

"Bad Boy" Perceptions of School Discipline

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School undoubtedly plays a significant role in a student's formative years. Patterns of delinquency are often established before the age of 13, with most students earning delinquent labels by the ages of 8 and 10 (Burbach, 1999). Negative schooling experiences such as low academic achievement, low interest in education, truancy, and poor-quality schools are believed to contribute to juvenile delinquency (Hawkins, Farrington, & Catalano, 1998). While it is difficult to say whether school failure causes delinquency or whether students who engage in delinquent activities have certain characteristics that contribute to their school failure, early negative schooling experiences often act as a precursor to delinquency. This phenomenon highlights the importance of reaching young adolescents early in their delinquent behaviors and targeting school factors that may contribute to delinquency.

Discipline is one important school factor that may influence students' perceptions of negative schooling experiences. School officials often struggle with effective ways to discipline students who are chronically disruptive. Many commonly used discipline methods often do not meet the desired intentions, and some carry unfair racial targeting as well as expelled from school (Edelman, 1987).

There is a wide body of literature describing discipline techniques employed by schools. However, little emphasis has been placed on students' perspectives of discipline. Particularly those students, who have been labeled by teachers, administrators, and peers as the "bad boys," have had little opportunity to express their own views of the disciplinary procedures enacted upon them. This article describes a study that addresses middle level students' perceptions of discipline in relation to the school's contribution to juvenile delinquency.

As part of a larger research question to determine the experiences of students enrolled in alternative schools, this author recently spent approximately four months shadowing nine seventh-grade students in an alternative school located in Georgia. Students were sent to this alternative school because they had been suspended or expelled from their traditional schools and were considered to be chronically disruptive. For the purposes of this article, the school is called "Bridges," and all names are pseudonyms.

Methods

Driven by sound theoretical qualitative methodology (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1992; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990), a theoretical orientation including critical theory (e.g., Bennett deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999; Hinchey, 1998; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000), and constructionism (e.g., Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 1994), this author conducted an ethnographic case study in which she observed and interacted with alternative school students in their daily school lives. The researcher interviewed them extensively; visited their homes and talked with their parents and grandparents; spoke with their teachers, administrators, and school resource officers; and subsequently, spent an enormous amount of time reflecting on their situations and their experiences, ultimately trying to determine how these data might translate into more successful school experiences for similar middle level students. This article shares students' perspectives of discipline and offer suggestions for ways to restructure traditional schools to better serve the needs of students who are at-risk for delinquency.

Findings

Student perceptions of discipline fell into four basic categories: Rules for the sake of rules, inappropriate consequences, low tolerance for anger, and labeling effects. Each category is discussed in detail below.

Rules for the Sake of Rules

Students at the alternative school spoke of ways in which they believed school actually perpetuated cycles of delinquency. One such example was in the school's over-dependence on rules. It often appeared that the reasons behind school rules were not clear to students. Students often resisted tight control in discipline by flouting disrupting class when they were reprimanded for breaking rules that they did not perceive as necessary. Students spoke frankly about rules they saw as important or not. When students failed to see the reasoning for rules, they did not "buy into" them, causing them to resist and occur further disciplinary or delinquent involvement.

Dress code. Students found the dress code policy to be especially problematic. The policy in the school handbook read, "All pants must fit and be worn at the normal waistline. The use of a belt is encouraged." Reminiscent of age-old arguments between teens and their parents over appropriate dress, problems ensued when students did not share the same interpretations of "fit" with administrators. Billy felt that the resource officer at the school was "out to get students" because of the dress code, a violation that can lead to serious consequences. Other students echoed the belief that the resource officer, in particular, adhered to an interpretation of the dress code that was too strict. Billy said,

I just think like Officer Bo would jump on all of us kids- not just me- like every kid he would just, if you said something you really didn't mean, he would just write you up for that. And he wrote me up for my pants falling down. And your hair is supposed to be only one color. I think that's stupid. I think the pants thing- I mean, I think it's really kind of stupid. I mean, if it's coming way off your butt and you can see your underwear then that is disrespectful to girls and the teacher, but I don't think just because it's a little bit down, they shouldn't jump on all of us for that. Because we want to be comfortable. And I'll be worrying about that more than I'll be worrying about what the teachers are saying.

Students seemed to view the interpretations of the dress code only as a means of control. Students regretted the purpose of the dress code was never explained to them. Conceivably, if the reasoning behind these rules was explained, students might resist less and some of the problems associated with resistance might be alleviated.

Compromises. Monis and Billy discussed how they think school officials and students could reach compromises by establishing rules by which everyone could abide. Both of them alluded to the notion that they need more freedom in the school environment. They believed rules should be flexible enough to accommodate all students, without punishing the whole school because of the few students who abused privileges. Morris began,

Oh, yeah, like having to stay in the class all period. They just changed it to where we don't get to go to the library or the bathroom. There is only one teacher that will let us go to the bathroom. Staying in class an hour and 45 minutes is too long. 'Cause I mean, I really had to go [to the bathroom] today and they would not let me go and I thought that was stupid. I think they should let us go but if you see someone out [in the hall] you should check their agenda. And if they get caught roaming the halls they should put a mark in their agenda. And then they won't get to go somewhere and not everyone gets punished. They stopped- like last year we could go to the snack machine everyday, all day, and every class. This year we can only go at lunch.

While it is plausible that teachers have their own ideas about the need for these rules, it was clear in conversations with students that there were no democratic discussions that attempted to meet the needs of both teachers and students. Perhaps student perceptions would have been different if they had been a part of the decision-making process. Morris often vocalized the need for compromise with the rules and procedures of the school. Although his suggestion contradicted the "smoke-free" policy of the school, here he addressed the need for a smoking break:

I think smoking at school, I think it matters, but there should be a time that you get a smoking break, like you should get your parents' permission and all that because sometimes you just get too stressed out and you need a cigarette. My parents would sign a permission, and my grandparents might.

He continued thinking about other compromises that could be made in other situations for which he had been reprimanded. He said this about teachers letting students sleep in class: "I think that if you're tired they should like give you a chance to write your name on something that says, 'I will make up this work' and then you get to sleep that period. Billy agreed with Morris' ideas and added by saying of teachers,

They don't know what happened that night. I mean, your parents could have been in a big fight and you didn't get any sleep and you're really tired. And they don't even want to know why you are so tired. They just tell you to get up. I mean, if I was a

teacher, I would ask the student, "Why are you tired?" or go see the counselor or something like that, you know. And nowadays they are just yelling at you to get up, stand up, and splash water on your face and stuff like that.

While this writer is not suggesting that students should sleep in class, Billy does present a valid example of yet another way that schools favor those who come to school ready to learn. Some students who are legitimately unable to sleep due to family arguments at home and get in trouble at school for sleeping, are consequently punished in both places. Perhaps what Billy is really arguing is that teachers should take the time to find out why students are tired instead of assuming it is out of laziness. Many of the compromises that Billy and Morris suggest seem to point to a need for open communication between teachers and students.

Ineffective coping strategies. Abiding by certain school rules was particularly challenging for students when their home environments presented much different expectations than their school environments. For example, when students came from homes in which profanity was commonly used as a mode of expression, or when smoking was used as an outlet for stress, students found themselves at school with ineffective coping strategies. Here Billy explained how both he and his mother used cigarettes as a coping strategy to deal with stress:

That's why I'm glad they made cigarettes. Both of us. Because my nerves sometimes just get so shot I think about it and I'm like, I just need a cigarette. My mom would kill me if she didn't have a cigarette.

When students' home coping strategies did not work at school, they were placed at a disadvantage. Differing, or ineffective coping strategies at school can be detrimental to students in terms of school consequences. A common challenge for students is how to effectively deal with anger in the school atmosphere, a place that typically shows little tolerance for emotional expression.

Low Tolerance for Anger

Students at Bridges were socialized to express very little emotion at school. Anger was practically the only emotion that students did

reveal, perhaps because this added to their masculine role and did not expose them emotionally. When students did express anger, they usually got in trouble for it because there were very few *acceptable* ways to express anger. Often, the expression of anger only served to perpetuate cycles of delinquency for the student. Many students lacked appropriate ways to express anger. They were punished for voicing anger, or were simply removed from the inflammatory situation, thereby avoiding any kind of resolution. Students were seldom encouraged to talk about their anger or think about ways to appropriately express it. More often than not, students were expected to suppress their anger. Students who constantly tried to ignore their anger may have been successful in covering up their emotions for a while, but when it erupted, it often resulted in violent outbursts. These actions in turn caused the angry student to be suspended or expelled, which often meant a violation of probation or other involvement with the juvenile court.

Impediment to learning. Goodman (1999) describes how students in the Wonalancet Alternative School had to deal with anger in his classroom in order to get to the learning process. Here he describes the very situation that seemed to occur at Bridges, although students at Bridges were offered few alternatives to deal with their anger:

We learned that if the students came to us with unresolved feelings from any earlier encounters or interactions, those feelings would continue to hover about until they were resolved. It mattered not how enthralling our lesson was. If two of our students were angry at one another, those issues needed to be addressed before any teaching could take place (p. 34).

At the Wonalancet Alternative School, students were encouraged to talk about their feelings and listen to each other, while they were also given the freedom to "have space to deal with it" (p. 34).

Isolation. Students of Bridges, however, were forced to find other ways to deal with their anger—ways that kept them out of trouble, which often meant anger suppression. Students indicated a variety of methods they used to restrain anger. Many students found isolation an essential strategy in dealing with their anger and preferred to simply physically remove themselves from the inflammatory situation. Some participants saw this as an effective, or at least a "safe," method for

staying out of trouble. They discussed their need to retreat when they felt angry. Martin said,

When I get mad I feel like I hate myself and I be talking to myself. When I get mad I go in a room by myself. At school, I just go by myself at school. I don't talk to nobody. You just be your own self and don't talk to nobody. Stuff like that.

Jeremy echoed this need for isolation. He said that when he became angry at school, he would "go sit in the office," as does Mark, who would "go to the library to where nobody is." Bradley also experienced problems with expressing his anger appropriately. He attended anger management courses as part of a court order. These classes were sponsored by the Department of Juvenile Justice and were held at the alternative school once weekly for several weeks. Jeremy, who also attended anger management classes, described the purpose of these classes: "You talk about your anger and how you can prevent from getting mad." Bradley seemed to find little worth in these classes and told how he continued to suppress his anger:

Well, I go to anger management, but that don't do nothing. They don't teach me anything that I don't already know. It was a court order. I just keep it [anger] to myself. Just forget about it. If somebody makes me mad, like if somebody makes me mad, I go to the bathroom and when I come back I'll be fine.

Billy reflected on the ways that acting out anger sometimes led him trouble, and the limited acceptable ways for expressing emotion in school:

Yeah, cause if you do it [express yourself] nowadays, you mostly get in trouble. I know a lot of people who hold their anger in and someone will say something to them and they let it all out.. [Morris nods and points to self].

In the same discussion, Morris expanded the notion of keeping his anger bottled up and discussed what happens when that becomes an ineffective strategy.

People piss me off all the time and they get me mad and I won't say nothing about it, and then one time I'll click and I'll go off and I don't mean to, but I'm angry. Sometimes I just get angry at life and how things work.

These boys are good examples of how schools, perhaps unknowingly, encourage unhealthy anger suppression. By encouraging students to hold their anger inward, schools almost ensure a volatile release when anger does surface. Experience has taught students and teachers alike that school should be a place of non-emotion. Anxieties tend to rise when emotion, particularly anger, is displayed at school..

In this way, the school structure reinforces the socialization among students that rewards non-emotional expression and punishes emotional expression. When male students seek to display masculinity, little room exists for other emotions to be expressed as well.. Students also described the effects that labeling had on their school perceptions, and ultimately, their involvement with delinquency.

Labeling Effects

Several students confirmed the effects of labeling that occur in school.. Just being placed at the alternative school affixed certain labels to students. According to some students, the alternative school endures a reputation in the county as a school for the "bad kids" and often evoked fear in the students who were sent there. Students confront preconceived notions held by peers, teachers, and administrators when they return to their traditional school.. Billy talked about the interactions he had with the administrators and teachers of his home school, who upon his return, automatically identified him as a troublemaker, saying,

Just like calling you to their office for no reason. Sometimes they just pick on you like with little stuff.. I mean, I know some kids use that as an excuse that they get picked on at school, but most of the time it is true. 'Cause I know a lot of teachers who do. I feel that I've been brought out just because of some of the stuff I do, some people think I'm bad because of that and I don't think that's fair because of some of the things you've done in the past..

He added later in the conversation,

The officers [at regular school] suck, plus the principal there is always on you. They constantly are nagging at you. Your pants are falling down, are too low, your hair is too long, something like that.. I just get tired of it. I would get tired of it and then I would like blow up in their face. And then I would get in trouble for blowing up in their face.

Mark, who had returned to the alternative school for a second placement, echoed this very sentiment. He perceived that he was treated differently at his regular school because of his placement at the alternative school:

When you go back from this school, I think they do [treat you unfairly], 'cause they think that you're a bad person just 'cause you went there [alternative school] and half the people don't really know what you're really like at all.. ... Like I did what I did 'cause I'm not really that bad a person. I just did some stupid crap ... And um, so they treat you a lot different thinking that you're a bad person and they load me down with more work when I get back. And the principal is always watching you. He'll pick out every little thing that you do and give you detention for it.

Billy said that teachers were particularly guilty of labeling him and believed that not only were his actions disliked, but also he was not liked as a person. Of this matter, he said,

And just like, [school helps me get in trouble] when like our parents say that we're overreacting when we say that teachers pick favorites or they hate us. But it's true. Some teachers hate us. And they like to get you in trouble; they pick out favorites.

Labeling can lead to students getting in trouble even when they had not necessarily committed an offense. When students are continually labeled as "bad kids," they can begin to see themselves as such and might be more likely to engage in delinquent behavior (e.g., Braithwaite, 1989; Shoemaker, 1990). Billy referred to the effects of labeling when he said, "Someti mes they wi ll bel ieve somebody over you and you're tell ing the truth. I don't think that's right." Bradley agreed, and told about a time he was punished for injuring a girl when he closed her hand in a locker,

even though, according to him, someone pushed him, which caused him to push the girl into the row of lockers. Bradley also believed academically-successful students receive preferential treatment.

Another problem that students described was not only that they often received the blame when it was unwarranted. They found themselves unable to escape their past mistakes in order to move their behavior in more productive directions. Billy commented that, even though he was in another school year, he still felt judged by his past behaviors. Here he talked about the resource officer at the alternative school:

I don't know, I guess because like he just senses trouble in me sometimes. Last year I was just getting in trouble for little things and I'll admit this, that I was wrong in some of those ways, but just because of what I done last year, I don't think he should bring that up. 'Cause it's like a new year, it's like a new school year, and he's still bringing up stuff from the past..

Students often felt targeted for misbehaviors, as if they were "under a microscope" and someone was just waiting for them to make a mistake.

Labeling effects have implications not only for the student in school, but also for the student's involvement with the Juvenile Justice System. The more often students are targeted for misbehaviors, the more likely they are to receive juvenile complaints, appear in court, and establish a history with the juvenile court system where consequences increase in severity with every offense.

Student perceptions of the role of rules, low tolerance for anger, and labeling effects all have implications for the ways schools may actually unknowingly perpetuate delinquency.

Implications and Recommendations

Crawford and Bodine (2001) assert that most schools rely on arbitration as a discipline strategy. Arbitration calls for a non-involved adult to determine a solution or consequence to a dispute. Students often are expected to comply with these decisions, despite their lack of involvement in the resolution. Discipline at Bridges reflected this style of resolution and allowed very little input from students. Students were told how to act and were handed consequences that they often perceived as inappropriate. Likewise, they often exacerbated difficult circumstances

because they had no appropriate ways to express their anger, which only served to perpetuate their problems in school. Findings suggest employing democratic decision making in schools, using appropriate consequences, allowing for expressions of anger in school, and diminished labeling could greatly benefit students at risk for delinquency.

Implement Democratic Decision-making

Students in this study felt uninvolvement in making and enforcing rules at their school. They expressed a desire for increased communication about the rules by which they were expected to abide. They believed that schools often imposed rules and procedures that they neither fully understood nor saw as important. Therefore, they often did not "buy into" the rules set forth by school and were thus quick to rebel and challenge rules which appeared arbitrary and meaningless to them.

Although some classrooms involve student participation in rule-making, few school-wide discipline plans involve students. Particularly in smaller school settings, involving students in making and implementing school-wide rules might be a way to achieve a more democratic approach to discipline. By allowing students input into making school-wide rules, and having a formal procedure to challenge school rules, the purpose of certain rules may become clearer to students. Students in this study suggested ways that rules could be compromised so that students and teachers get most of what they want. These suggestions were often craftily devised and even plausible in some circumstances. The fact that students thought out these compromises and shared them with the researcher indicates some eagerness to become more active in the discipline structure within their school. Letting students bear the responsibility not only helps them to assume ownership of the rules, but also allows them to examine the perspectives traditionally held by educators concerned with the good of the school community.

One strategy that has been tried successfully in juvenile courts (Vickers, 2000) is the use of peer courts. This is a variation on the peer mediation models now being utilized in some middle schools. After students, teachers, and administrators establish a working set of school rules, a peer court could be implemented to determine consequences for violators. In peer courts, students are

trained to serve as "judges" and sit on a panel to hear the concerns of other students who are involved in disputes. Adults serve only as facilitators to the process. Students in school peer courts could rotate serving on the court panel. When a student violates a rule, it would be up to the panel (with the supervision of teachers and administrators) to hear the circumstances and determine consequences. Peer courts empower students so they feel their needs are heard and they hold more power within the disciplinary structure. In addition, serving on the court panel provides the students the opportunity to look at rule-violation from another perspective. Practice in using this perspective may help students consider more thoroughly their own actions that could lead to disciplinary measures. Peer court evaluations in juvenile court systems show that more than 90% of participants report higher levels of satisfaction and feel more invested in the justice process than those who participated in traditional juvenile justice programs. Participants of such programs also showed lowered recidivism rates (Vickers).

Provide Appropriate Consequences

Kennedy and Morton (1999) speak to the ironical nature of suspension/expulsion policies, saying, "Does it make any sense at all to suspend a student from school when school is the last place on earth that the student wants to be?" (p. 10S) Students, parents, and grandparents in this study spoke about the need for appropriate and logical disciplinary consequences. They asserted that many consequences serve only to take students out of school, thereby not only removing the student from the instructional atmosphere, but also perpetuating isolation, non-supervision, and non-resolution of problems. School officials may need to carefully reexamine the intentions of consequences, whether to punish students or remove them from the surrounding group of peers in the classroom.

The use of appropriate and logical consequences in school is not a new debate, yet certain consequences in school are so widespread that they continue to receive attention in the literature. The puzzling question is, if certain consequences have been recognized as ineffective, why are they continually being used in schools today? Perhaps school personnel

who administer such consequences see few other options to remove students from the classroom.

If the purpose of suspension and expulsion is to remove the student from the school environment to benefit the other students, perhaps in minor offense cases we should consider other options. This may range from providing an isolated space that simply allows a quiet place for students to work without enforcing additional punishments, to models that allow time for students to diffuse their energies and reflect on the situation. Schools could employ counselors, social workers, or even parent volunteers to talk with students about inflammatory situations and guide their reflections. If students can talk about the situation and participate in a structured reflection, they may be better able to understand and modify their behavior in similar instances in the future.

Suspensions and expulsions, for the participants in this study, often led to long periods of non-supervision that prompted more severe consequences and involvement with delinquency. Data from this study indicated students more likely saw this "punishment" as a reward of free time. Even worse, Dunbar (1999) relates, "a significant growth in student expulsions and suspensions has been attributed to an increase in drug and alcohol abuse, assault and battery, and weapons in the schools" (p. 2). Perhaps some of the suggested alternatives could better serve the objectives of suspensions/expulsions by working to understand the causes of inappropriate behaviors, instead of merely responding to the behaviors themselves. Likewise, allowing for expressions of anger may be a more appropriate response to managing student behavior.

Allow for Expressions of Anger

Students in this study spoke about the continual need to suppress their emotions, particularly anger, while at school. Such denial of emotion and a lack of ability to adequately express emotion carried negative consequences when these emotions finally did erupt. Instead of insisting anger be suppressed in schools, schools may better serve students by helping them express their anger in appropriate and healthy ways such as by talking and communicating anger in a structured setting. School has traditionally been a place that avoids conflict at all cost. Providing an appropriate time and space for students to deal with their emotions may prove to be a more effective means of managing those emotions than simply ignoring them. Suppression should not be the only

student option for controlling anger. Teaching students to address and resolve conflict may pare some of the problems that students experience in controlling their anger. Some anger management programs have been instilled in schools. The most successful models help students manage anger and frustration by helping them recognize that these emotions are present in conflict but that expressing these emotions can also trigger problematic responses from others. Successful programs help students learn the words necessary to identify emotions verbally and ways to express emotions in non-aggressive, non-inflammatory ways (Crawford & Bodine, 2001).

Diminish Labeling Effects

Research (e.g., Schur, 1971; Shoemaker, 1990) has consistently shown that labeling children as "delinquent" serves to reinforce their negative self-images. It may also prompt children to live up to an expectation of misbehavior. Participants in this study spoke about labeling effects imposed upon them by teachers when they returned to their schools. Participants found it hard to shed their "bad boy" images once they had been established. Feeling as if they were "watched under a microscope," they felt as if someone was always waiting for them to make a mistake. Labeling effects in schools are well documented in the literature (Schur, Shoemaker); we need to find ways to minimize labeling practices. Although this phenomenon is complex and far-reaching, one way to minimize labeling practices is to look at the social, emotional, and cognitive development of students within their individual contexts. Students who are sent to the "alternative school" are often referred to as the "bad kids," which only serves to reinforce negative labeling. If we could make traditional school a more successful place for students at-risk for delinquency, we might also reduce the negative images of those students. If these students could be served successfully in their traditional schools, through counseling and social services, we might eliminate the stigma and isolation effects that come with serving students in alternative schools. Working with teachers to help them reflect on their own labeling practices would better equip them to serve students at-risk for delinquency.

With the rise of youth crime (e.g., Burbach, 1999) and school violence (e.g., Garbarino, 1999), the need for understanding delinquency, in particular the role that school plays in delinquency, appears urgent. Today's youth, who are now filling prisons and morgues, can no longer wait for us to determine how to stop this downward spiral of delinquency. We must listen to what students want to tell us in our quest for improved school conditions that better meet the needs of students at-risk for delinquency.

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