

RETURNING TO “NORMAL” AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: AN
EXAMINATION OF HOW ONE MIDWESTERN SUBURBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL
RETURNED TO IN-PERSON LEARNING

by

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To my mother and father, who instilled in me a love of learning

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ABSTRACT

RETURNING TO “NORMAL” AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: AN EXAMINATION OF HOW ONE MIDWESTERN SUBURBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL RETURNED TO IN-PERSON LEARNING

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James Brian Radcliffe

Adviser: Julia B. Smith, Ph.D.

The COVID-19 Pandemic highlighted the role that schools play in the development of adolescents. During this time in their lives, the social and emotional aspects of learning are highlighted as students struggle to “fit in” with their peers. Along with this struggle, adolescents are developing their own unique identity. Taken together, these aspects of adolescence often result in the manifestation of what are considered to be inappropriate behaviors in school. This case study examined the changes that were made at one midwestern middle school in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequences of those changes, perceived or otherwise.

This research was conducted using a mixed methods descriptive and explanatory case study approach. The research questions that for this study were: Did the changes that were implemented at this school have an impact on student behavior? What were the perceptions of staff members, students, and administrators of the changes and how they impacted student behavior? What did the objective office referral data show about student behavior? What can we learn from this experience that might be used in the future?

Using data gathered from student focus groups and staff and administrator interviews, I discovered three prevalent themes: health and safety issues, increase in behavior issues, and decreased behavior expectations and enforcement. An analysis of the office referral data showed that the themes referenced above were not supported by the number of office referrals during the time period in question and the office referral data did not match perceptions of students and staff.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Overview

For decades, middle school teachers and administrators interacted in a similar manner with their students from year to year. The typical school year would begin with the first one to two weeks being dedicated to teaching academic expectations, along with behavior expectations both in and out of the classroom. There would be ice breaker activities to help students get to know one another and to help teachers become better acquainted with their students. It is how it had been done for years. Then the world was hit with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed everything, including the ways in which middle school teachers and administrators interacted with their students. It was my experience that, at the outset of the pandemic, educators were hailed as miracle workers. They redesigned curriculum to meet the needs of students in a remote learning environment, with varying levels of success. Since many teachers already had an online component to their classes, they were able to adapt their prior experience to this new environment and did so to the best of their ability. Teachers adapted their teaching methods and worked tirelessly to make online learning interesting and engaging for their students. As we struggled through the challenges of online teaching and learning, we did not suspect that our greatest challenge was yet to come.

Locking down an entire society was not an easy task, and history is rife with similar examples of catastrophes that have changed the course of human history. From

two World Wars to the more modern-day disaster of Hurricane Katrina and the devastation it left in its wake in New Orleans, there is no shortage of disasters that have caused humanity to change in its approach to everyday life. While each of these examples provides a window into the human reaction to a catastrophe, the COVID-19 pandemic was unique in that it resulted in a complete lockdown of society in many countries across the globe. This global issue resulted in schools having to shift to an online presence with no human contact between teachers and students. Fortunately for teachers and students, the technology that had been developed in the 21st century helped to make this transition possible. This technology, which included better quality video conferencing, gave educators the ability to hold classes virtually and helped them to do their level best to provide the highest quality of education possible under the circumstances surrounding the pandemic.

The true challenge was yet to come, however, as we had to navigate our way back to in person learning in schools. Educators were in uncharted waters and there were many approaches to establishing our new “normal.” As schools returned to in person learning, the COVID-19 pandemic was still having a large impact on society. There was no widely available vaccine, and the morbidity numbers were still fluctuating. According to the Centers for Disease Control (n.d.), morbidity rates for the state in this study increased from 133 in July 2021 to 852 on September 2021, ultimately reaching 3,472 deaths in December of the same year. Schools approached the return to in person learning by instituting new rules regarding social distancing and limiting the amount of contact that students could have with each other and with their teachers. Many started back to

school wearing masks—which came with their own set of concerns, such as students not wearing them properly and difficulty in communicating—and hand sanitizing stations became the norm throughout school buildings. Along with these changes, there was a shift in how students were welcomed back to school regarding the establishment and enforcement of rules in the classroom and building. Schools focused heavily on the social and emotional needs of students, but in doing so, did they ignore the basic needs of adolescent students, such as structure and routine?

My research uses a case study approach to examine how one middle school in a midwestern metropolitan area attempted to ease their students back into face-to-face learning by modifying their behavior expectations for students. I will look at the changes that were made at the school as part of the effort to address students’ and staff concerns about the social and emotional well-being of the students and the consequences – intended or otherwise – of those changes.

Background

Background of Middle School

The current structure of the public school system did not just happen, it is something that has evolved as the population has expanded and as educators and educational researchers have made new discoveries regarding the way in which humans grow and develop. The earliest schools were either religious schools or private schools and they were the norm in the United States. During the nineteenth century, the states of New York and Massachusetts began prioritizing public education. New York mandated that local governments set up school districts supported by tax dollars in 1814 and just

over twenty years later, Horace Mann spearheaded a reform movement that focused on public education in Massachusetts. According to the textbook *The American Nation* by Davidson and Stoff (2005), Mann lobbied lawmakers in the state and eventually saw the building of new schools, an extension of the school year, and an increase in teachers' pay. Many other states copied Mann's model in the establishment of their own school systems.

The earliest, and most iconic, iteration of a public school was in the form of the one room schoolhouse which put students of all ages and grades in a single room. While quite common in rural areas with small numbers of students, the one room schoolhouse quickly faded in urban areas as cities became larger with more students in each grade level. States began to make school attendance compulsory for children of a certain age and cities saw the rise of a two-tiered school structure consisting of grammar school and high school (Cremin, 1988). Grammar schools were set up to educate the youngest students, usually first through eighth grade (approximately six through thirteen years of age), while high schools serviced older students in grades nine through twelve (Lounsbury, 1960).

As the population continued to grow and educational research expanded, schools were further segmented into a three-tier structure, a movement that began around 1910. It is worth noting that although many school districts changed their structure in line with educational research, in some cases the shift to a two- or three-tiered school system was based solely on the effective use of the buildings available to the school district (Lounsbury, 1960). This new structure consisted of an elementary school serving grades one through six, a junior high school that serviced students in grades seven through eight

(or in some cases, nine), and a high school that students would attend to complete their education through grade twelve. The three-tier structure for schools had several advantages. The first—and arguably the most important—advantage was that students were separated by age which resulted in students of a similar maturity level being grouped together and separated from students who were younger or older than they were. A second advantage of the separation of students by grade level is that teachers could become more specialized in their respective fields and focus their own studies on the subjects that they were teaching. In addition to gaining more expertise in their content area, teachers could also focus on the developmental issues that students face at different ages (Alexander, 1968). It was this focus on the developmental issues of adolescents that led to the most recent iteration of the three-tier school structure in the United States—the middle school concept.

In the early 1960s, educational researchers and those who studied child development proposed an updated version of the three-tier structure used in most public schools and the middle school concept was born. Following the latest research guidelines, the division of students in buildings changed by grade level. Elementary schools became first through fifth grade, middle schools were either seventh through eighth or seventh through ninth grade, and high schools remained in their place to educate students through twelfth grade (Alexander, 1968). The new middle school concept was more than merely a new way to separate students by age and maturity level. The concept, in its purest form, also encompassed a more nuanced approach to educating adolescents. In many middle schools, the sixth-grade classes were self-contained, meaning that students remained in

the same room with the same teacher for most of the day, leaving only for elective classes such as music, art and physical education. In this way, the sixth grade was still very much like the elementary schools to which students had become accustomed. The seventh and eighth grade classes followed either a block schedule, which allowed for students to move between three or four classes throughout the day, or a typical secondary school schedule, where the students changed classes every hour (Alexander, 1969). The reasoning behind this change at the middle level was that it would result in an easier transition for students as they prepared for high school (Alexander 1969).

Background of Current Situation

In any previous school year, teachers spend between one- and two-weeks teaching expectations to their students. These expectations typically focus on issues such as appropriate behavior—both in the classroom and other parts of the building—classroom rules, procedures, and homework expectations. Teachers who exhibit exceptional classroom management skills rely on these first two weeks of school to ensure that expectations are clear to their students. (An additional discussion of classroom management can be found in Chapter Two.) In addition to establishing clear expectations, the consequences of not meeting those expectations are also explained. Once the expectations and consequences have been explained to the students, classroom management becomes much easier if the teacher ensures that the rules and consequences are followed with consistency. “The most important thing a teacher can provide in the classroom during the first week of school is CONSISTENCY. Classroom practices and procedures must be predictable and consistent.” (Wong & Wong, 2009, p. 83) This

format for beginning a school year has been used with great success by teachers for decades, but once the COVID-19 pandemic came along, everything changed.

For many students, COVID-19 did not merely bring uncertainty about school, it also brought concerns about their lives that ranged from food insecurity to increased abuse in their homes. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in increased challenges for students, teachers, parents, and every other member of society. These concerns, may easily lead to a child feeling traumatized. When students experience trauma, it affects the way in which they process information and can “make it extremely difficult for young adolescents to give substantial attention to the cognitive processes necessary for school success” (Crosby. Howell & Thomas, 2020). These issues are not new to teachers, but during the pandemic shutdowns, the prevalence of these issues and the need to address them proactively was highlighted. One positive outcome of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic is that today’s teachers have a greater level of understanding of the issues that many of their students face at home.

In March of 2020, schools were closed as a precautionary measure to stem the spread of COVID-19, leaving students with no option other than to be in their homes. This closure was initially intended to last for two weeks, but it soon became evident that schools would have to remain closed for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. Teachers, students, and families had to switch to online learning amid an atmosphere of extreme uncertainty about the future of education. By August 2020, it became evident to most schools that the 2020-2021 school year would begin using virtual learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the risks it still posed to society. Teachers were

given additional training in the use of online learning platforms and were advised to revisit their expectations for students in the face of the challenges society was facing. How then, were teachers to teach expectations to their students? What were those expectations and how were rules to be enforced in an online format? These are questions that plagued the teaching profession as we moved into a new school year with no students in the classroom.

Many school districts felt that it would violate The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 to require students to have their cameras turned on during virtual learning. This decision left teachers not knowing if their students were really “in class” or whether they signed into the class, then left to do something else. Many of my own students have admitted that they slept through many of their classes or spent their time playing online games when they were supposed to be doing schoolwork. Since there was little that schools could do to enforce rules during online classes, consequences for breaking the rules were virtually eliminated at the beginning of the 2020-21 school year except in the most egregious of cases.

Schools began to return to in person learning, albeit in a hybrid form, in the spring of 2021. Strict rules were in place regarding social distancing and schedules were created in a way that eliminated lunch periods for students to avoid any type of close contact. These rules were strictly enforced, but little attention was given to the traditional rules and expectations that would have been taught at the beginning of the school year. The focus had changed from teaching students how to behave in school to assuring that their social and emotional needs were being addressed above all else. In the school district that

was the focus of my research, teachers were forbidden to give failing grades to students during the online and hybrid classes because it was thought that this would be emotionally damaging to the students. As the school year drew to a close, discussions were taking place to determine what school would look like for the following year. COVID-19 remained a concern for schools and society and reports of cases were fluctuating from month to month. Given the level of uncertainty regarding COVID-19 at the end of the 2020-21 school year, many wondered if there would be a second year of online learning.

By August 2020 most school districts had decided to return to in person learning for the upcoming school year, but it was going to be different than it had been in years past. Due to COVID cases fluctuating and the lack of a widely available vaccine, classrooms were arranged to give the maximum amount of space between students and any type of group or partner work was strictly forbidden. Masks were required of all personnel and students and hallways were closely monitored to enforce the social distancing requirements. Along with these changes, there was also a shift in the way that expectations and consequences were addressed with the students. Teachers were instructed to “go easy” on the academic and behavior expectations for students. The teachers were told to look the other way when students were not following the rules—with the exception of masking and social distancing guidelines—as long as no one was getting physically or emotionally hurt. The beginning of the 2021-22 school year saw the social and emotional needs of the students take center stage as the focus of education.

Maslow before Bloom

As we have learned more about the psychological needs of students and how deficiencies in those needs affect learning, the educational community has developed a greater understanding of the importance of putting the psychological and physical needs of students above their educational needs, hence the term “Maslow before Bloom.”

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs begins with the most basic of human needs—the need for food, water, etc. Maslow’s hierarchy is usually represented in the form of a pyramid, with the most basic—or human—needs at the base, psychological needs at the middle level and self-fulfillment needs at the top. The human needs that Maslow (1954) categorized are: Physiological, Safety, Belongingness and love, Esteem, and Self-actualization (pp. 80-92). While most educators will attest to the fact that they do their best to address their students’ needs on the Maslow hierarchy, they will also agree that the focus of educators during the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated that they increase the emphasis on the psychological well-being of their students.

Educators must focus on both Bloom’s taxonomy and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs when working with students of all ages. Bloom’s taxonomy is a framework published by Benjamin Bloom in 1956 that defined categories into which educational goals should be assigned. These categories were: “Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation” (p. 18). Bloom’s taxonomy was revised in 2001 and the revised categories are: Remember, Understand, Apply, Evaluate, and Create (Armstrong 2010). In both versions of the taxonomy, the level of knowledge increases as one moves from each level to the next, providing students with the requisite

background knowledge to develop a deep understanding of the material being taught. As one moves up the taxonomy, the depth of knowledge being taught gradually increases. The categories outlined by Bloom are used by teachers across the country to scaffold their instruction to meet the needs of their students. The COVID-19 pandemic caused teachers to alter their focus as they realized the importance of addressing students' needs as well as assigning educational goals. Choice Theory demonstrated that students whose needs are not being met often respond with inappropriate behavior (Glasser, 1986).

The emphasis on the psychological well-being of students became the focus of many educators and social-emotional learning quickly became one of the most widely used phrases in schools. One of the best-known sources for information about social emotional learning is The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) which defines social emotional learning as:

the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (*Advancing Social and Emotional Learning* – (para. 5).

When schools returned to in person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, educators realized that many students were frightened to be back in school and were concerned about contracting COVID-19. The need to focus on social emotional learning and the students' psychological needs quickly became the focus in schools as we were intent on helping our students feel welcome and safe at school.

If schools are educational institutions, then why should they concern themselves with their student's social and emotional needs? This question is one that illustrates the need for teachers to focus on both the academic issues highlighted by Bloom, and the social emotional issues and psychological needs identified by Maslow. Schools and teachers need to care about the issues that their students face at home. They need to be informed about best practices for teaching students affected by trauma. The COVID-19 pandemic was a global traumatic event that affected people from all walks of life. When we returned to in person learning, several of my colleagues were sharing that they were very uncomfortable being back in the classroom with the students. An adolescent does not process information in the same manner as an adult and our students needed us to be the calm voice in the room that reassured them that they were going to be alright. In recent years, schools have committed more professional development time to trauma training and trauma informed instruction (Crosby, Howell, and Thomas, 2018).

As children enter adolescence, their social emotional learning needs tend to take the forefront in their lives. This is a time of change and confusion for many students as they struggle to create their own unique identity that is separate from their parents (Bishop and Harrison, 2021). Schools need to focus on social emotional learning in order to help students be successful, yet there must also be a balance between social emotional learning and accountability. When my school returned to in person learning, the focus was on social emotional learning and *only* social emotional learning. Any thoughts of teaching accountability were pushed to the side as we welcomed our students back into the school. The pendulum may have swung too far to the social emotional learning side

of the education scale, and it became stuck in that position for most of the 2021-22 school year.

Problem Statement

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary to investigate the role that schools play in children's socioemotional lives. This investigation will undoubtedly lead to further research to theorize what schools should be doing to help students develop their own identity. One of the most important aspects of middle school education is helping to guide students in the development of their identity, which is now diverging from that of their parents (Bishop and Harrison, 2021). Although adolescents are still at an age where they are "seeking affirmation from their family and other important adults in their life, young adolescents have a strong desire to belong to a peer group (p. 61). This desire to belong or "fit in" with their peers, along with the development of an individual identity will often manifest itself in behaviors that are deemed unacceptable by the adults in the adolescent's life (Blos, 1941).

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are: Did the changes that were implemented at this school have an impact on student behavior? What were the perceptions of staff members, students, and administrators of the changes and how they impacted student behavior? What did the objective office referral data show about student behavior? What can we learn from this experience that might be used in the future?

Significance

Any significant event in history or society is worthy of research and this research is significant for a few reasons. There has been scant research done on how schools returned to in person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since we experienced this pandemic and the lockdowns that ensued, it is reasonable to think that humanity could face a similar event again in the future. Having access to this study and its conclusions will give educational institutions an explanation of how one school approached the return to in person learning and some of the successes and difficulties that they faced. The issue will be examined primarily through the lens of child behavior theory with a focus on the middle school years, ages eleven through fourteen.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE AND THEORY OVERVIEW

The Changing Role of Schools

With schools becoming more segregated by age group, educational institutions began to take on a new role. This new role turned schools into more than just a place to learn about academic subjects like Language Arts, Math, Social Studies, and Science, along with elective classes like Art, Physical Education and Music. Schools became a place that tried to address all the needs of pre-adolescents. They began to develop more after school programs to meet the needs of students, but also to help parents with childcare between the school day and the end of the parents' workday. Social workers became more prevalent in schools as students began to exhibit more issues with dealing with their own emotions, interacting with other students, and having challenges at home. Today's schools often provide free breakfast and lunch to students and many districts continue providing meals for students through the summer months. Schools have vision and dental professionals who come to the school to give students eye exams and dental checkups. The school—and particularly the middle school—has become a one stop shop for all of the students' needs (Ascher, 1990). Additionally, Tillotson (1993) attests that:

School plays, at the very least, as vital a role in a student's life as does home and family. In some cases, as gleaned from the survey results, school is much more vital in providing positive role models, clear expectations of performance and methods of achievement, and sources of nurturing (p. 5).

In many ways, schools have taken on the role of surrogate parents, providing students with far more than just an academic education.

Curriculum and Instruction Changes

Over the course of the past century, the curriculum being taught in schools and the way in which it is taught has changed greatly. One merely has to watch a movie from the 1940s, 50s, or 60s to see an example of the “sage on the stage” approach to teaching. In this approach, the teacher lectures and the students take notes. Education was teacher driven and the teachers’ word was Gospel. The curriculum itself was selected by the teacher and teachers often taught about the things in which they had an interest. In my own experience, none of my history teachers taught about World War I but spent an inordinate amount of time teaching World War II. As a history teacher myself, I can see the attraction in this choice because World War II had many aspects that are more interesting to middle and high school students. The problem with this approach, of course, is that students in different classes and different schools were not exposed to the same material. This lack of consistency led states to adopt standards for education, which set guidelines for the topics and skills that were required to be taught in public schools. Because each state had a separate set of standards, the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Mathematics were released in 2010 (Porter et al., 2011).

Along with the adoption of teaching standards, teaching methods also began to change. Researchers discovered that the old “sage on the stage” approach that used note taking and rote memorization was not the most effective method of teaching due to the lack of student interaction with the material being taught. New research began to show

that students learned better and gained a deeper understanding of topics by interacting on a deeper level with the subject matter. Campbell (1991) asserts that “All middle level curricula should emphasize teaching skills, hands-on activities, and application of information learned” (p. 22). In my own experience as a teacher, I have witnessed the difference in how students learn using Campbell’s approach as opposed to the lecture and take notes approach. Our computer generation students want constant stimulation and instant gratification and the fastest way to lose them is to simply talk “at” them. Marcia Tate details twenty different strategies for keeping students engaged in the classroom in her book “Worksheets Don’t Grow Dendrites” (2003). These strategies are listed in table 2.1.

Table 2.1

Marcia Tate’s Instructional Strategies

1. Brainstorming and Discussion	11. Music, Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rap
2. Drawing and Artwork	12. Project-Based and Problem-Based Instruction
3. Field Trips	13. Reciprocal Teaching and Cooperative Learning
4. Games	14. Role Plays, Drama, Pantomimes, and Charades
5. Graphic Organizers, Semantic Maps, and Word Webs	15. Storytelling
6. Humor	16. Technology

Table 2.1 – Continued

Marcia Tate’s Instructional Strategies

7. Manipulatives, Experiments, Labs, and Models	17. Visualization and Guided Imagery
7. Metaphors, Analogies, and Similes	18. Visuals
8. Mnemonic Devices	19. Work Study and Apprenticeships
9. Movement	20. Writing and Journals

Nowhere in this list is there a strategy that involves a teacher lecturing and students taking notes—the focus is on students actually engaging with the material as opposed to simply recording the ideas on paper.

As education was changing, so was the world—specifically the way in which humans found information. I am referring to the development of the Internet. The advent of the information superhighway has forever changed how we retrieve information, how we perform research, and how we find entertainment. I will use my own experience in high school during the 1980s to demonstrate how education has changed because of the internet. When I was in my high school history class, a great deal of rote memorization was required of students. We had to commit to memory the date(s) of major battles, troop numbers, casualty statistics, and details about both the victor and the vanquished. If we fast forward to 2024, we quickly realize that none of this is necessary in today’s world. Why would we have students spend time memorizing information that they can retrieve in a few seconds on their computers or other devices? This change in how we educate

students was made very clear to me in 2005 when I returned to college and took an undergraduate history class in western civilizations. I was having a conversation with my professor, and he pointed out to me that with the existence of the internet, we could now spend more time analyzing why an event happened, rather than merely acknowledging that it happened. Additionally, we can now spend more time digging into the effects of a historical event to gain a deeper understanding of our past.

Impact of Instructional Aspects of Schooling

After examining the changes that have occurred in curriculum and instruction, we can now turn our attention to how these changes have affected middle school students and their development. One example of how things have changed is the idea of an integrated curriculum at the middle school level. The integrated curriculum model, while challenging to implement, offers tremendous potential in terms of student growth and teaching the skills that students need to be successful in high school and in the world. Schools that have implemented an integrated curriculum have forgone the traditional subjects such as Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, and English Language Arts. Instead, they incorporate ALL of these subjects into solving complex problems with real world applications (Beane, 1993). An example of this approach is detailed by Beane (1992) in his description of an integrated lesson at Marquette Middle School in Madison, Wisconsin. He provides a very thorough description of this lesson in the following quote:

a group of teachers carried out a thematic unit that followed the new curriculum vision. The unit began with the students listing questions about themselves and their world and then identifying a number of themes that the questions suggested.

Students then selected one theme, living in the future, and listed activities they might use to answer questions related to it. The activities suggest just how such a curriculum works. One involved designing a model for the city of Madison in the year 2020 and required integrating the work of committees on the environment, transportation, government, education, and health. Another activity called for investigating family health histories to determine personal risk factors in the future. A third brought an artist into the school to sketch pictures of how the students might look in 30 years and discuss physical effects of aging. A fourth involved creating, distributing, tabulating, and analyzing a survey of several middle schools to find out what students' peers predicted for the future. Yet another activity found students investigating the accuracy of predictions made for this decade 100 years ago. (p. 2-3)

An integrated curriculum approach helps students to develop their problem-solving skills, among other benefits, but it also requires a complete overhaul of our current approach to education. There are other changes that have occurred which have been less disruptive to the current educational system, such as greater use of technology and Learning Management Systems (LMS).

Teachers armed with new technology began to develop new ways of doing things in their classrooms. On the most basic level, the document camera has replaced the overhead projector and slideshows have proven to be an effective method for presenting information to students. Learning management systems such as Eduspace, Google Classroom, Powerschool, and Schoology have been developed to give teachers an online

platform for their classes. Teachers can now post lessons and assignments online for students to access either while in their class or from home. Using information gathered from the 2019 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Brese and Twele (2023), found that fifty percent or more of the schools that participated in the TIMSS study used some form of online platform for their fourth-grade students and that by the eighth grade, that percentage was even higher. It was the very existence of these platforms that made it possible to continue delivering instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and for many teachers, the transition to remote teaching was not a terribly difficult task because they were already using an online platform for their students.

In general, the curriculum and instructional shifts experienced by early adolescents have given them more autonomy in school. The teacher's word is no longer treated as Gospel and students are encouraged to find answers by performing their own research. This shift has helped to increase student engagement and motivation at the middle school level (Alley, 2019).

Work Expectations

As the approach to curriculum and instruction has changed, so have the expectations for student work. Researchers and educators alike have questioned the necessity of giving homework. The research on the benefits of homework has been mixed. Cooper, et al, (2006) found that homework had a positive effect on achievement levels in grades seven through twelve, but this increase was not as noticeable in the elementary grades. Other studies have shown that giving students homework assignments

does not increase student achievement levels (LaConte, 1981). While researchers have not come to a consensus on whether or not homework is beneficial, one conclusion is clear—giving students homework does not have a negative effect on their academic performance (Thomas, 1992).

The relative uncertainty of the benefits of homework has coincided with the shift to a more standards based grading approach in which students are assessed by how well they understand the concept or skill being taught, rather than being given credit for simply completing a task (O'Connor, 2011). An important aspect of this grading philosophy is that students are often given multiple opportunities to show that they have mastered the material being taught. This approach to assessments benefits students of all ability levels, as it allows students to relearn and be reassessed on material that they may have struggled with in class when it was first presented (Dueck, 2011). While in theory, giving students multiple attempts to show mastery is ideal, it can be difficult to implement on a regular basis in the classroom due to time constraints and state requirements for the teaching of standards. In his article, “Redos and Retakes Done Right”, Wormeli (2011) stresses the importance of allowing students to have multiple attempts to show mastery of content and skill, while also giving a detailed list of fourteen practical strategies to help overcome the challenges that this practice can create in the classroom.

What is known about the impact of homework on adolescent learning is that while research is inconclusive regarding the benefit of homework, it is clear that homework is not detrimental to middle school students' academic achievement. Opponents of

homework have long argued that excessive homework takes valuable time away from other aspects of their lives such as their social emotional development. As educators have shifted away from giving more homework, they have also changed the way in which they grade the work that is required of their students, with a stronger emphasis on the students' showing mastery of the skills they have learned rather than simply being given credit for completing an assignment.

Social Emotional Aspects

As described above, schools have undergone important shifts in their role in working with students. One of the areas that has gotten increased attention has been the social and emotional learning aspects of students as they learn. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2024) defines social emotional learning as

the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (para. 5).

Many districts have mandated some form of social emotional learning into the regular curriculum with a strong emphasis on inclusion of such programs at the middle school level.

Educational researchers have created tomes of information about the need for students' social and emotional needs to be met and society has placed the responsibility

for meeting those needs on the shoulders of teachers and other school professionals. While teachers and other educational professionals recognize the need for social emotional learning in the classroom, questions arise regarding the competence of teachers to implement these programs, as well as how many of them have addressed their own social and emotional needs (Waajid, et al, 2013). Additionally, many teachers and school leaders are not adequately trained in the field of social emotional learning (Gimbert, et al, 2023). While there are challenges to their implementation, the need for these programs at the middle school level is evident and given the nature of adolescents, not surprising.

Research abounds regarding the difficulty that early adolescents face as they endure puberty and are suddenly faced with emotions and all of the other changes that happen at this point in our maturation process (c.f., Blos, 1941; Hall, 1904; Goossens, 2006). To help students navigate this difficult time, many schools have instituted social emotional learning programs and initiatives that are incorporated throughout the school day (Hunter et al., 2022). The number of social emotional learning programs has grown exponentially since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bond, 2020). The isolation that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic created challenges for an entire generation of learners. These students missed an entire year of interaction with their peers, teachers, and society as a whole. The effects of this isolation are still being uncovered and further research will be necessary to assess the full impact of the pandemic on students.

Research on this topic has shown that schools need to address the social emotional needs of their students as well as their academic needs. Maslow's (1954)

hierarchy of needs tells us that students will not be able to learn if their basic needs are not met. This hierarchy is often described as a pyramid and the base of the pyramid is the physiological needs that all humans have such as food, water, and shelter. Further up the pyramid, the needs are safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (McLeod, 2018). The most basic needs of physiological issues and safety must be met in order for students to succeed in school. The human needs that Maslow categorized are: Physiological, Safety, Belongingness and love, Esteem, and Self-actualization (McLeod, 2018). While most educators will attest to the fact that they do their best to address their students' needs on the Maslow hierarchy, they will also agree that the focus of educators during the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated that they elevate the emphasis on the psychological well-being of their students.

Educators must focus on Bloom's taxonomy as well as Maslow's hierarchy of needs when working with students of all ages. Bloom's taxonomy is a framework published by Benjamin Bloom in 1956 that defined categories into which educational goals should be assigned. These categories were: Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation" (Armstrong, 2010). Bloom's taxonomy was revised in 2001 and the revised categories are: Remember, Understand, Apply, Evaluate, and Create (2010). In both versions of the taxonomy, the level of knowledge increases as one moves from each level to the next, providing students with the requisite background knowledge to develop a deep understanding of the material being taught. These categories are used by teachers across the country to scaffold their instruction to meet the needs of their students, yet if students do not feel safe, loved, etc., they are not

able to learn, which illustrates the importance of social emotional learning in the classroom.

Trauma

Safety in schools has become the number one priority in recent years. Multiple school shootings, civil unrest over the treatment of Black people and other minorities by police forces, and of course, the COVID-19 pandemic have all worked to increase the amount of trauma experienced by students of all ages. Trauma is defined as “an individual’s experience of, and response to, an adverse event in the form of intense reactions that include fear, helplessness, and loss of control” (Manian 2021, p. 4). In his investigation of adolescent issues, Tillotson (1993) stated that:

With society being what it is today, replete with one parent families, blended families, families with both parents working, increased sources of information accessible to adolescents, and an abundance of social challenges to teens and pre-teens that did not exist ten years ago, it is absolutely critical that school personnel be equipped to confront a wide range of crises (p. 5).

As Tillotson’s study from over three decades ago demonstrates, trauma is not a new phenomenon that schools have to confront, but a long-standing issue among adolescents.

Trauma can occur on both an individual level and on a larger scale, such as a global pandemic. Crosby (2020) asserted that:

On an individual level, trauma can include, but is not limited to, experiences of domestic or interpersonal violence, persistent poverty, or community violence. On

a larger scale, trauma can result from encountering war or famine, natural disasters, or a pervasive health crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. (p. 1)

For many students, trauma is often precipitated by having an adverse childhood experience (ACE). Examples of these experiences include abuse, neglect, parental divorce, substance abuse (either on the part of the student or a family member), incarceration, and death of a parent or guardian (Manian, 2021). The report prepared by Manian (2021) cited the CDC-Kaiser Study, which examined approximately 17,000 children. This study found that 46.3% of all children have had at least one ACE and 21.7% of all children in the study have had two or more ACEs. The percentages of students who are experiencing trauma as a result of ACEs is concerning and schools must continue to address the emotional issues that this trauma causes adolescent students.

In addition to ACEs, children have also been exposed to collective trauma, such as the September 11, 2001, bombing of the World Trade Center and the COVID-19 pandemic. Halpern-Felsher and Millstein (2002) found that students in California showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These students were also more likely to fear dying in a tornado or other natural disaster after the attacks of September 11. Events such as the COVID-19 pandemic create individual trauma, but also result in collective trauma. Hirschberger's (2018) study on the effects of collective trauma explains that this type of trauma resides in our collective, rather than individual memory. Even though the memory is of a different nature, we still tend to not only remember the trauma, but we also reconstruct the events within our memory (2018).

The research on trauma tells us that all humans experience trauma, even adolescents and small children. As has already been established, adolescents are going through a period of growth—physically, mentally, and emotionally—which would naturally make it more challenging for them to deal with trauma and traumatic events in their lives. Schools across the country have responded to the issues that trauma has caused in their students with increased time spent on teaching emotional intelligence in the form of social emotional learning (Hunter et al., 2022). Schools also need to increase the number of support personnel and the amount of training that teachers receive on how to recognize and address trauma in their students (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Waajid et al., 2013). Addressing trauma in students and teaching them how to cope with that trauma is of paramount importance to teachers as research has shown that students who struggle with trauma have lower levels of academic achievement and experience a greater number of behavioral issues.

In their article, *Infusing Social Emotional Learning into the Teacher Education Curriculum*, Waajid, Garner, and Owen (2013) found that there is a direct link between students' ability to overcome trauma through the use of social emotional learning strategies and the level of academic achievement that students experienced in school. They argue that additional social emotional learning training in teacher preparation programs is warranted to help new teachers work more effectively with their students who have experienced trauma. Many teachers—myself included—feel that the job of a teacher extends beyond the subject matter being taught. Helping students learn how to overcome trauma and other difficulties that they face in life is just part of the job.

Discipline

When students do not demonstrate appropriate behavior in schools, educators work to re-educate students with regard to behavior expectations. At one time, teachers may have been able to teach a well-behaved group of attentive students, but teachers “can no longer assume that students have been prepared socially or academically at home for the increasing demands of school” (Canter & Canter, 2001, p. 4). Students need teachers to teach them how to behave, just as teachers teach students the other skills that they need to be successful in their classes (2001).

Traditional approaches to student discipline, such as out of school suspension, after school detention, and even the threat of expulsion from school have proven to be ineffective with many students (Weaver & Swank, 2020). Modern approaches to classroom management include building rapport with students, including them in the process of establishing classroom rules, and acknowledging the times that students exhibit appropriate behavior (Marzano, et al., 2005). Additionally, teachers need to take on the role of detective to determine the cause of student misbehavior. In many cases, the cause of behavior issues has little to do with what is actually happening in the classroom. Johnson (2012) advocates for a proactive approach to classroom discipline that focuses on the root causes of inappropriate student behavior.

While many researchers would argue that discipline in school is not an instructional aspect of schooling, this review would be remiss if it did not examine how discipline practices in schools have changed over time. Corporal punishment and demeaning practices like requiring a student to sit in the corner wearing a “dunce” hat

and are not acceptable in today's schools. These practices have been replaced in today's schools by a combination of positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) programs and restorative justice programs.

In their work, *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: History, Defining Features, and Misconceptions*, Sugai and Simonsen (2012) tell us that PBIS is a framework for enhancing the adoption and implementation of evidence-based interventions to achieve the academic and behavioral outcomes that schools strive to achieve for their students. PBIS programs work to reward students who demonstrate appropriate behavior in schools.

Restorative justice programs address student discipline issues from a restorative perspective, whereas corporal punishment and public shaming are very punitive in nature. Weaver and Swank (2020) stated, "Restorative justice is an alternative disciplinary approach to the traditional, punitive approach to discipline" (p. 1). If the main goal of a school is to educate students, then a restorative justice model must be included. Restorative justice teaches students how to meet the expectations of the school, whereas a punitive system only punishes students for not meeting the expectations. Schools that have instituted effective PBIS programs have witnessed a decline in the number of students who receive office referrals, and in general, have a school environment that is more conducive to learning (Scherer & Ingle, 2020).

Relevance to the Dissertation

The information gleaned in this literature review will help to guide my own research. I plan to explore how a midwestern middle school altered its expectations of

students when students returned to in person learning and how those changes impacted student behavior. This topic cannot be addressed without a thorough understanding of how schools have changed over the course of history, how trauma has affected students, and how schools react when students do not adhere to school rules or do not meet behavior expectations.

Adolescent development theory and classroom management theories are necessarily linked. This is something that teachers have known for years. Teachers with strong classroom management skills understand how adolescents develop and how their development relates to student behavior and performance in the classroom. It is exceedingly difficult to manage a classroom of adolescents if the teacher does not understand the difficulties that this age presents and the developmental challenges that their students face on a daily basis.

Researchers have divided children and adolescents into various categories based on development and maturation. G. Stanley Hall (1904) identifies these stages as: childhood (four to eight years), juvenile or preadolescent (eight to 12 years), and adolescent, which Hall believed to last from thirteen or fourteen years of age until the age of twenty-five. Peter Blos (1962) divides adolescence into four distinct stages: 1) The Latency Period, 2) Preadolescence, 3) Early Adolescence, and 4) Adolescence Proper. Blos' descriptions of these phases do not give a distinction based on the age of the child, but rather on the psychological characteristics that are exhibited by children in each of the four stages.

Although researchers have traditionally divided children and young adults into categories that make distinctions based on age and maturity, the age at which these distinctions are recognized has changed over time. Bergin and Bergin (2019) identified three periods of adolescence; early childhood (from birth to five years), middle childhood (six to twelve years), and adolescence (from thirteen to nineteen years). Meeus (2019) provided a comparison of a typical life course for adolescents that compared status transitions in 1950 to those that are more commonly recognized in 2015 (see Table 2.2). If we assert that adults are responsible for their actions, but children are not, it becomes increasingly difficult over time to determine where adolescents should be placed on this spectrum. Since adolescence occurs between childhood and adulthood, it is easy to simply state that adolescents are only partially responsible for their actions. According to Meeus, the period that defines adolescence changes with time, which makes it more difficult to delineate clear distinctions between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Table 2.2

Meeus' Status Transitions in 1950 and 2015

Status Transition	Life course in 1950	Life course in 2015
Transition from school to work	15	21
First Sex	21	17
Age of adolescents in education	12-15	12-21

Table 2.2 - Continued

Status Transition	Life course in 1950	Life course in 2015
Age range for intimate relationships	21-24	17-29
First marriage	24	29

Earlier work by Hurlock (1955) identifies adolescence as extending “from sexual maturity until the age when independence from adult authority is legally assured (p. 2). (When Hurlock published her findings in 1955 America, that age was twenty-one.) While Hurlock identifies a specific age for the end of adolescence, she recognizes that adolescence begins at different ages—thirteen years for girls and fourteen years for boys. Hurlock also gave a specific age at which adolescence is divided between early and late adolescence and identified that age as seventeen years for both boys and girls.

Along with researchers identifying stages of adolescence differently, it also seems as if there are as many different theories on adolescent development as there are researchers. (See Appendix A for a partial listing of adolescent development theories Bergin and Bergin (2012).) Although there are multiple theories and approaches to interpreting adolescent development, all adolescent theories address the following questions:

1. What is the underlying conception of development and of human nature in general?
2. Is development basically quantitative or qualitative in nature?

3. How do the individual ('nature') and the environment ('nurture') contribute to development?
4. What is it that develops? (Goossens, 2006, pp. 11-12)

In addition to answering these questions, adolescent development theories fall into four basic categories. These categories are biological, psychoanalytic, social-cultural, and cognitive (2006).

Categories of Adolescent Theory

Biological theories of adolescence are those theories that focus on the biology of human beings at various stages of life. This field of study was first brought forward in the United States by Grandville Stanley Hall in 1904 (Goossens, 2006). According to Goossens, Hall's interpretation of the stages of development were strongly influenced by theories of evolution and he likened different stages of individual development to those of the development of humans as a species. This law of recapitulation drove Hall's theories on human development. For instance, in infancy, Goossens reports that Hall argued that children mimic the animalistic stage of human development, with primitive mental, motor, and sensory development. Following this line of thought, Hall connected childhood (four to eight years) to the stage of human development that was thought to be ape-like. During this phase, children develop an interest in playing with toys that would correspond to the life needs of primates such as guns for hunting food and hiding in forts, much like primates would seek refuge in caves. As children grew and matured, they entered the juvenile or preadolescent stage (eight to 12 years), which models the half barbarian stage of human development. Finally, children enter the adolescent stage,

which Hall believed to last from thirteen or fourteen years of age until the age of twenty-five. In this final stage of development, we see the emergence of higher emotions that many have described as ‘storm and stress’ (2006). An extension of Hall’s biological model can be found in Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model which includes social, economic, and political forces along with family influence. In the bioecological model, the child is at the center, with the aforementioned influences aligned in concentric circles to demonstrate the many ways in which a child’s development is influenced by external forces (Bergin & Bergin, 2012).

Psychoanalytic theories of adolescence stand in contrast to Hall’s biological theory, inasmuch as they do not place adolescence in a specific role (Goossens, 2006). The psychoanalytic theories promoted by Sigmund Freud place earlier childhood experiences into more specific stages and assert that adolescence is simply a recapitulation of those earlier stages of individual development—in contrast to Hall’s theory regarding recapitulation of the evolutionary development of the species (2006). Freud’s interpretation of adolescent development was that adolescence and puberty marked the emergence of a more mature form of sexuality, which eclipsed any earlier forms exhibited by the individual. The psychoanalytic approach also asserts that “different layers of personality each referred to a different period of development and each layer only made sense in relation to these different periods of development considered as a whole” (Goossens, 2006, p. 16).

Freud’s theories on adolescent development were furthered by the work of his youngest daughter, Anna Freud (Goossens, 2006). “She saw puberty as a period of

increased activity of the drives” (p. 16). Freud saw this increase as both quantitative and qualitative in nature at various stages of development. In order to overcome these drives, adolescents develop defense mechanisms such as becoming overly involved in sports and other activities (2006). Freud also felt that not all adolescents would demonstrate the typical “storm and stress” that most theorists had come to associate with adolescent development. Rather, she simply asserted that those adolescents who did not exhibit the typical ‘storm and stress’ had more developed defense mechanisms in place (2006).

Peter Blos, a researcher who had met Anna Freud in Vienna and worked with her, put forth a new take on adolescent psychoanalysis. Blos asserted that “adolescence is the second separation-individuation phase in life, which in important ways, parallels the first such phase, which occurs in the first two to three years of life” (Goossens, 2006, p. 17). During the first period of separation-individuation, the child separates itself from its mother and begins to develop a rudimentary sense of self (2006). Blos’ new theory is another example of a recapitulation theory, where a stage in life mimics an earlier stage that the child has experienced. Although researchers agree that there is a separation between stages of adolescence, there does seem to be some agreement that adolescence as a whole cannot be viewed as one unchanging period of development.

Bergin and Bergin (2012) define social-cultural theory as “a theory of how children learn, largely based on Vygotsky’s writings, that emphasizes social interaction, historical context, and culture” (p. 112). Vygotsky’s view is predicated on the idea that cognitive growth cannot happen in the absence of interactions with others in a social context (Bergin & Bergin, 2012). To illustrate this idea, Bergin and Bergin (2012) use

examples of students who are struggling to learn on their own but are able to do the work with the help of their teacher. In both examples, the students were working within their zone of proximal development, which “is the level of competence between what a child can do alone and what he or she can do with assistance” (p. 113). By recognizing their students’ zones of proximal development, teachers are tapping into the social aspect of cognition that is the basis for much of Vygotsky’s work (2012).

Social-cultural theories of adolescence also share characteristics with Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model discussed earlier. These theories state that “adolescent behavior is shaped to a certain extent by the reactions from their immediate social environment, that is, by reactions from their parents and peers” (Goossens 2006, pg. 17). Meeus reinforced this definition when he identified Bandura’s social learning theory as another explanation for “the role of parents as key socialization agents for their children” (2019). As students try to grow into their own identities, they begin to develop loyalties outside of the family, leading conflict with the standards that the adolescent has been taught in his or her family life. One such affiliation might be membership in a gang in early adolescence. (Blos, 1941). While adolescents struggle to find acceptance outside of the family, many also struggle with family relationships. If an adolescent is part of a family where there is a high level of jealousy and competition between siblings, they are more likely to show hostility to their playmates and have difficulty relating to others in school (1941). If the adolescent has a contentious relationship with their parents, that hostility can carry over into their school life and affect their relationships with their teachers and others in positions of authority in the school.

Cognition “refers to mental processes like thinking, problem solving, categorizing, and remembering” (Bergin & Bergin, 2012, p. 96). Cognitive theories of adolescence state that when children enter adolescence, there are cognitive changes that take place in their brains and that these changes are responsible for many of the concerning behaviors displayed by adolescents (Goossens, 2006). According to Goossens, the basis for these theories lies in the work of Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist whose 1958 work explored the transition to a more formal thinking process. “Adolescents can think about their own thinking and reality becomes secondary to possibility” (Goossens, 2006, p. 19). This thought process leads adolescents to envision many ways in which our world may be different from the world as viewed by others. (2006). Piaget divided cognitive development into distinct stages based on at what point in a child’s development he thought cognitive development happened. These stages are sensorimotor, preoperations [*sic*], concrete operations, and formal operations. Unlike some of the other theorists that have been discussed, Piaget did not define specific ages for each stage, preferring to recognize that children develop at different speeds and at different ages (Bergin & Bergin, 2012).

Behaviorism is a cognitive theory that is based on the concept of conditioning. By definition, behaviorism is “the scientific study of overt, observable behavior (Bergin & Bergin, 2012, p. 87), which implies that the development of a child is solely based on nurture, ignoring any impacts that the child’s natural characteristics may have on the development of the individual. Conditioning can be divided into two categories—classical and operant. An early example of conditioning is the work of Ivan Pavlov. In his

experiments, Pavlov worked with dogs and trained them to salivate when they heard the ringing of a bell. The dogs had been conditioned to associate the bell with receiving food. Bergin and Bergin (2012) define classical conditioning as “a form of conditioning in which a neutral stimulus is paired with a stimulus that causes an involuntary response until the neutral stimulus becomes a conditioned stimulus and also causes the response” (p. 88). Classical conditioning helps us to understand why some children do not like school. For instance, if a child has had negative experiences at school, such as bullying, failure, disrespectful teachers, etc., he or she will most likely develop a dislike for school. Even when forced to attend school, this child will not perform well due to the anxiety that has been created by their previous experiences (Bergin & Bergin, 2012). Operant conditioning is based on the idea that consequences are responsible for conditioning, so it focuses on voluntary responses, as opposed to the automatic responses that are created as a result of classical conditioning. This type of conditioning relies on the ideas of reinforcement and punishment as the means to affect behavior (2012).

Positive Youth Development and The Developmental Assets Framework

Two interrelated theories that frame the current thinking about adolescent development are Positive Youth Development Theory (PYD) and the Developmental Assets Framework (DAF). “The field of positive youth development focuses on each and every child’s unique talents, strengths, interests, and future potential” (Damon, 2004, p. 13). This approach is at odds with many approaches that focus on the particular problems that adolescents face as they grow up, such as disabilities that affect their learning and drug and other substance abuse (Merrick et al., 2013). The negative portrayal of youths in

the media has exacerbated the perception of adolescents as young people with unacceptable behavior. PYD “grew out of dissatisfaction with a predominant view that underestimated the true capacities of young people by focusing on their deficits rather than their developmental potentials (Damon, 2004, p. 13). According to Damon (2004), there has been a great deal of time and effort spent on correcting problems that adolescents face after the problems have surfaced, whereas positive youth development seeks to prevent problems by focusing on the positive aspects of each child as an individual. Damon (2004) provides the following explanation of the difference between PYD and more traditional approaches to adolescent behavior:

This new approach envisions young people as resources rather than as problems for society. The positive youth development perspective emphasizes the manifest potentialities rather than the supposed incapacities of young people—including young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and those with the most troubled histories (p. 15).

In their evaluation of existing PYD programs, Catalano et al., (2004), identified fifteen constructs that they discovered existed in successful programs. They used these constructs to develop a definition of PYD which simply stated that PYD programs encompass all of the fifteen constructs. The fifteen constructs identified by Catalano et al., are:

1. Promotes bonding
2. Fosters resilience
3. Promotes social competence

4. Promotes emotional competence
5. Promotes cognitive competence
6. Promotes behavioral competence
7. Promotes moral competence
8. Fosters self-determination
9. Fosters spirituality
10. Fosters self-efficacy
11. Fosters clear and positive identity
12. Fosters belief in the future
13. Provides recognition for positive behavior
14. Provides opportunities for prosocial involvement
15. Fosters prosocial norms

(See Appendix B a list of these constructs with detailed descriptions.) The constructs that predict success in a PYD program also reflect the issues that predict problem behavior in adolescents (Catalano, et al., 2004). Also of note is Catalano et al.'s observation that these constructs should be included in an integrated approach, as opposed to being adopted on a piecemeal basis to address individual problems (Merrick et al., 2013). Catalano et al.'s constructs provide valuable insight into the importance of family and community involvement in the development of adolescents.

Several specific intervention programs have been developed in response to the PYD approach. For example, anyone who has worked in a school with Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is already familiar with the concepts behind the PYD

model. For clarification, PBIS is a framework for enhancing the adoption and implementation of evidence-based interventions to achieve the academic and behavioral outcomes that schools strive to achieve for their students. PBIS programs work to reward students who demonstrate appropriate behavior in schools (Sugai and Simonsen, 2012). PBIS works to recognize appropriate behavior that schools want to see from their students, while PYD creates a framework for developing the positive attributes that lead to appropriate behavior.

In contrast to positive youth development, one fairly systemic approach to using PYD in an intervention approach has been called the developmental assets framework. The developmental assets framework was created to address student behavior issues before they manifested themselves, as opposed to the traditional medical model in which problem behaviors were addressed after they had manifested themselves. The traditional approach is akin to the manner in which a medical professional treats a patient in that the treatment does not begin until after the problem has surfaced. The drive to develop a new approach was spurred on the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. Prior to NCLB, the United States Government initiated the Comprehensive School Reform program in 1998 to address issue of failing students in America's schools. Schools across the country created many different intervention programs to combat the problem of failing students and most of them followed the aforementioned medical model. Benson (2003) proposed a new idea that focused on addressing problem behaviors before they happen—this idea has evolved into the developmental assets framework.

The developmental assets framework is “A promising approach that emphasizes positive characteristics as protective factors for children exposed to negative predictors” (Edwards, et al., 2007, p. 148). This framework is centered around identifying positive influences, or assets, in a child’s life. According to Edwards, et al. (2007), researchers from the Search Institute have identified forty assets that students must have in order to develop in a positive, successful manner. These assets are evenly divided between external assets and internal assets. The external and internal assets are further divided into four separate categories, shown in table 2.3.

Table 2.3

Categories of Developmental Assets

External Assets	Internal assets
Support	Commitment to learning
Empowerment	Positive values
Boundaries and expectations	Social competencies
Constructive use of time	Positive identity

The developmental assets framework is a proactive, rather than reactive approach to working with students who may be experiencing difficulties in school. By ensuring that students have as many of the assets as possible at their disposal, schools can more effectively avoid inappropriate student behavior issues. Much of this work falls to school improvement committees and school social workers (Edwards, et al., 2007).

The DAF and PYD approaches are notably interrelated as the assets identified as being essential to the DAF share many aspects of the PYD constructs. This relationship shows the importance of ensuring that all students have access to the assets that they need to be successful. The internal assets that Edwards et al. (2007) identify are the base line characteristics that students need. The external assets are key to supporting students as they develop and it is the combination of both internal and external assets that work together to have a positive effect on students (Edwards, et al., 2007). A successful PYD framework must incorporate the principles of DAF in order to help students achieve their full potential. When students are empowered through a combination of PYD and DAF, they will be in a better position to make choices that affect their future as well as their daily lives.

Choice theory tells us that teachers must recognize that inappropriate behaviors are often the result of a student not having their needs met. Walter, et al., (2008), assert that “At risk middle school students do not believe that their needs for belonging are being met at school (p. 8). Human beings are “genetically programmed to try to satisfy four basic psychological needs” (Glasser, 1986, p. 28). The four needs that Glasser identifies are love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. It is not difficult to see that there are similarities between these four needs and some of the previously mentioned adolescent development theories. The need for love and belonging, for instance, relates well to social cognitive theory, just as the needs of power and freedom play a significant role in positive youth development theory. A rudimentary understanding of choice theory

and adolescent development theories is the bare minimum that new teachers need to learn if they are going to become effective teachers who can manage their classrooms.

Classroom Management Theory

Many teachers struggle with classroom management and complaints about student behavior abound in teacher lounges in schools. Traditional approaches to student discipline, such as out of school suspension, after school detention, and even the threat of expulsion from school have proven to be ineffective with many students (Weaver & Swank, 2020). Modern approaches to classroom management include building rapport with students, including them in the process of establishing classroom rules, and acknowledging the times that students exhibit appropriate behavior (Marzano, et al., 2005). Johnson (2012) advocates for a proactive approach to classroom discipline to prevent inappropriate student behaviors from occurring. Additionally, teachers need to take on the role of detective to determine the cause of student misbehavior. In many cases, the cause of behavior issues has little to do with what is actually happening in the classroom. In their role as detectives, teachers utilize their knowledge of adolescent development to help uncover the underlying cause(s) of student behavior issues.

Acknowledging that “modern” is a relative term, I looked at the 1970 work by Smith and Smith. To my surprise, the ideas put forth in their book are very much in line with more contemporary works by Robert Marzano and Harry Wong, beginning with the importance of having a stable environment in which students feel safe. Smith and Smith (1970) give an excellent overview of a stable classroom environment:

A stable environment is a predictable one. It contains rules that are clearly defined and consistently reinforced. The behavior of the authority figure (the teacher) is consistent and predictable. The daily routine, and even the appearance of the room, are never changed capriciously. A child who has spent a week in this room feels safe here, for he knows what to expect. His feelings of uncertainty are concentrated on the learning tasks he faces. (p. 6)

The importance of consistency cannot be overstated. As a classroom teacher who is often cited for having good classroom management skills, I have seen firsthand the difference that consistency can make in the classroom. As I have mentored new teachers, the most difficult skill for most of them to learn is that of being consistent in their dealings with students. Consistency does not simply refer to grading practices, it applies to every aspect of being a teacher. Whether the issue is a test retake policy, breaking classroom or school rules, or interacting with other students in the room; consistency in expectations and consequences is of paramount importance. Everything a teacher does that increases the consistency in his or her classroom can have a positive impact on student achievement levels.

According to Wong and Wong (2009), “How you manage the classroom is the primary determinant of how well your students will learn” (p. 81). Wong and Wong go on to state that “Effective teachers **MANAGE** their classrooms. Ineffective teachers **DISCIPLINE** their classrooms” (pg. 82). This statement reflects the difference between managing a classroom and merely disciplining students when their behaviors are unacceptable. Effective classroom management can be a daunting task for both the

novice teacher and those who have years of experience. Many new teachers that I talk to who express frustration with student behavior put the blame for poor behavior in the classroom squarely on the shoulders of school administrators because they have not yet realized that classroom management is something that is entirely within their control as teachers. In order to effectively manage a classroom and consequently, be an effective teacher, it is imperative that teachers build relationships with their students.

Children and adolescents are like the rest of the human population in that they want to be recognized, understood, and appreciated for the unique qualities that each human possesses (Marzano, et al., (2005). “Many people believe that the relationship between teacher and student is the starting place for good classroom management” (p. 56). Marzano et al., identified four key components to developing good student-teacher relationships. These components are: demonstrating personal interest in students, behaving equitably and responding affirmatively to questions, exhibiting an assertive connection, and being aware of the needs of diverse types of students (2005). While all of these components play a vital role in building good relationships with students and effectively managing a classroom, understanding the diverse needs of students is arguably the most important.

Differentiation in instruction is the bastion of good teaching. This practice allows for lessons to be geared toward different learning styles and different ability levels. Howard Gardner, a professor at Harvard University, has identified multiple intelligences that students possess (Combs, 2014). Gardner lists nine different intelligences, ranging from visual-spatial to naturalistic learners. The specifics of the learning styles, or

intelligences, are not relevant to this discussion, however, the existence of the differences helps to explain the needs of students and the necessity for teachers to understand those needs. Teachers who use multiple teaching styles that are tailored to the needs of their students are better “able to motivate and engage their students” (p. 18). If students are engaged in the material being taught, then their needs are being met and inappropriate behaviors are reduced (Glasser, 1988).

Trauma Considerations

The research on trauma tells us that all humans experience trauma, even adolescents and small children. Since it is an accepted fact that adolescents are going through a period of physical, mental, and emotional growth, it stands that it is more challenging for them to deal with trauma and traumatic events in their lives. To address this issue, especially in the wake of the COVID- 19 pandemic, schools across the country have responded to the issues that trauma has caused in their students with increased time spent on teaching emotional intelligence in the form of Social Emotional Learning (Hunter et al., 2022). Although there has been an increase in the amount of time that schools spend on social emotional learning, schools also need to increase the number of support personnel and the amount of training that teachers receive on how to recognize and address trauma in their students (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Waajid et al., 2013). The absence of Glasser’s (1986) psychological needs will create trauma also as students need to feel a sense of love and belonging, they need to feel that they have power and freedom, and they need to have fun. Addressing trauma in students and teaching them how to cope with that trauma is of paramount importance to teachers because students who struggle

with trauma have lower levels of academic achievement and experience a greater number of behavioral issues.

While many of the adolescent development theories have merit, for the purposes of my research and interpretation of the data I intend to collect, I intend to focus primarily on choice theory, positive youth development, and the developmental assets framework. The need for students to have their needs met plays a key role in both the development of adolescents and in effective classroom management. In order for those needs to be met, students must have access to the necessary assets that they need to be successful.

Early adolescence is a challenging time. I have yet to meet anyone who would relish the idea of reliving their middle school years. The awkwardness, uncertainty, physical changes, and emotional changes that adolescents experience at this time of life can be overwhelming, yet humans have been surviving this period for thousands of years. Teachers are in a unique position to help adolescents navigate this phase of life, but they must be equipped with the requisite knowledge of adolescent development in order to be successful in this task. Once teachers understand how adolescents develop, they can formulate effective strategies for managing their classrooms and building relationships with their students. It is these relationships that give teachers the best hope of helping students work through their trauma, become more focused and interested in school, and being successful in their future endeavors.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Research Questions

The research questions that for this study are: Did the changes that were implemented at this school have an impact on student behavior? What were the perceptions of staff members, students, and administrators of the changes and how they impacted student behavior? What did the objective office referral data show about student behavior? What can we learn from this experience that might be used in the future?

Research Design

This research was conducted using a mixed methods descriptive and explanatory case study approach. A mixed methods design means that I used the data that I gathered both quantitatively and qualitatively in my analysis. The mixed methods approach also affected the types of data that were used. For instance, I used historical office referral data as part of my quantitative analysis and survey and interview data as a basis for my qualitative analysis.

A descriptive mixed methods approach means that I describe a particular phenomenon, such as William F. Whyte's *Street Corner Society* 1943/1955 (Yin 1994, p. 4). The advantage to this approach is that it gives me the ability to study one particular case in great depth. The downside, however, is that I am only examining one case—examining multiple cases would yield a greater understanding of the phenomenon, but this approach would have proven to be too demanding on my resources.

Examples of the types of questions that descriptive case studies attempt to answer are:

- “how teaching practices in terms of management, climate, and instruction are evidenced in authentic classroom situations” (Pakarinen 2024, p 30)
- “This study sought to; (i) describe children’s perspectives on disasters; and (ii) determine significant concepts that can be used for School Disaster Risk Reduction Management specifically for kindergarten” (Legaspino 2023, p. 24).
- What were the “processes by which contact tracing for COVID-19 cases in Maltese schools was carried out and analyses the data collected throughout the scholastic year 2020–21” (Cuschieri 2023, p. 209).
- Are “vulnerable populations, including Indigenous Australians: people living with severe and persistent mental illness (SPMI): at increased risk of medication related problems” (Collins 2023, p. 1).

In general, these questions are focused on describing something, provide its characteristic or summarize its conditions.

Examples of types of data used in these illustrative descriptive case studies are:

- Teaching practices are examined using three different measures: classroom management, climate, and instruction (Pakarinen 2024)
- Participant interviews (Legaspino 2023)

- This study analyses the findings of the data collected with regards to cases assessed and managed within kindergarten, primary and secondary educational facilities (Cuschieri 2023).
- Participant interviews (Collins 2023).

In general, these data are evidence of descriptive characteristics—classroom condition, what people have seen or understand—as they represent the conditions or the characteristics of the case.

The methods used for collecting/gathering data in these example descriptive case studies are:

- Video recording (Pakarinen 2024)
- In person interviews which were recorded for later review and clarification purposes (Legaspino 2023).
- Case and contact data were exported from the Schools Contact Tracing Team (SCTT) central database and anonymized. The data collected included information such as “class and grade, status (student, teaching or non-teaching staff), number of primary school contacts quarantined and a brief case history that was collected from the positive case” (Cuschieri 2023, p.210).
- Pharmacists from the community conducted medication reviews related to the cultural and health needs of participants (Collins 2023).

In general, these methods use a qualitative analysis approach. Even in those that use quantitative data (Cuchieri) use it to describe the case rather than test hypotheses.

The approaches used to analyze and report on findings from these data in the illustrative descriptive case studies is/are:

- Analyses were carried out by first analyzing the video recordings using the Early Childhood Classroom Observation Measure (ECCOM) instrument. Second, teachers with the highest scores were chosen for a more detailed investigation and descriptive statistics were analyzed (Pakarinen 2024).
- The researcher transcribed the data through the use of hand analysis, then the data were coded using Tesch's Eight Steps in the Coding Process (Legaspino 2023).
- "Simple, descriptive statistics were generated using Microsoft Excel for students and school staff attending kindergarten, primary and secondary school. Other data that were analysed [sic] included the number of people placed in quarantine per case as well as the possible source of infection" (Cuschieri 2023, p. 210).
- Medication related problems, their severity and pharmacist recommendations were documented and classified using an established classification system. MRP severity was assessed by pharmacists and an independent assessor (Collins 2023)

All of these analyses are descriptive in nature, there are no correlational or comparative examinations.

A case study structure means that I will examine one particular phenomenon in one particular place at one particular point in time. Yin, Stake, and Merriam are the three

most prominent researchers in the field of case study design, yet there is a difference of opinion between these researchers in how to define a case study. Yin's (1994) definition of a case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (p. 13). Stake's (1995) definition states that "Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (p. xi). Finally, Merriam (1998) identified the qualitative case study as "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit" (p. xiii). The first stage of the research will be to examine and describe what changes were implemented when schools returned to in person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Once these changes have been examined, I will look at student behavior data to determine if there was a change in student behavior during the first year that schools returned to in person learning. If a change was noted, the data was examined to determine whether that change can be attributed to the changes that were implemented.

Selection of Participants

Students were selected based on their enrollment in eighth grade at Johnson Middle School (pseudonym) in suburban Michigan. They were recruited for this study through an announcement that was made in their Social Studies classes. In addition to myself, this announcement was also made by Mr. Martin Teagarden (pseudonym) in his eighth-grade classes and Mrs. Winifred Beauregard (pseudonym) in her eighth-grade classes. Mr. Teagarden and Mrs. Beauregard are not key personnel in this research study and directed all questions to me. Students that were chosen to participate in the focus

group were individually selected by me to represent a cross section of the student population and I spoke to them individually to ask for their participation in a focus group discussion that took place after school. The focus group was provided with pizza and beverages as an enticement for their participation.

Parents were selected to participate in the study based on their student being in the eighth grade at Johnson Middle School and were recruited through direct email. Teachers and other staff members were selected based on their current employment at Johnson Middle School and those who have been employed at the school since the fall of 2019. I spoke to staff participants in the study individually to ask for their participation.

Data Sources

The data sources that I used to conduct this research are student and staff surveys, along with staff interviews and student focus group discussions. I also used data provided to me by the school district that details the number of office referrals issued and the reasons for those referrals. Having these data allowed me to compare the data from 2021-22 to previous years to determine if there was a significant difference in documented student behavior during the year that the school returned to in person learning.

In addition to analyzing the available data, I used interviews with staff, as well as focus group discussions with students. The perceptions of the individuals involved are important, not only for their intrinsic value, but as a point of comparison to determine if the perceptions are supported by the office referral data. If the two types of data do not align with one another that is an indication that further research will need to be conducted to determine why there is a discrepancy. This research could be completed based solely

on the office referral data, but to truly get a sense of the overall impact of the changes that were made, it is important to also factor in the perceptions of those involved. In addition to the aforementioned office referral data that was requested from the school district, this study will incorporate the use of surveys, interviews and focus groups. The surveys were administered to students, staff members, and parents and were created using Qualtrics.

Survey Design and Questions

The student and staff surveys were intentionally kept short, focusing on just three questions. The first question asked the participants to use a sliding scale to rate how they felt about returning to school in the fall of 2021. A sliding scale was used in order to gain the best insight into a range of concerns that I think students might have. The statements they were asked to rate were:

- I felt scared
- I was worried about getting sick
- I was relieved to be back in school
- I was self-conscious about my appearance
- I didn't know how to talk to others in person
- I was nervous about talking to my teachers
- I was glad to see people instead of Zooming
- I found it easier to pay attention in class
- Prefer not to say

The second and third questions were multiple choice. Question two asked about their perceptions of school rules regarding behavior and whether they were less strict, stricter, or about the same as before the COVID-19 pandemic. Question three asked participants to evaluate student behavior, again comparing post COVID-19 to pre pandemic times. Both of the multiple-choice questions offered the participants the option of prefer not to say. Since both of these questions were asking for a more specific answer, the multiple-choice option is the most appropriate, both in design and in the amount of time the participants would need to devote to the survey. The staff and parent surveys used the same questions, but with modified language in order to get their perceptions of how students adjusted to returning to in person learning.

Interview and Focus Group Design and Questions

The interviews and focus group discussion used an open-ended format. The question that opened the focus group discussions was “What changes did you notice from your perspective as students in how you were welcomed back to school last year, compared to this year and did you notice a difference in expectations for behavior in school?” The opening question for the teachers was “What changes did you notice in how students were welcomed back last year and how we handled expectations in terms of it being after the pandemic—in other words, how was the beginning of last year different than before the pandemic, or was it?” The question that I asked the school principal is “What changes did you notice in how students were welcomed back last year and how student discipline was handled by the administration? How was the beginning of last year different than before the pandemic, or was it?” For parent interviews, the questions were

“What changes did you notice in how your child was welcomed back last year compared to the start of school before the COVID-19 Pandemic? Did your child tell you that things were different at school? If so, how did they say that they were different? Did you notice any differences in your child regarding their behavior—either at school or at home—that was different from previous years?”

Office Referral Data

Office referral data is collected from Office Disciplinary Referrals (ODRs). This data includes a multitude of infractions, a detailed list of which can be found in Appendix C. These infractions are listed in the student code of conduct, which has not changed since 2008. In order to gain a better sense of the types of infractions that were documented, I organized the data into categories that reflected the type of behavior issue. The categories chosen were behavior against students, behavior against authority, and behavior against property. A breakdown of which infractions were included in each category is detailed in table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Office referral infraction categories

Group 1: Behavior against other students	Group 2: Behavior against authority	Group 3: Behavior against property
Fighting	Disruptive Conduct	Defacement of Property
Harassment	Insubordination	Technology Abuse
Bullying Verbal	Profanity	Stealing
Bullying Physical	Cheating/Acad Misconduct	Trespassing

Table 3.1 - Continued

Group 1: Behavior against other students	Group 2: Behavior against authority	Group 3: Behavior against property
Bullying Cyber Threat/Coercion	Inappropriate Dress	

Data Collection Procedures

Existing Data Collection Process

Historic data regarding the number of behavior incidents reported to the school office was requested and received from the school district's Office of Student Services. This information was provided in aggregate form and student names and identification numbers were removed by the person providing an excel file with the data to me. The records that I received had no identifiable data. The data was broken down into subcategories based on grade, gender, type of offense, reporting staff member, and consequences assigned for the behavior.

Survey Data Collection Process

Digital surveys for students and parents were created using Qualtrics. Students whose parents have consented to their participation in the study were asked to take the survey during their Social Studies classes. Staff members and parents who agreed to take the survey were emailed the link to the survey and asked to complete it in their own time.

Interview Data Collection Process

In person interviews with teachers, school administrators, and parents were included as part of the data collection process for this study. The interviews took place at a location and time of the interviewee's choosing, allowing them to ensure that the location is sufficiently private. All emails sent to possible interview participants were individual so that no interviewee will know the identities of other interviewees in the study.

Data Analysis

The interviews and focus group were recorded using Zoom to create a transcript. I replayed the recordings and corrected any errors in the transcripts. Once the transcripts were complete, they were coded to identify any common themes within and across participant groups. The survey results were similarly examined to identify any commonalities across groups. Finally, the office referral data were analyzed to determine if there was a change in the percentage of students receiving office referrals. The office referral data from before the COVID-19 pandemic were compared to office referral data from the school year that students returned to in person learning to identify any trends in student behavior.

Teachers and the school principal were interviewed for this study and a group of eighth grade students was asked to participate in a focus group discussion. The interview and focus group questions used were: Did the changes that were implemented at this school have an impact on student behavior? If so, how and why was student behavior impacted? Data were gathered from interviews with teachers and the school principal and

through a focus group of eighth grade students. Initial analysis of the interview and focus group data revealed that many stakeholders held similar views on the return to school during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further coding and analysis identified the following concerns:

- Things were different
- Health and safety concerns directly related to COVID-19
- Expectations had changed
- There was no increase in behavior issues
- Social and Emotional Learning issues
- Changed behaviors
- Decreased behavior expectations and enforcement
- Stagnation in social and emotional growth
- Increase in uncertainty
- Learning loss associated with expectations in school
- Increase in behavior issues
- Anxiety

Of these, the concerns that were noted with the greatest frequency were health and safety issues, increase in behavior issues, and decreased behavior expectations and enforcement.

I analyzed data from the 2017-18 school year through the 2021-22 school year. For each of the years examined, I examined the data based on the type of infraction for which the office referral was issued, grade level of the students, student gender, and the month in which the office referral was issued. Due to the fact that enrollment counts vary

from one year to the next, all of the data have been converted to percentages to give a more accurate basis of comparison between school years.

In addition to the infractions listed above, the most common infractions were for truancy, bus rule violations, and controlled substance violations. These infractions were omitted from this analysis for specific reasons. Truancy issues, while still considered to be a behavior issue, are something that is dictated by district policy. Additionally, in the case of truancy, there are instances in which the student is not at fault but he or she is truant because of issues regarding their home life. Bus rule violations were not considered due to the fact that the category cannot clearly be defined. For instance, a violation of bus rules could be profanity, fighting, or any one of the other infractions listed in table 3.1. The final category that was omitted was the possession and/or use of controlled substances as this is not necessarily a school behavior issue, but a larger issue affecting the lives of students both in and outside of school.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Interview and Focus Group Findings

The interview and focus group transcripts were analyzed in order to identify any common themes. The main themes that surfaced in the transcripts were health and safety issues, an increase in behavior issues, and a decrease in behavior expectations and enforcement of school rules. These themes are discussed in detail below.

Health and Safety Issues

When students returned to school for in person classes, there were still several issues regarding health and safety regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing and masking were just two of the concerns that had to be addressed in schools. In spite of these precautionary measures, people were still being diagnosed with COVID-19 and the infection rates were fluctuating wildly, with the number of new cases of COVID -19 in Michigan increasing from 14,329 at the end of August 2021 to 59,292 by the end of November of the same year. (CDC, n.d.) This fluctuation served to remind people that even though schools were trying to return to a more normal learning environment, there were still issues surrounding the pandemic that could not be ignored.

The teachers who were interviewed all agreed that returning to school during the COVID-19 pandemic required a greater focus on health and safety issues that they had experienced prior to the pandemic. This response was to be expected as the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need to be aware of health and safety issues. One teacher said, *“Teachers noted that having everybody in the building wearing masks was challenging as*

the wearing of masks reinforced any feelings of anxiety that students—and staff—might have about being physically back in school.” This quote illustrates one aspect of wearing masks as schools returned to in person learning. Masks created the additional problem of obscuring everyone’s face, which made communication more difficult and eliminated the use of facial expression during conversations.

Students cited health and safety issues as the greatest cause of anxiety for them when they returned to in person learning. Anxiety was the issue that was mentioned the most during the focus group discussion, with several of the students expressing concern over their own mortality if they returned to school for in person instruction. When comparing school before and during the pandemic, one student said, *“in fifth grade, you’re like I just don’t want to go back because it’s not fun, but in seventh, you’re like am I going to die when I come back?”* This quote exemplifies the extent to which anxiety about COVID-19 permeated student’s lives. Prior to returning to school, students were at home and the message that was being put forth by the government and the media was that if you were around other people, you ran a considerable risk of becoming infected with COVID-19. Although mortality rates from COVID-19 had decreased by the time school brought students back into the buildings, infection rates were still vacillating and there was an elevated level of concern over getting infected.

From an administrative standpoint, the principal shared that the main concern over returning to in person learning was the enforcement of new health and safety guidelines. Hallways were prepared with a dividing line taped down the center, and stickers placed on the floor to remind students about keeping six feet between each other

at all times. Classroom furniture needed to be rearranged to achieve the greatest amount of separation between students, and health department guidelines regarding the wearing of masks needed to be strictly enforced.

An additional issue that was mentioned by the principal was the extreme amount of uncertainty that everyone faced with the return to in person learning. Programs that had been suspended due to social distancing requirements were being brought back in modified forms and guidance from the county's health department was being updated on a regular basis.

For example, the SEDSAC group, the Executive Director's Advisory Council, and a few other things like that, like Student Council, to some degree, things like that. We weren't sure, when we started the year, whether we would be able to run those things, and if we were, how would they be able to run them? Would they have to be partially remote, or a certain amount of people at a time, in a room? Because the medical aspect of things, the Wayne County Health Department guidance of things, and then possibly what other mandates would come along with whatever district policies were in place, were all factors to keep an eye on.

The above quote shows the uncertainty created by the health and safety issues associated with COVID-19 was a going concern for school administrators. This added level of uncertainty served to increase the amount of anxiety that was being experienced by teachers and students alike.

Returning to an in-person format for school during a global pandemic is something that had not been done in recent years. The perceptions of the staff, students,

and principal show that the health and safety issues that were facing society were also a major concern in schools.

Increase in Behavior Issues

Before we look at the next theme—increase in behavior issues—some time should be given to explaining exactly what is meant by a “behavior issue.” Students, teachers, and administrators in schools identify behavior issues as inappropriate behavior. That behavior could manifest itself as disrespect towards staff, profanity, fighting, and any number of other behaviors that violate the student code of conduct. In the interviews and the focus group discussion, behavior issues was a theme that was universally mentioned by all those who participated in the research.

Two thirds of the teachers who were interviewed agreed that there was an increase in undesirable student behaviors by the spring of 2022. When asked if they felt there was an increase in behavior issues, the responses that were given were “*most definitely*” and “*absolutely, we saw an increase in problem behaviors, especially in the hallways.*” However, one teacher felt that there was no increase in inappropriate behaviors and stated, “*I don’t think there were more issues.*” This teacher’s statement serves as a reminder that not everyone will perceive a situation through the same lens. For example, in this particular case, geography played a part because the teacher who did not see an increase in inappropriate behaviors taught in a classroom that is at the end of a hallway and there were far fewer students passing by their door on any given day compared to the other teachers who were interviewed. In spite of their different perceptions, the teachers were all in agreement that the beginning of the year had fewer

issues, which they felt was because students were actually scared to be back in school and in classrooms with other people.

In my discussion with the school principal, he stated that he felt that there was “*definitely an increase in unwanted behavior,*” especially in the spring of 2022. This quote shows that the principal’s perception of student behavior was in line with the teachers’ perceptions. The principal indicated that even though teachers spent time reteaching expectations at the beginning of the year, student behavior issues were on the rise. This challenge he felt, was a result of additional health and safety expectations that were taught in the first two weeks of school and overshadowed the traditional lessons about appropriate behavior in the school.

When the students in the focus group were asked if they felt that there was an increase in inappropriate behavior in school, they were unanimous in their response and indicated that there were many more problems in the school by the spring of 2022 compared to previous years. The students felt that the teachers and administrators in the building had gone “soft” on enforcing school rules. They told me that it led to a feeling that the rules could be broken and there would be no consequences for inappropriate behavior. One student stated that *Last spring is when people started pushing their boundaries because they started realizing that the teachers weren’t really doing much to enforce the rules, so people really started punching the boundaries, starting fights, wearing stuff that to be honest just looks horrible like pajama pants.*” Another student added “*Since things were so easy, they just got out of control and did whatever they wanted to cuz [sic] no one was really stopping them.*” These quotes illustrate that the

students' perceptions regarding behavior issues were in line with what teachers and the principal perceived to be happening in school.

The theme of increased behavior issues was common among all research participants. Students, teachers, and the school principal were all in agreement that there was an increase in inappropriate behaviors as the school year progressed. This perceived increase may have happened for a variety of reasons, but the most common explanation provided by the research participants was that it was the result of a decrease in behavior expectations and the enforcement of school rules.

Decreased Behavior Expectations and Enforcement

The teachers that I interviewed told me that they were told to “*go easy on enforcing the rules,*” with the exception of the health and safety guidelines. In other words, they were expected to enforce masking and social distancing guidelines but ignore many other behavior issues. One of the interviewees told me that she thought this made sense because the students were scared to return to in person school and going easy on them would help them to transition back to an in-person classroom experience after being online for over a year. When discussing differences between the beginning of the year compared to earlier years, she stated that “*there were a lot of things that were different at the beginning of the year...the fact that we started the year with all the different health and safety expectations.*” This statement shows that expectations were different at the start of the year when schools returned to in person learning.

When I spoke with the principal, he agreed with the teachers' responses regarding an easing of rule enforcement during this period. The guidance from the school district

was that we needed to put a greater focus on the students' social and emotional learning in order to help them transition back to being in school with other students. The principal felt that while this approach may have been the best given the apprehension that many students felt, it also contributed to an increase in inappropriate student behaviors later in the school year. Additionally, the level of uncertainty that was prevalent when schools returned to in person learning required additional planning on the part of schools. As students returned to the classroom, the principal expressed concern over the fact that we might have to shut down again at any moment. He noted that *“possibly what other mandates would come along with whatever district policies were in place, were all factors to keep an eye on. And from a health point of view, and an uncertainty, like, would we shut down again?”*

The students who participated in the focus group discussion also felt that there were lower expectations. One student noted that *“Last year, we were welcomed back with a lot less rules and it was more laid back. This year, it’s a lot more expectations that we have to follow and a lot more rules.”* Students typically feel that there are too many rules in school, so this quote is especially relevant for showing how the students perceived the changes that took place in the beginning of the school year. The focus group discussion was held in the fall of 2022, which allowed the students to make comparisons between how they were welcomed back during the pandemic and how that year compared to the following year. As evidenced above, students felt that the rules were much stricter in 2022 when in fact the rules were the same as they had been before the pandemic—the effort that went into enforcing the rules is what had changed. It is worth noting that the

teachers did not explicitly tell the students that they would be more lenient in enforcing rules when they returned to in person learning, rather the students were able to perceive the changes on their own.

The perceptions noted from staff, students, and the school principal indicate that in addition to behavior expectations being lessened there was also a decrease in the enforcement of school rules. Not only did all three groups having the same perceptions, they were also in agreement that it caused more behavior issues in the latter part of the school year.

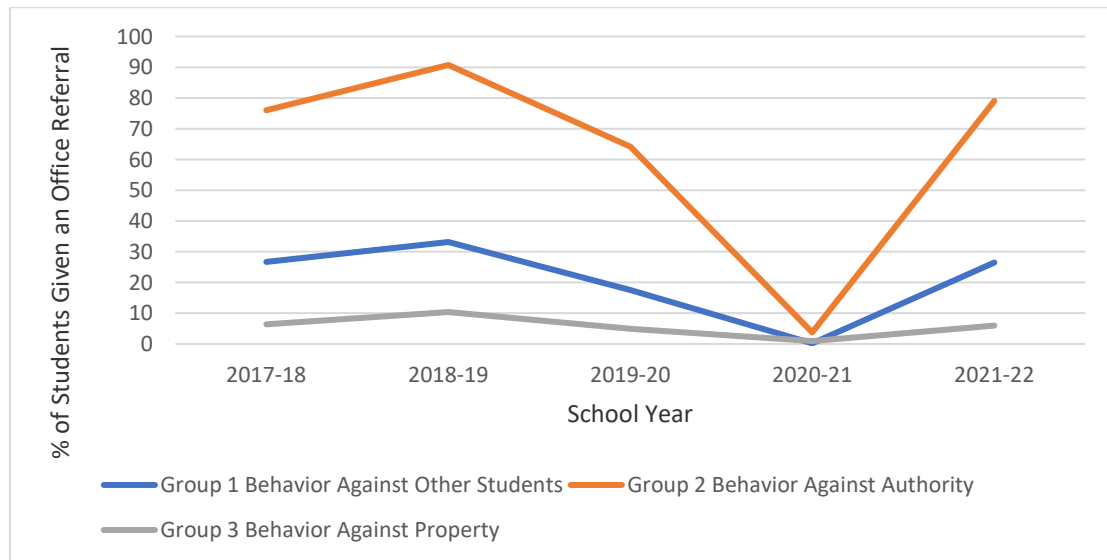
Office Referral Data Analysis

In addition to the data gleaned from interviews and the focus group discussion, office referral data was also examined to determine if there was a documented increase in inappropriate student behaviors. Data were analyzed from the 2017-18 school year through the 2022-23 school year. For each of the years examined, the data were examined based on the type of infraction for which the office referral was issued, grade level of the students, student gender, and the month in which the office referral was issued. Due to the fact that enrollment counts vary from one year to the next, all of the data have been converted to percentages to give a more accurate basis of comparison between school years.

Figure 4.1 illustrates the types of infractions for which office referrals were issued in each of the years being studied.

Figure 4.1

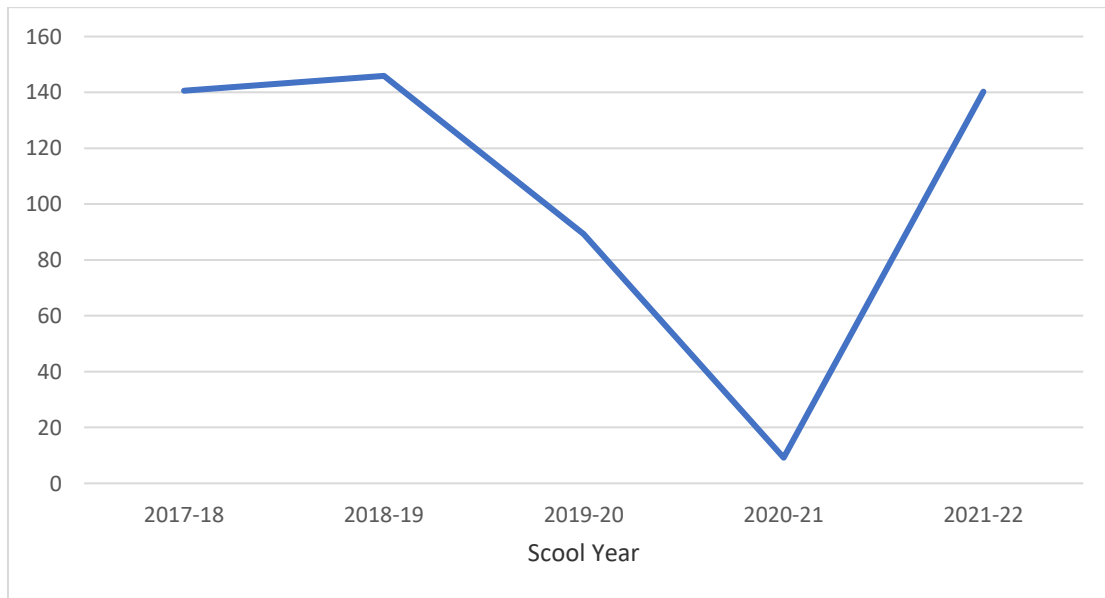
Office Referrals by Infraction



Office referrals varied widely during the years 2018-2022. In the 2019-20 school year, schools were closed in the middle of March, leaving three months of the school year with no teachers or students in the building. In the 2020-21 school year, remote learning was in place until the spring and then students came back to school on a hybrid schedule, which only allowed half of the students to be in the building at a time. Because of these pandemic related issues, the office referral data for those years is understandably skewed but has been included for reference purposes. Figure 4.2 details the total number of office referrals by year for the years being studied. The percentage of students given an office referral calculates as higher than 100% for some of the years shown. For example, in the year 2017-18, the percentage of students who were given an office referral is 140.55%. This is due to the fact that although there were only 550 students enrolled in that year, there were 773 office referrals issued.

Figure 4.2

Office Referrals by Year

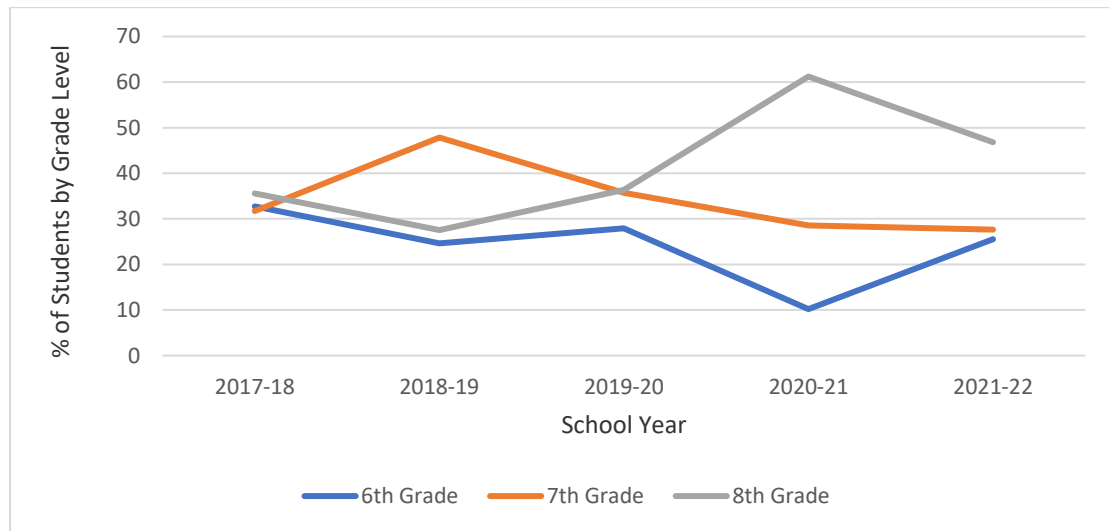


NOTE: Percentages greater than 100 indicate multiple referrals.

The office referral data by grade level show that students of different maturity levels have varying patterns of inappropriate behavior in school. Figure 4.3 illustrates how the percentage of students receiving office referrals varies by grade level.

Figure 4.3

Office Referrals by Grade Level

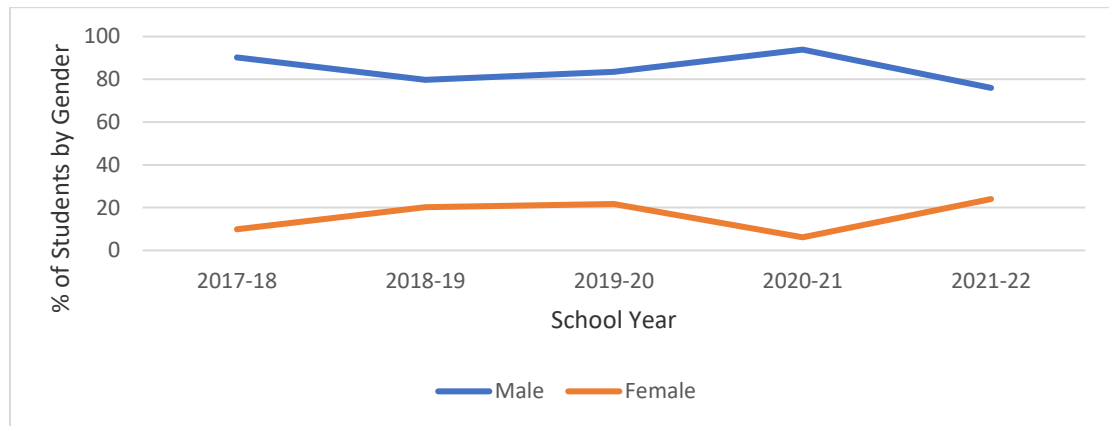


It is interesting to note the variance in grade levels and the inversion that occurs between seventh and eighth grade students from the 2018-19 school year to the 2020-21 school year.

The next category that was examined is the breakdown of office referrals by gender for each of the years studied. This data is illustrated in Figure 4.4 and shows an expected pattern, as adolescent boys tend to test rules and boundaries with greater frequency than is seen from adolescent girls.

Figure 4.4

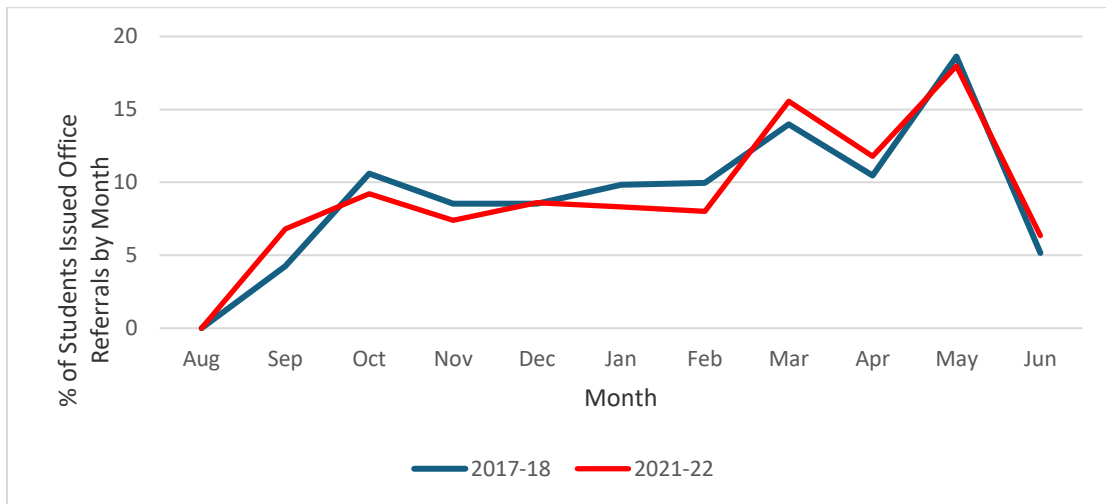
Office Referrals by Gender



The final category that the data were divided into was the month in which the office referral was issued. Figure 4.5 shows this breakdown and illustrates the behavior patterns that are typical in middle school. The two notable exceptions to the typical behavior patterns are the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years due to schools closing in March 2020 and continuing remote learning through March 2021. (These years have been omitted from figure 4.5 to provide a clearer picture of the difference in office referrals from 2018 to 2022.)

Figure 4.5

Office Referrals by Month



Having examined the office referral data, it appears that the perceptions of the students, staff, and school principal are not supported by the office referral data. This difference between perception and report will be the focus of Chapter Five.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

Overview

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine if the changes that were made to school procedures and behavior expectations played a role in student behavior when schools returned to in person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2021-22 school year. The research questions for this study were: Did the changes that were implemented at this school have an impact on student behavior? If so, how and why was student behavior impacted? What can we learn from this experience that might be used in the future?

The evidence gleaned from interviews with teachers, students, and the school principal indicated that there was an increase in inappropriate behaviors from students, however, this is not supported by the actual office referral data. As a middle school teacher who was employed in this suburban midwestern school district during the years in question, I hypothesized that the changes made to school procedures and behavior expectations had a negative impact on student behaviors through the course of the 2021-22 school year. After careful analysis, I discovered that it was not the case and, in fact, there was no significant change in the percentage of students who were issued an office referral for inappropriate behavior from the time before the pandemic to the point at which students were back in school.

Summary of Findings

An examination of the data showed that there was no significant difference in the number of office referrals from the 2017-18 school year to the 2021-22 school year. The percentage of students receiving office referrals in these years were 140.55% and 140.25%, respectively. This finding does not match the perceptions of the stakeholders in the school who were interviewed for this study. Although the findings from the office referral data disagree with the perceptions of the stakeholders, that is not to say that the perceptions are flawed. Given the nature of discipline in a school setting, there will invariably be differences in how many office referrals are issued by different teachers on any given day. If a teacher is feeling sympathetic toward a student because they are having a tough time adjusting to being back in school, it is easy to see how that teacher might be inclined to forgo issuing an office referral for a particular infraction. Conversely, a different teacher may feel more inclined to follow the school rules more closely and issue more office referrals.

Given the increased amount of trauma that students experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, one would expect to see an increase in inappropriate student behavior. There are many reasons why this might not be evident in the data. As mentioned above, there is the potential for a lack of consistency in the use of the office referral process. This lack of consistency will inevitably lead to variations in how the process is implemented. Additionally, every teacher has their own perceptions of what is and is not acceptable behavior in a classroom. There are teachers who have extremely strict classroom rules that put limitations on student behavior and those who have a much

more relaxed approach to classroom management. This variation is to be expected as each teacher is an individual with their own set of beliefs and values. For this reason, what may seem an egregious offense to one teacher may not be an issue of concern for another.

With this type of variation, one possible reason for the difference may have been a shift in teachers' referral behavior after returning from the pandemic. The teachers may have been experiencing more behavioral issues than they would consider typical but, in addressing the shift, issued referrals at a different level than before. This idea is something that is often seen when events cause a cultural shift in that we only tend to formally recognize the most problematic or troubling events, but we tend to internalize issues that are less problematic. For example, if a student is being disruptive in class, he or she will be reprimanded by the teacher, but if the behavior continues, the teacher may involve the principal to impose some type of disciplinary action such as a detention or a suspension. If that same student responds to the teacher's reprimand in a positive manner, the teacher does not see the need to involve the principal but will still note the student's behavior internally. This internalization might be the reason why there was not an increase in office referrals, even though the perceptions were that instances of inappropriate behavior had increased. If only the most grievous of offenses resulted in an office referral, there would be no documentable increase in office referrals, even if there was an increase in inappropriate behaviors.

Recall that in Figure 4.2, there was also variation in the number of referrals by grade level. This variation could be caused by a number of reasons. In general, younger students tend to be more inclined to follow rules than older students as they have not yet

reached the rule testing stage of adolescence. Seventh and eighth grade students have typically entered the rule testing stage of adolescence, and it is typical to see higher levels of inappropriate behavior from students of this age. An additional reason could simply be the makeup of the student body in each grade level. Student behaviors tend to follow trends, but in any given year, the number of students who exhibit inappropriate behaviors can vary widely depending on the home lives of the students, the number of students who have been exposed to trauma, and multiple other factors that can have an effect on their behavior.

In addition, when schools returned to in person learning, there was a strong focus on teaching health and safety expectations. This research raises the question of whether or not the increase in health and safety expectations resulted in a decrease in the amount of time spent teaching expectations related to behavior. At the beginning of the school year, teachers spend time explaining school and classroom rules and expectations. During this time, teachers do not teach their subject matter but focus on what students need to do to be successful in school. When school returned to in person learning, expectations regarding health and safety rules and procedures had to be incorporated into these lessons at the beginning of the year. Many students were apprehensive about returning to school and adding the additional health and safety concerns may have simply been more information than they were able to process at that time.

Ultimately, the study showed a deep disagreement between objective, observable data provided by office referrals and subjective, experience-based reflections provided by

students, teachers, and the school administration. This important discrepancy invites different types of implications to be considered.

Implications

The original intent of this study was to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected how schools returned to in person learning and examine how changes that were made impacted student behavior in the hope of being able to guide future generations through a similar situation should one occur in the future. This study indicated that the changes that were made to put more focus on the social and emotional well-being of students did not have an adverse effect on student behavior at the middle school level.

As discussed in Chapter Two, today's adolescents are likely to have experienced some type of trauma in their lives. The COVID-19 Pandemic was an event that created both individual and collective trauma. Hirschberger's (2018) research into the effects of the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center demonstrated how collective trauma impacts adolescents. Crosby (2020) specifically cited the COVID-19 pandemic as a global health crisis that could also create collective trauma. The students who lived through the COVID-19 pandemic are carrying this collective trauma as well as any personal trauma that they may have experienced in their lives with them. Had the data shown an increase in inappropriate student behavior from the years before the COVID-19 pandemic to the years after students returned to in person learning, there might have been a causal link between this traumatic event and student behavior, but that was not evidenced by the data. In fact, the results showed that there was no significant change in

inappropriate student behavior between the 2017-18 school year and the 2021-22 school year.

This research study provides important insight into how people—and adolescents in particular—recover from a traumatic event such as a global pandemic. The findings do not indicate that there was any type of causal link between the pandemic and student behavior, even though the students who participated in this study were directly impacted by the events surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Adolescent development theory has shown us that students at this age level are in a constant state of “storm and stress” (Goossens, 2006). It may be possible that for these students, the COVID-19 pandemic was simply another layer of stress that life had thrown their way. Students may also have not realized that staying home for a year and learning remotely would have negative consequences on their development, although many of them began to realize this once schools returned to in person learning.

In the first week of October 2021, I was becoming frustrated with a lack of participation on the part of my students. They simply would not answer questions in class and in many cases, they would not speak at all. Out of frustration, I asked one of my seventh-grade classes why they would not talk, telling them that I usually have to get them to stop talking but now I could not get them to start. One boy who sat in the front row of class tentatively raised his hand and gave me the answer. He told me that “*we have only been texting for the past year, so we don’t know how to talk to one another in person anymore.*” It was at this moment that I realized how deeply the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted my students. They were actually scared to be back in school with

their classmates and, as stated in Chapter Three, some of them feared that they would get sick and die. It is reasonable to assume that this fear had at least some impact on student behavior.

Although students are generally resilient and adjust to disruptions quickly, the disruption caused by COVID-19 was on a scale that had not been seen in recent times. Students were removed from their schools and everything moved to online platforms. Other disruptions like snow days, or school lockdowns and evacuations happen, but those events tend to be short lived and somewhat predictable. COVID-19 and the response to it was unlike anything students had experienced before and the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic resulted in increased anxiety not only for students, but for adults as well. The data that I examined for this study spans several years, including years before the pandemic. The pre-pandemic years provide a baseline for comparison when analyzing data from the years that schools were online, the year that the students returned to in person learning with increased health and safety restrictions, and finally the year during which the health and safety restrictions were lifted. The fact that there was no significant change in office referral data serves to demonstrate the resiliency of the students. They lived through a global pandemic but were able to return to their normal routines in a relatively short amount of time.

Limitations

In determining my data collection design, I chose to use student experiences as my main focus as I felt that this was the most logical course of action. Because of this decision, I did not collect information about the students' backgrounds. A future study

would benefit from a more in-depth examination of the students and their backgrounds to determine if the students had any biases or any influences in their lives that might provide more insight into how behavior might have been altered when students returned to in person learning.

Finally, an attempt was made to retrieve office referral data from all of the middle schools in the school district, but at the time of this writing, these data have not been made available to me. A comparison of office referral data from other schools may have shed some additional light on this study and given a more complete picture of how the return to in person learning was implemented at other schools.

Directions for Future Research

When I began this research, my hope was that it would yield some guidelines for returning to school after a catastrophic event like the COVID-19 pandemic in the future. The findings indicate that the increased focus on students' social and emotional needs did not result in an increase in office referrals for inappropriate behaviors. This finding indicates that further research may need to be done to focus on other aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. A study that delves more deeply into the psychological aspects of surviving a global pandemic would provide valuable insight for teachers and school administrators as they navigate a return to in-person learning in the future.

As mentioned above, a study that examines the backgrounds and characteristics of the students would provide educators with valuable insight into the needs of their students. Teachers excel at differentiating instruction based on the needs and abilities of their students. A study that provides them with additional information about the non-

academic needs of their students would supply teachers with additional tools that they can use to meet the needs of every student.

This case study was intentionally designed to examine how one suburban, midwestern school returned to in person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. A broader study that includes multiple schools from multiple, varied school districts would provide additional information that would help to determine if the experiences at Johnson Middle School were the same as those at other schools. In addition to a simple comparison, a study of this nature might be able to provide a more complete guide to the best practices for returning to school when the next catastrophic event occurs.

Additional research needs to be pursued in student behavior that considers the views of the students, teachers, and administrators and how they align or disconnect from one another. One issue of particular interest is the parameters that are set to determine what does or does not constitute behavior that warrants an office referral, whether these parameters are consistent across school districts, and whether or not they should be standardized across districts. This proposed study should also examine how shifts in inappropriate behavior may be affecting the reporting of that behavior in the form of an office referral.

There is much research that still needs to be completed to determine the long-term effects of the isolation that the pandemic caused on adolescent students. Studies that examine the amount of learning lost during remote schooling also need to focus on whether or not there was a loss of maturation during the lockdown period, how long it

takes students to recover from an event such as a global pandemic, and how schools can best help their students to regain what has been lost.

Conclusions

When Johnson Middle School returned to in person learning in the fall of 2021, school leaders were focused on helping students feel welcome in the school again. Many students were fearful of being around other people, so schools softened the expectations for student behavior. This shift did not have an adverse effect on student behavior and should be seen as an appropriate approach to reacclimating students to the school environment.

Adolescents are emotionally fragile. School leaders need to be well versed in adolescent psychology in order to address the issues that their adolescent students face on a daily basis. School leaders also need to be cognizant of the fact that a majority of their students are struggling to cope with trauma as a result of adverse childhood experiences and may have a less-than-ideal home situation. Over the past century, schools have become a place where students can go to have their needs met. When these needs are not being met, choice theory tells us that students will react with inappropriate behavior (Lambie, et al., 2008). The need for schools to be an integral part of students' lives has been demonstrated by the variety of services that schools now provide for their students. Schools need to continue to be the place where students can feel safe, cared for, and protected, while at the same time providing an education that includes social and emotional learning as well as the standard academic subjects and electives.

Appendix A

Table A1

Bergin and Bergin's Table of Major Theories of Adolescent Development (pp. 5-6)

Major Theory and Theorist	Basic Aims	Emphasis: General Age Trends for All Children versus How Individuals are different	Forces That Drive Development	Emphasis: Nature or Nurture?	Domains of Development the Theory Explains Well
Bioecological Model Urie Bronfenbrenner	To highlight the multiple layers of influence on the child	Both	Hereditry and environment act together to influence development. Does not specify particular processes.	Both	Any
Ethology Konrad Lorenz and Nikolass Tinbergen	To understand the functions of behavior in different species	Focuses on species-wide age trends, but not on individual differences.	Genetically based processes shaped by evolution drive development. Behavior becomes incorporated into the biology of a species because it promotes breeding success. Compares human and animal behavior. Emphasis is on innate behaviors.	Nature	Attachment Emotions Aggression Language

Table A1 – Continued

Major Theory and Theorist	Basic Aims	Emphasis: General Age Trends for All Children versus How Individuals are different	Forces That Drive Development	Emphasis: Nature or Nurture?	Domains of Development the Theory Explains Well
Behaviorism (also called Learning Theory) B. F. Skinner	To explain learned behavior	Focuses on individual differences, which are the result of different histories of enforcement.	The child is passive; reinforcement and punishment drive development. Behaviors that are reinforced are more likely to re-occur. Emphasis is on observable behavior. Concepts of mind, cognition, and inner experiences are ignored. Useful for managing children's behavior problems.	Nurture	Any learned behavior. Does not explain innate behaviors, like smiling, or why some things are reinforcing.
Social Cognitive (or social Learning) Theory Albert Bandura	To explain acquisition of behavior and cognitions such as attitudes	Greater emphasis on individual differences, especially on behavior and attitude change, not trends.	An expansion of behaviorism/ learning theory. Children learn from models or others who are reinforced. This requires children to remember and interpret things they have observed—which means cognition is involved. The child actively interprets reinforcement.	Nurture	Any learned behavior

Table A1 – Continued

Major Theory and Theorist	Basic Aims	Emphasis: General Age Trends for All Children versus How Individuals are different	Forces That Drive Development	Emphasis: Nature or Nurture?	Domains of Development the Theory Explains Well
Cognitive Developmental Theory Jean Piaget	To explain the development of logical thought and moral judgement	Age trends are strongly emphasized and age-based “stages” of cognitive development are outlined.	Innate cognitive maturation (with some social interaction) drives development. Children actively “construct” their own knowledge through exploration. Abilities are similar, even with different cultural experience. Maturation limits logical reasoning ability, so children’s cognitive development is stage-like.	Nature Maturation	Knowledge Logical reasoning

Appendix B

Table B1

PYD Constructs and Descriptions

Construct as identified by Catalano et al., (2004)	Description from Merrick, et al., (2013)
Promotes bonding	“development of strong affective relationship [sic] with and commitment to people (healthy adults and positive peers) and institutions. According to interpersonal and family theories, adolescent developmental problems are regarded as outcomes of problem family and interpersonal processes” (p. xvi)
Fosters resilience	“ability of an individual for adapting to changes in a healthy way, a reintegration process for an individual to recover, or positive outcomes after experiencing adversity. It refers to adolescents’ capacity against developmental changed and life stresses in order to “bounce back”: from stressful life experience and achieve healthy outcomes” (p. xvii).

Table B1 – Continued

Construct as identified by Catalano et al., (2004)	Description from Merrick, et al., (2013)
Promotes emotional competence	“awareness of one’s own emotions, ability to understand others’ emotions, ability to use the vocabulary of emotion, capacity for empathy, ability to differentiate internal subjective emotional experience from external emotional expression, and capacity for emotional management” (p. xvi).
Promotes cognitive competence	“cognitive abilities, processes or outcomes such as logical thinking, creative thinking and critical thinking. Poor cognitive competence is usually a precursor of adolescent developmental problems” (p. xvii).
Promotes behavioral competence	“ability to use nonverbal and verbal strategies to perform socially acceptable and normative behavior in social interactions and to make effective behavior choices, such as resisting peer pressure” (p. xvii).

Tale B1 – Continued

Construct as identified by Catalano et al., (2004)	Description from Merrick, et al., (2013)
Fosters self-determination	“ability to set goals and make choices according to his/her own thinking. Regarding skills and strategies which promote self-determination, they uncloset self-awareness of strengths and limitations, goal setting and action planning, problem solving, choice-making, and self-evaluation” (p. xvii).
Fosters spirituality	“promotion of the development of beliefs in a higher power, cultivation of a sense of life meaning, and values about life choices” (p. xvii).
Fosters self-efficacy	“beliefs in one’s abilities and to use such abilities to attain certain goals. Research findings show that self-efficacy is positively related to adolescent developmental outcomes” (p. xvii).
Fosters clear and positive identity	“building of self-esteem and facilitation of exploration and commitments in self-definition” (p. xvii).

Table B1 – Continued

Construct as identified by Catalano et al., (2004)	Description from Merrick, et al., (2013)
Provides recognition for positive behavior	“development of systems for rewarding or recognizing participants’ positive behavior such as prosocial behavior or positive changes in behavior” (p. xvii).
Provides opportunities for prosocial involvement	“events and activities that promote young people’s participation in prosocial behavior and maintenance of social norms” (p. xvii).
Fosters prosocial norms	“clear and healthy standards, beliefs, and behavior guidelines which promote prosocial behavior such as cooperation and sharing” (p. xvii).

Appendix C

Table C1

Johnson Middle School Behavior Grid

Behavior	Major	Intervention	Minor	Intervention
Code 122 False Fire Alarm or Bomb Report/Tampering with Fire Alarm System	Student delivers a message suggesting possible explosive materials, pending explosions, and/or weapon being on or near school grounds.	Administrative Referral		
Code 121-Arson (starting a fire) Code 124-Fireworks	Student is in possession of substances/objects readily capable of causing bodily harm and/or property damage. Student plans and/or participates in malicious burning of property	Administrative Referral		
Code 114 Controlled Substances	A student will not smoke, use tobacco or similar substances be in possession of, use or under the influence of alcohol, drugs, (prescribed, over the counter and/or illegal) or drug paraphernalia. Smoking: in any area under the control of a school district, including all activities or events supervised by the school district.	Administrative Referral		
Code 103 Disorderly/Disruptive Behavior	A disorderly, physical or verbal outburst, which results in a major. A major disruption means the teacher has to stop teaching to deal with the outburst because if he or she didn't there could be a physical conflict.	Administrative Referral	Disruptive behavior, which results in a minor disruption of learning.	Record infraction on the Minor Infraction Recording Sheet. Teach and reteach expectations.
Code 106 Dress Code Violation/Inappropriate Dress and Grooming	Refusal to comply to staff request to cover up or adjust clothing; reoccurring	Administrative Referral	Student follows request to cover-up or adjust clothing, not recurring	Record infraction on the Minor Infraction Recording Sheet. Teach and reteach expectations.

Table C1 – Continued

Behavior	Major	Intervention	Minor	Intervention
Code 101 Cheating/Academic Misconduct	Plagiarize/Cheat /Use of technology (including AI) /Copying on a summative assessment. Gaining unauthorized access to or tampering with educational materials and/or records.	Administrative Referral Zero on the assessment and no chance of re-take	Formative Assessments: either homework or class work	Zero on the assignment and parent notification. Record infraction on Minor to Majors Form.
Code 105 Inappropriate Display of Affection	Excessive touching or inappropriate physical contact	Administrative Referral	Touching or inappropriate physical contact	Record infraction on the Minor to Majors Form. Re-teach expectation.
Code 115 Technology Abuse	Inappropriate use of technology and any violation of the District's Technology Use Agreement.	Administrative Referral	Use of cell phone or other electronics during school hours.	Record infraction on the Minor to Majors Form. Re-teach expectation.
Code 108 Truancy/Audit	Excessive Tardiness/Late	See Tardy Policy	Tardy/Late	Record tardy/See Tardy Policy.
Code 108 Truancy/Audit Code 102 Defacement of Property or Destruction of Property	Skipping	Administrator Referral	Tardy/Late	Record tardy/See Tardy Policy.
	Careless or intentional damage to any property that does not belong to the individual	Administrative Referral and restitution for the replacement and/or repair of the damage including labor		
Code 126 Weapons: Dangerous Instruments Code 127 Weapons Code 128 Weapons; Use of Legitimate Tools as Weapons	A student shall not knowingly possess, handle, or transmit any object that can reasonably be considered a weapon at school, on school property, or at a school sponsored event.	Administrative Referral		
Unprepared for Class			Student comes without class, planner, School ID required materials for class.	Record infraction on the Minor to Majors Form.

Table C1 - Continued

Behavior	Major	Intervention	Minor	Intervention
Code 104 Misrepresentation (Failure to Follow School Personal Identification policy)	Use of someone's name/identity	Administrative Referral		
Code 113 Harassment/Bullying/Intimidation Emotional, or Technological) Code 118 Threat/Coercion	Any kind of threat bullying, intimidation, or verbal assault, intimidation to the point of causing emotional distress	Administrative Referral/ Enter into the bullying Tracker	Making fun of another person, put downs, name calling, inappropriate jokes, not recurring.	Record infraction on the Minor Infraction Recording Sheet. Teach and reteach expectations.
Code 112 Profanity and/or Obscenity toward Others	Uses profane, racial and/or sexual slurs or gestures toward staff or students.	Administrative Referral	Initial use of profane language (not directed toward another individual).	Record infraction on the Minor Infraction Recording Sheet. Teach and reteach expectations.
Code 107 Insubordination/Unruly Conduct	Blatant or repeated refusal to comply with a reasonable request. Actions or behaviors that create an interruption in classroom instruction or a disruption of the school.	Administrative Referral	Initial refusal, but immediate compliance after second request. Actions or behaviors that are distracting to the educational process.	Record infraction on the Minor Infraction Recording Sheet. Teach and reteach expectations.
Code 116 Fighting	When a student's behavior escalates to aggressive physical contact.	Administrative Referral	Play-fighting, horseplay, or posturing that does not result in physical contact.	Record infraction on the Minor Infraction Recording Sheet. Teach and reteach expectations.

Appendix D

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter



Date: October 16, 2024

Study #: IRB-FY2025-149

Study Title: Returning to Normal After the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Examination of How One Suburban Middle School Returned to In Person Learning

Submission Type: Initial

IRB Decision: No Human Subjects Research

Research Team:

Jim Radcliffe

Julia Smith

The above referenced study has been determined to be No Human Subjects Research according to federal regulations.

The IRB decision is based on the following:

Approved as NHR based on the data for this study being collected under a previously approved IRB application (#IRB-FY2023-216). Research will use de-identified data.

Please retain a copy of this correspondence for your records.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB staff.

Thank you.

The Oakland University IRB

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