. “Mr. Hills Albert started it.” Grunting into his hands, holding back from punching Albert again, “and then he said something bad about my mother! Geez.” Mr. Hills then asked the class if what Russell saying was true? No one said anything. Mr. Hills continued with a loud stern voice, “Albert is this true? Did you say something bad about his mother? Did you instigate Russell to hit you?” Albert was silent looking down at the floor. Mr. Hills got very close to Albert and said “ I am only going to ask one more time, “Did you, or did you not instigate this fight Albert?” The entire class was silent and some boys were staring at Russell and others were staring at Albert. Albert did not answer, and Russell’s head was down on his desk, still thinking about what his mother would say to him when he got home. Mr. Hills said to the whole class, “We will not continue class until Albert explains to me the story, since I was stupid enough to listen to Brandon earlier.” A long pause, and Albert finally said, “I said something to Russell first, but I was joking and he said something that made me angry.” Mr. Hills responded, “Did you not think that what you said to Russell maybe made him angry?” There was no answer and then Mr. Hills said “I am going to call your mother also Albert, because it is

pathetic to see that fifth grade boys cannot go to lunch and act their age, and that all of you are sitting here quiet with scared looks on your faces.”¹⁴

This example demonstrated the humiliation that Mr. Hills has created for Russell and Albert, as well as the entire class. When Russell walked into the classroom after he had been in the office for over an hour, Mr. Hills completely attacked Russell for his behavior, and then went further to embarrass him because Mr. Hills had to call his mother. It seemed very awkward that Mr. Hills felt the need to stop the entire class to inform Russell that he made the wrong choice and that his mother was called. Then after Russell got upset, which seemed inevitable, and pleaded his case Mr. Hills then began humiliating Albert in front of the class. Mr. Hills was addressing a personal issue that two boys had at lunch in front of all of their peers an hour and a half later. Mr. Hills then went even further to address the whole class as pathetic. Russell has many issues going on at home and as Mr. Hills said to me a few days later when I asked him about the situation:

“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.”

So even though Mr. Hills humiliated Russell he also recognized that there were things going on at home that are out of Russell’s control, he still felt that Russell could handle it. Russell was a very sensitive kid, and he internalized everything until one day he released himself by punching someone. It was very obvious that when Mr. Hills was talking to Russell in front of the class that he was upset. He felt bad about disappointing him, and he was also very hurt by the way that Mr. Hills treated him. This is demonstrated when Mr. Hills asked Russell about the black eye that he had, and he looked Mr. Hills in the

¹⁴ Field Notes 11.7.2006

face and told him that his four year old brother did it, this is after a month ago when he had bruises on his legs he felt comfortable telling Mr. Hills that it was “my mom’s stupid boyfriend.” He internalized Mr. Hills’ response and lost trust in him, which lead Russell to treat Mr. Hills differently in future situations.

Another time Russell was throwing eraser pieces across the room, and one boy was whispering to Russell asking him to stop continuously, and Russell did not stop. Mr. Hills was working with another boy at the back of the classroom, but definitely saw what he was doing. Russell was not doing what he was asked to do, and he was being disruptive to the students that he was throwing erasers at as well as to the other students who thought it was funny. Mr. Hills just said “Please stop throwing erasers whoever is doing it.” then he said nothing else at all until he said, “Line up it is time to go to workout.” Mr. Hills completely ignored Russell in this situation which allowed him to think he got away with it. I could tell that by looking at Russell’s face as he stood fidgeting in line. Ignoring Russell sent him the message that his behavior was acceptable and that he could behave like that and get away with it. Unfortunately, that situation came up again a few days later and Mr. Hills acted completely opposite and humiliated each and every student who was somehow part of the eraser throwing. Mr. Hills has inconsistent ways of dealing with behavior problems, which is a reason why the same behaviors continue.

Conclusion

Classroom behavior problems are a result of many factors, but the teacher and their expectations have an immense affect on students (Schlechty & Atwood 1977). Urban behavior problems need to be addressed immediately because they could be a

strong part of inequality of urban education. This could help change the levels of low achievement in urban schools. Teachers did not recognize the ability of control that they have over their students. They can create and prevent many of the behavior problems that take place in the classroom, and if they know this they can use it to benefit the classroom environment and the student as well.¹⁵ Teachers use outside factors to justify students' behavior problems, instead of facing the problem and trying to understand it. Outside factors are major influences on students' lives, but they do not have to affect students' behavior or achievement. It was found that teachers based their reactions to student behavior based on home factors, which played out as unfair for the students and sent wrong messages about behavior to them (Lipton, 1971). This research showed that behavior can be a controllable factor in a classroom.

Inconsistency from teachers was a major factor that affects behavior problems. If students knew what the teacher wanted from them, then they were more likely to demonstrate the appropriate behavior, but if the expectations were always changing then it was hard for the students to behave correctly. Urban classroom behavior remains a problem and can begin to be adjusted based on teachers.

¹⁵ Informal conversation with a social worker

Resources

- Baker, J. (1999). *Teacher-Student Interaction In Urban At-Risk Classrooms: Differential Behavior, Relationship Quality, and Student Satisfaction with School*. The Elementary School Journal, 100, 58-70
- Connecticut State Department of Education. (2005). Strategic School Profile: McDonough School 2005-2006. Retrieved December 14, 2006, from <http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/der/ssp/SCH0506/elema166.pdf>
- Ferguson, A. A. (2001). *Bad Boys: Public School in the Making of Masculinity*. MI: The University of Michigan Press
- Klein, S. (1971). *Student Influence on Teacher Behavior*. American Educational Research Journal, 8, 403-421
- Lipton, A. (1971). Classroom Behavior: Messages From Children. The Elementary School Journal. 71, 254-261
- Natriello, G & Dornbusch, S. (1983). *Bringing Behavior Back In: The Effects Of Student Characteristics and Behavior on the Classroom of Teachers*. American Educational Research Journal, 20, 29-43
- Perkins V. Hugh, (1965) *Classroom Behavior and Underachievement*. American Educational Research Journal, 2, 1-12
- Schlechty, P. & Atwood, H. (1977). *The Teacher-Student Relationship*. Theory Into Practice, 16, 285-289
- Waxman, H. & Padron, Y. (1995). Improving the Quality of Classroom Instruction for Students at Risk of Failure in Urban Schools. Peabody Journal of Education. 70, 44-65

Appendix A
Student Interview Questions and Answers

These interviews were to give the students voices, though many of their answers did not directly answer my research question about behavior triggers in the classroom, it gave them a chance to explain their side of the story. Here are some Questions that I asked with answers;

Do you follow the rules in school?

Bianca- "People are who they are, just 'cause there is a rule don't mean I change."

Do you think the rules are fair?

Bianca- "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- "No rules are not fair because no one follows them all of the time. They want you to get in trouble

Harry- "There has to be rule, but they aren't always fair, like if I have to go to the bathroom I shouldn't have to wait for the break I should be allowed to go."

Why do you get into trouble more than other students?

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."

Brandon- "Because I talk t much, I try not to but I just do."

Ali- "I don't really get into trouble"

Bianca- "Because everyone thinks I am a bully and that I am bad, and I don't care, I don't care what no one thinks of me."

Why do you think that people in your class get in trouble?

Bianca- "they are stupid"

Russell- "they make the teacher mad, or punch someone

Ali- "they want to"

Marissa- "they want other people to think that are bad and daring."

Brandon- "they want to be popular."

Harry- "it is cool if you get in trouble, it means that you are bad a_s."

What do you do if you start getting out of control or when you know that you are going to something that you might get into trouble for?

Bianca- "I don't get out of control, and if I maybe will get in trouble I don't care I mean if you call home I don't care I never get in trouble at home, that's why school is stupid."

Marissa- "I just ask my teacher if I can go to the bathroom and, this sound funny, but I talk to

myself in the mirror until I calm down."

Russell- "I can't control it is just happens even when I don't want to."

Harry- "I close my eyes and count backwards, I mean that is what I am supposed to do but I

don't know what I really do. I just fight."

How does it make you feel when you get in trouble?

Bianca- "I feel good." And she smiled from ear to ear.

Russell- "I just hope my mother doesn't find out, she will be mad."

Harry- "I hate it, but it happens a lot so I am sorta used to it,"

Brandon- "I feel bad, whenever I get in trouble I close my eyes and pretend it isn't happening."

These responses help further describe the child. These are their real answers to my questions