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Best Practices for Successful In School Suspension Programs

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Abstract

The study analyzed the disciplinary strategy known as In School Suspension and the types of supports students receive in four suburban schools located in upstate New York. I interviewed five administrators at the middle school level. Through the interviews and tape-recording the data, I found that there are several differences among the methods implemented in the four middle schools. Some of these differences consisted of the referral process, resources provided, and the exit procedure from the In School Suspension room. This study illustrates that although there are an array of differences between In School Suspension programs, each participating school had some successful disciplinary procedures. Therefore, this study has implications for school administrators in creating In School Suspension programs that meet the needs of the students.

Introduction

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Best Practices for
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Introduction

Human beings are born without the ability to decipher right from wrong. Life experiences allow them to sort through what is and is not socially acceptable. Babies use a cause and effect strategy to learn about the world in which we live. Newborns are trained to cry until their needs are met. In this example, the cause may be hunger, and the effect is crying. This method is very effective at getting the attention of their caregiver. They use this same cause and effect strategy in the popular game of dumping their food on the floor and waiting for mom or dad's reaction. Eventually, they discover that their food belongs on their plate and not on the floor.

When children reach school age, educators must take on the responsibility of teaching their students appropriate behavior in the school setting and beyond. In the days

of one-room schoolhouses, the behavior was handled directly in the classroom. Teachers were notorious for slapping their students' hands with rulers, and making them balance books on their heads for an extended amount of time. In today's education, many schools have a room designated for students who misbehave known as the In School Suspension room. According to Morris and Howard (2003), the purpose is to isolate the student from his peers and classroom setting. The removal serves as the students' punishment and allows the teacher to continue the lesson.

Imagine a small room within a school separate from classrooms of learning where the walls are blank and desks are up against walls or divided by partitions. Inside students are often slumped over their desks catching up on sleep and others doodle as they wait for their busy work to be delivered by the teacher that admitted them. Others stare blankly at the pile of work in front of them feeling hopeless and unprepared to complete it. At the room's entrance is a large desk where an adult sits serving as a guard waiting for any new admittance, or those students exiting to use the bathroom. The adult often remains stationary at her desk and disciplines the kids by yelling: "No talking!" "Sit down!" "Wake up!" "Get to work!" According to Pokorski (2010), this adult is uncertified to teach, and as a result, is not prepared to effectively assist students with their work. Therefore, the level of productivity and learning within this particular and common method of discipline in today's schools is almost nonexistent. An In School Suspension room arranged in this manner is a telltale sign that the school uses a punitive approach because it prevents student interaction and further emphasizes the feeling of isolation.

In School Suspension is a widely used practice in schools that removes the student from the classroom due to his or her behavior. Suspensions can last anywhere from a day to several weeks. The original and predominate goal of In School Suspension programs in the late 1980s appeared to be “excluding the problem student from the regular classroom while continuing to provide some type of educational experience” (Morris & Howard, 2003, p. 156). In essence, the form of discipline temporarily removes the student misbehaving from the classroom activity in order to allow the remaining children the ability to continue to learn. It also enables the teacher to continue with the lesson. Although the environment for the teacher and the remaining students has improved, it is important to consider how this negatively affects the student being removed. Since students are removed from the classroom setting in order to be placed in In School Suspension, the goal of this study was to determine what type of education services students receive during In School Suspension in upstate New York. This is an essential area of study because researchers have found that the number of suspensions correlate with lower graduation rates (Bertrand & Pan, 2011).

In order to fully understand the purpose of the implementation of In School Suspension programs and their effectiveness, educators must ask what has been the cause of this change in disciplinary action? Since the introduction of In School Suspension programs, teachers are likely to respond to disruptive behavior by removing the child from the regular classroom and into a separate, often isolated place. The purpose of the separate space is meant to serve as a discipline technique in order to stop the behavior from occurring again. Yet this is based on the assumption that students want to be a part of the class. In School Suspension programs presume that students are getting what they

need in the classroom socially, academically, and emotionally. Ultimately, this belief fails to consider the possibility that some students, for various reasons, prefer to not be involved in the class and would rather be in a position that requires minimal work and effort on their part. Reasons for this attitude vary, but can be influenced by family or the lack of effort the teacher took to get to know the student (Kennedy, 2011; Skiba, Michael, & Nardo, 2000). Teachers who make their students feel like an important part of the classroom are less likely to encounter students who want to disassociate themselves from the group. The other purpose removing the disruptive student serves is that it allows the learning of the classroom to continue. Teachers are better able to focus on delivering the content successfully when behavioral issues have been eliminated from the room. The instant benefits are obvious for the teacher and the overall class but the question remains: How effective are such practices on remediating the behavior of the student removed? This question was the driving force as the different types of In School Suspension models were explored and critiqued for their effectiveness, along with alternative methods that could possibly eliminate the need for In School Suspension rooms.

Literature Review

Models of In School Suspension Programs

The four models of In School Suspension programs are the popular punitive model, as formerly depicted in the introduction, academic model, therapeutic model, and individual model (Morris & Howard, 2003). The punitive model is the most popular approach in today's schools. Its purpose is "to teach students to accept the consequences for their actions and to make them think about what they're doing" (Morris & Howard, 2003, p. 156). This model does not encompass counseling or a plan to prevent academic

failure. The environment does not promote learning or opportunities for student engagement to role-play desirable behaviors. In fact, the punitive model does little to diagnose the behavior, keep the student on track academically, or provide opportunities to practice substituting the behavior for a more appropriate one (Morris & Howard, 2003). This punitive model serves as a holding spot for the student while his or her time is being served. Dickinson and Miller (2006) as well as Pokorski (2010) found that ISS teachers are not certified, and this may negatively impact student progress. For example, in regards to the students' futures, "the likelihood of at least one suspension decreases the likelihood of completing high school by 17 percentage points; the likelihood of attending college by 16 percentage points and decreases the likelihood of being a college graduate by 9 percentage points" (Bertrand & Pan, 2011, p. 62). Also, according to Morris and Howard (2003), students are affected psychologically because their self-esteem and motivation is diminished. The punitive model fails to diagnose the source of the behavior which may cause students to repeat the same behavior and continue to be placed in ISS (Morris & Howard, 2003). This cycle can be detrimental, as "repeated suspension has been linked to a variety of negative outcomes for students, including academic failure, negative school attitudes, grade retention, and school drop-out" (Mendez & Knoff, 2003, p. 31). When students are excluded from the classroom they feel unwanted and unmotivated to change the opinions their teachers and peers have developed about them (Morris & Howard, 2003).

The academic model differs from the punitive model because it assumes that disciplinary problems are caused by academic deficits (Morris & Howard, 2003). Behavior is believed to improve with instruction in basic skills to promote academic

growth. The purpose of this model is supportive of the original 1980s goal in which the child is excluded from the regular classroom while still receiving an educational experience. This approach measures academic skills and diagnoses learning difficulties by a trained professional. The benefits of this model include providing individual instruction by a qualified teacher and support resources such as books, computers, and visual aids. To gain a thorough understanding of this model, it is beneficial to provide a situation. For example, based upon Morris and Howard's (2003) description of the academic model, if a student does not know his basic multiplication facts, he is more likely to become frustrated and may exhibit disruptive behaviors during math. In the academic model, the teacher and the In School Suspension instructor would collaborate to determine the cause of the behavior. The classroom teacher would share patterns of behavior and triggers that onset the behavior. An example of a trigger in this case, would be the transition from English to mathematics. Once it has been determined that the student lacks the understanding of basic multiplication facts, the In School Suspension teacher would work with the student on developing this skill. This requires re-teaching of the content, helpful strategies such as the nines trick when multiplying by 9s, and the lattice method. Support resources such as multiplication flash cards, times tables, and timed multiplication tests to increase speed would be provided as additional support resources. Pokorski (2010) writes, "If students are provided with the instruction they need while serving in school suspensions, we have broken the cycle of sending them back to classes and feeling lost in the content" (p. 58). According to Morris and Howard (2003), students in the academic model will have developed a sounder foundation that

will enable them to return to the classroom without feeling overwhelmingly behind. The goal is to help students get on track academically along with the rest of their peers.

The therapeutic model is similar to the academic model in that it seeks to find the source of the behavior (Morris & Howard, 2003). This particular model is encompassed with teacher and student involvement. Morris and Howard (2003) articulate the goal of this model is to uncover social and emotional problems the student may be experiencing that act as contributors to the misbehavior, for example alcoholism/drug abuse in the family, a familial death, and divorce. The therapeutic approach provides the opportunity to re-learn and role-play desirable classroom behaviors through individual and small group practices. It encourages personal reflection, coping strategies, student recognition and acknowledgement of problems (Morris & Howard, 2003). Morris & Howard (2003) explain, “As an important step in controlling the misbehavior, students are expected to accept responsibility, which usually only happens after they have had time to reflect on the issues” (p. 157). Some examples of reflection include the student and teacher discussions that center on uncovering the source of the student’s behavior. The environment of a therapeutic In School Suspension room encourages student and teacher interaction; desks are typically pushed together or contain circle tables for group discussions or activities. In School Suspension teachers walk about the room to help students in completing their work, and they also prepare and teach mini lessons that teach appropriate behavior. Teachers engage their students by making them accountable to share what they have learned by role-playing with their peers. These methods promote a new or improved behavior pattern in the student (Morris & Howard, 2003).

In response to the fundamental goal of In School Suspension, Sullivan (1989), an educational researcher, suggests that the purpose of In School Suspension programs is to help students gain the skills necessary to address concerns that are leading to their negative behaviors. Sullivan's (1989) recommendations directly correlate to the individual model (Morris & Howard, 2003). The individual model, according to Morris and Howard (2003), advocates that to determine the root cause of the students' behaviors, counseling and assessment are required. Since there are a substantial amount of potential causes to behavior, this suggested goal relates to the individual model. In order to determine the root cause of the behavior, the individual model typically requires a counseling component and assessment. This approach is also referred to as a type of Positive Behavior Support (PBS) because the child is not viewed as a bad child, but as a child who is exhibiting undesirable behaviors; these behaviors can be substituted with more appropriate ones (Fetter-Harrot, Steketee, & Dare, 2009). During the process of uncovering the source of behavior, an eventual behavior goal is set which differs from the previous replacement behavior. Furthermore, PBS suggests an independent and personal approach to solving undesirable classroom behaviors. This means offering a combined model approach that is tailored to the individual's needs. This particular method evaluates each student to determine which In School Suspension program(s) is appropriate for him or her and it takes into consideration the degree of his or her behavior. This model recognizes there are reasons for misbehaviors and the reasons for them are varied for each individual. It is common for students under the individual model, to have a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) and Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP). These documents contain observations of the unwanted behavior, temporarily

substitute it with an alternative goal behavior, and ultimately eliminate the behavior by replacing it with a more acceptable one (Fetter-Harrot, Steketee, & Dare, 2009).

Criticism of In School Suspension Programs

Critics would argue that In School Suspension is an overused disciplinary technique that fails to provide an appropriate education (Kellow & Dukes, 2008; Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Rose, 1998; Vavrus & Cole, 2002; Zhang, Katsiyannis, & Herbst, 2004). According to data gathered in the year 2000 from the U.S. Department of Education, the Office of Civil Rights indicated that there were “3,053,449 suspensions from U.S. schools” (Sisco, 2006, p. 2). A number this staggering has drawn attention to whether or not the basic civil rights of these students are being met.

Since the inception of zero-tolerance policies of the 1980s, “between 79% and 94%” of schools have adopted strict punishments for both minor and severe offenses (n.a. Out of School Suspension and Expulsion, 2003, p. 1). Zero-tolerance policies may explain why some students are being punished to the ultimate degree (Achilles, McLaughlin, Croninger, 2007). According to Mendez and Knoff’s (2003) research, “most out-of-school suspensions across the country are for minor infractions of school rules rather than for dangerous or violent acts” (p. 32). Ultimately, teachers are likely to send a student who is misbehaving to In School Suspension without considering the severity of the offense, simply because there is a room allocated for that. In School Suspension rooms are too often used in this manner as a quick fix for handling misbehavior. The room itself serves as a symbol of a predetermined consequence for misbehaviors. The American Bar Association (ABA) strongly argues that it is wrong to

mandate automatic suspension and ignore the specifics of each case. Teachers who fail to attempt to investigate what may be the cause of the behavior are ignoring the specifics.

Skeptics of In School Suspension find the term disruption to be ambiguous because it is subjective (Vavrus & Cole, 2002). For example, Morris and Howard (2003) define misbehavior as:

Behavior that interferes with the student's own learning and/or the educational process of others, and requires attention and assistance beyond that which traditional programs can provide or results in frequent conflicts of a disruptive nature while the student is under the jurisdiction of the school, either in or out of the classroom. (p.156)

However, according to Vavrus and Cole (2002), educators view misbehavior in different manners. In other words, the level of tolerance varies among educators. For instance, a child that continuously spins his pencil and makes occasional noises may be enough of a distraction to some teachers that in every effort to make it stop sends the child off to the In School Suspension room. Another teacher may take the time to observe the behavior and see if and how it affects the individual and the students around that particular student. Although the teacher may think the behavior is odd, he may find that it is not a big enough distraction to attempt to remediate. This type of teacher may investigate further and find that it actually helps that student concentrate without sacrificing the learning of others.

The context in which the disruption occurs is also subject to interpretation of its appropriateness. Vavrus and Cole (2002) state:

Classrooms are not the homogeneous social spaces described in local and national policies about school violence; therefore, the language or behaviors that a teacher defines as a disruption vary depending on the persons in a particular class and their social interactions. (p. 90)

Some students have difficulty remaining still for long periods of time and according to their Individualized Education Programs (IEPS) may need to stand or walk about the room during a lesson.

According to Dickinson and Miller (2006) and Pokorski (2010), schools are also criticized for the lack of experience of In School Suspension teachers. In School Suspension teachers should be certified and have a counseling background (Dickinson & Miller, 2006; Pokorski, 2010). However, due to budget constraints, unqualified adults too often accompany In School Suspension rooms. Due to harsh economic times, some schools have eliminated In School Suspension teacher positions and instead have placed cameras in the In School Suspension room. If any problem or student interaction is witnessed, the staff or principal will then go to the In School Suspension room to handle it (Dickinson & Miller, 2006).

Kennedy (2011), Mendez and Knoff (2003), and Vavrus and Cole (2002) conducted research to determine who is being suspended and why in order to find an explanation for the widening achievement gap. These researchers found that many students find that they are academically behind upon returning from their suspension due to the fact that they have not received equal opportunities for learning which may cause the student to feel overwhelmed. These studies indicate that minority groups, students with disabilities, and males, are victims of overrepresentation in In School Suspension.

With each suspension referral, they continue to fall further and further behind their peers (Kennedy, 2011; Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Vavrus & Cole, 2002). In addition to being academically affected, these students are socially affected in that they develop a reputation for being bad kids by teachers and peers (Kennedy, 2011). Mendez and Knoff's (2003) research revealed the following:

In 1997, although black students made up approximately 17% of all students enrolled in public education, they represented approximately 32% of all students who were suspended, and across the United States, Black students were suspended about 2.3 times more often than White students during the 1996-1997 school year. (p. 32)

The significant difference in suspension referrals is directly contributed to teacher biases that are driven by the racism that exists in society (Skiba, Michael, & Nardo, 2000; Vavrus & Cole, 2002). Vavrus and Cole (2002) explain the overrepresentation of Blacks:

Suspension we contend, frequently occurs as the result of violations of the particular normalized and authorized discursive code of a classroom, a code to which African-American and Latina students may not have as much access as their Anglo-American classmates. Disruptions that are interpreted by teachers as incidents worthy of suspension are often violations of these unspoken and unwritten rules of linguistic conduct that cannot be neatly delineated in school discipline policy. (p. 91)

White Americans benefit from white privilege and having access to the societal rules is a great advantage (Jacobs, 1999).

In addition to minorities, researchers have found that In School Suspension Programs target students with disabilities (Achilles, McLaughlin, & Croninger, 2007; Dickinson & Miller, 2006; Fetter-Harrot, Steketee & Dare, 2009; Kellow & Dukes, 2008; Rose, 1988; Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba, Michael, & Nardo, 2000; Vavrus & Cole, 2002; Zhang, Katsiyannis, & Herbst, 2004). Many studies have centered around disciplining students with disabilities especially due to challenging behavior that some students may display (Achilles, McLaughlin, & Croninger, 2007) and due to this behavior, the rate of suspensions for students with special needs are greater than students without disabilities (Zhang, Katsiyannis, & Herbst, 2004). Students with disabilities are overrepresented in suspension rooms because, “students with disabilities are more likely to commit offenses resulting in exclusion because of poor social skills, judgment, and planning as well as being less adept in avoiding detection” (Zhang, Katsiyannis, & Herbst, 2004, p. 337). However, school districts need to be cognizant of legal implications when suspending a student with a disability because there are required mandates that need to be followed that protect the education of students with special needs (Achilles, McLaughlin & Croninger, 2007; Dickinson & Miller, 2006; Fetter-Harrot, Steketee & Dare, 2009; Kellow & Dukes, 2008; Rose, 1988; Zhang, Katsiyannis, & Herbst, 2004). One of these mandates, as described by Dickinson and Miller (2006) explains:

If a school removes a special education student from a current placement for more than 10 days... the IEP team must do a Manifestation Determination, and inquiry into whether a student’s misbehavior is caused by, or related to, the student’s disability. (p. 75)

The above law illustrates that students cannot be suspended if their disability was the source of the behavior. According to the special education law under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), schools do not have to provide students with disabilities special education services the first ten days of a suspension so long as the school does not provide services to suspended students without disabilities. However, after the ten days, it is considered a change of placement and a Manifestation Determination is required. Removing a student with a disability from his/her normal setting is damaging enough, but Achilles, McLaughlin, and Croninger (2007), Dickinson and Miller (2006), Fetter-Harrott, Steketee, and Dare (2009), Kellow, and Dukes (2007), Rose (1988), Skiba (2002), and Zhang, Katsiyannis, and Herbst (2004) would agree that eliminating their services for a ten day period is the ultimate form of destruction in terms of their potential for continued academic success. It undeniably deprives them of their right to an appropriate education.

Researchers have found that there is a disproportionate amount of boys in today's In School Suspension rooms than girls, yet there is little explanation for it (Skiba, Michael, & Nardo, 2000). Skiba, Michael, and Nardo (2000) explain that "a number of studies have found that boys are over four times as likely as girls to be referred to the office, suspended, or subjected to corporal punishment" (p. 4). These findings illustrate that there needs to be more advanced research on how the gender gap contributes to the disproportionate referrals.

Classroom Management Strategies that Minimize Misbehaviors

According to my research, there are a multitude of preventative classroom management strategies that reduce misbehaviors, without jeopardizing the student's

education. Fetter-Harrot, Steketee, and Dare (2009) as well as Kennedy (2011) write about the importance of a positive student-teacher rapport. Developing a safe and welcoming classroom environment on the very first day of school is imperative as it sets the tone for the rest of the school year. Teachers must make an effort to get to know their students, which includes knowing what interests them and what drives their motivation. Establishing a positive relationship among students will decrease the likelihood that misbehaviors will arise because students will have developed a respect for their teachers and environment. Teachers must also hone in on their students' skills and talents. This knowledge allows students to understand that they matter (Fetter-Harrot, Steketee, Dare, 2009; Kennedy, 2011).

Alternative Disciplinary Approaches

Although strict penalties should remain for dangerous behavior, less severe consequences exist for minor incidents that maintain an individual's civil rights (Dickinson & Miller, 2006; Fetter-Harrot, Steketee, & Dare, 2009; Kennedy, 2011; Morris & Howard, 2003; Pokorski, 2010). The following examples are potential replacements to the traditional punitive/reactive approach that unlike In School Suspension, do not further bring learning to a standstill. These examples do not remove the student from the learning environment, instead the student is provided with structured time to reflect on his behavior.

According to Pokorski (2010), lunch detention serves as an effective disciplinary approach. Students are being punished by not being allowed to sit with their friends in the cafeteria and instead eat in a designated lunch detention room. Although they are isolated from their peers during their lunch time, they are not missing important

instructional time. Lunch detention can be given during the students' lunch period for a day or for the duration of a school week, depending upon the severity of the behavior. A certified adult is not required in order to work in this room (Pokorski, 2010).

Detention that is served after school hours is a potential In School Suspension replacement (Kennedy, 2011). This valuable one-on-one time with the student allows the teacher to express that she values the student as an individual and also allows the teacher to explain the reasons why the particular behavior the student exhibited is not appropriate. The student will most likely develop respect for the teacher as an individual as well, having spent valuable time with him/her and seeing the teacher out of the typical "teacher" element. Thus, it is important that the student serve the detention with the teacher that assigned it (Kennedy, 2011).

Saturday school is an alternative approach to serving In School Suspension (Dickinson & Miller, 2006). Students are required to attend school on Saturdays in addition to participating in their regular classes throughout the week. Academic tutoring is provided along with skill-building instruction to develop social skills. This approach requires the student to serve out his or her punishment without missing valuable class time like most In School Suspension programs (Dickinson & Miller, 2006).

Mini courses or skill modules can be assigned at an available time within the student's regular class schedule as a positive disciplinary consequence (Dickinson & Miller, 2006). These should cover topics such as appropriate communication skills, anger management strategies, social skills that include getting along with peers, and determining appropriate behavior for various settings. The ultimate goal is to facilitate a change in behavior; therefore, topics should be related to the student's inappropriate

behavior in order to be effective. Topics can be studied in multiple ways such as through assigned readings, oral reports, tests, and through workbooks or videos. Upon completion, students should have an increased awareness and knowledge about the topic and are better prepared to incorporate what they learned in future situations (Dickinson & Miller, 2006; Morris & Howard, 2003).

Lastly, behavior monitoring and charting academic progress with an assigned adult before or after school provides the student with a visual representation of growth. Meetings are focused on problem solving and personal issues that interfere with learning (Dickinson & Miller, 2006; Fetter-Harrot, Steketee, & Dare, 2009).

The Success of Alternative Disciplinary Approaches

A Positive Behavior Support (PBS) program can be successful with the right ingredients (Fetter-Harrot, Steketee, & Dare, 2009). These ingredients are also referred to as prerequisites or foundations that are required in order to allow these alternative options to work as disciplinary consequences. A consistent and thoroughly researched behavior system is the key to most successful programs aimed toward creating a school climate supportive of positive behavior. Pokorski (2010) writes, “implementing a schoolwide protocol or management system will certainly assist in this process. Students will hear the same dialogue in the classroom, in the administrator’s office, and during their suspension (p. 59).” All staff and teachers must be aware of the expected behavior within the school and be trained on responsive strategies for dealing with behaviors that are not acceptable. Teachers need to be clear with their classroom rules and be quick to correct the behavior. It is suggested that, “if we wish for students to behave a certain way or display certain behaviors, they must also help write the parameters and expectations of

the classroom” (Pokorski, 2010 p. 58). When students are engaged in helping to write the rules, they are more likely to remember what is expected of them and it gives them a sense of responsibility to obey them.

Conclusion

Mendez and Knoff (2003) strongly suggest that the title “In School Suspension” be removed completely from the vocabulary of the school’s administrators and educators because the title is inflicting. This will also eliminate student awareness of a room designated for suspension purposes (Mendez & Knoff, 2003). Teachers will have no choice but to do everything they can to make their students feel like an important part of the class, because there is no other option other than the classroom. In turn, students will positively respond to their teachers’ efforts in including them and making them feel welcome rather than unwanted (Morris & Howard, 2003).

Every student, no matter his or her race, sex, or ability/disability has the right to a free and appropriate education. The frequent use of suspension in today’s schools demands that educational researchers study the causes for suspension referrals as well as the consequences these programs have on those students being referred. Many believe the implementation of zero tolerance policies is to blame for the over-use of suspension for minor incidents (Achilles, McLaughlin, & Croninger, 2007). Dickinson and Miller (2006), Fetter-Harrot, Steketee, and Dare (2009), Kennedy (2011), Mendez and Knoff (2003), Morris and Howard (2003), Pokorski (2010), Skiba, Michael, and Nardo (2000), and Zhang, Katsiyannis, and Herbst (2004) argue that students referred to suspension are not receiving an education that is appropriate for them. It is true that classroom disruptions and misbehavior are common causes for In School Suspension referrals.

Schools that implement In School Suspension programs are often ridiculed for lacking a positive behavior approach due in part to the reality that most In School Suspension programs use punitive approaches versus consequential ones (Morris & Howard, 2003). A student who has experienced the consequential approach has learned how to replace his or her behavior with a more acceptable one and has developed a plan to prevent the behavior from occurring again. Although suspension is necessary for certain situations including bringing weapons to school, engaging in illegal activity, threatening one-self and others, and jeopardizing the safety of others, Mendez and Knoff (2003) argue that schools are abusing the system by suspending students for less-severe behaviors. Too often, suspension is being used to discipline students for truancy, attendance issues, classroom disruptions, and minor conflicts with peers (Mendez & Knoff, 2003). Researchers who oppose In School Suspension as a disciplinary strategy, would respond by affirming the need for district-wide protocols (Fetter-Harrot, Steketee, & Dare, 2009; Morris & Howard, 2003; Pokorski, 2010).

Some teachers believe all behaviors are intentional and they have the potential to create learning opportunities for everyone. Secondly, teachers who hold this belief feel that in exhibiting the behavior, students are attempting to send a message to the teacher in order to get what they need. Examples of these needs can include increased academic support for those who have academic deficits, counseling for those students whose parents are going through a divorce, and/or skills on how to behave appropriately. Sending a student to In School Suspension is not the solution to solving these complex issues. Unfortunately, some students simply misbehave as an avoidance tactic to not do their work and many common In School Suspension programs enable them to do so. In

this case, educators are failing these students. Furthermore, teachers who believe all behavior is intentional have adopted the positive behavior approach because they take the time to use disruptive moments as teachable moments not only for the student who is doing the disrupting, but for the other students as well. They also take the time to determine the cause of the behavior which can vary greatly (Fetter-Harrot, Steketee, & Dare, 2009; Morris & Howard, 2003; Pokorski, 2010). On the other hand, some teachers are less accepting of disruptions and instantly make the student a candidate for suspension without considering the causes. The latter example is known as the common punitive model (Morris & Howard, 2003).

According to available research, it is clear that critics of In School Suspension stress the importance of district wide protocols, with the understanding that some students, often those with disabilities, will not respond to district wide strategies and need to have individualized strategies. Having district wide protocols decreases the likelihood of confusion about what the school considers to be a disruption/misbehavior (Pokorski, 2010). As Vavrus and Cole (2002) noted, the term disruption can have numerous meanings. All teachers will have a basis for what appropriate behavior is and looks like. Some disruptive behavior is manageable, while others are not and teachers need to have some basis behind their judgment to determine which is which. For behaviors that are not appropriate, it is suggested that an individualized plan (Functional Behavior Assessment and Behavior Intervention Plan) is developed for that particular student in order to modify his or her behavior effectively without removing him or her from the classroom (Fetter-Harrot, Steketee, & Dare, 2009; Morris & Howard, 2003; Skiba, 2002).

Methodology

Context

The purpose of this study was to determine what type of educational services students receive during In School Suspension at the middle school level. Therefore, this study was conducted in four suburban school districts in upstate New York. In order to limit the number of variables in this study, only suburban districts are participated. The accessibility of these schools made it convenient for me to gather data because I have established relationships within these districts through substitute teaching.

Participants

To gather data for the study, I interviewed five school administrators among four school districts. The five administrators are all principals and/or assistant principals at middle schools.

Justin Friend (pseudonym) is the principal for both Middle School and High School A. He has been a principal for fifteen years at this district.

Jim Newtown (pseudonym) is the school principal for both Middle School and High School B. Mr. Newtown has been a principal at this district for seven years.

Chris Carlson, school principal (pseudonym) and Vanessa Pitler, assistant principal (pseudonym) have worked together for four years at Middle School C.

Matthew Marshall (pseudonym) has been principal at Middle School C for seven years He has experience teaching at the collegiate level.

Research Stance

I served as an interviewer during this study. I interviewed five administrators in four different suburban school districts. During the interview, I asked thirteen questions and tape-recorded the participants' responses.

I am certified in Childhood Education (grades 1-6) and am currently working towards earning a Master's of Science in Special Education. I am an active substitute teacher among the four school districts in upstate New York.

Method

The purpose of this study was to find out what types of educational services students receive during In School Suspension. The results of the interviews will determine what types of disciplinary approaches are being used in the schools, the success rates of the approaches, what the disciplinary actions look like, and what the roles and responsibilities of both the teachers and the students are during this time.

To begin the process of gathering my research, I first e-mailed all school principals informing them that I am a substitute teacher in their district and that I am collecting data on my research topic for my capstone project. When I received responses from the participants, we set up an appointment for the interview.

I asked 13 questions regarding the circumstances for referring a student to In School Suspension, the responsibilities of teachers, students, and administrators during a suspension, the accessibility of education services and resources for students, educational supports available for students with disabilities who are in In School Suspension, and whether or not In School Suspension teachers are certified (see appendix for questions).

Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants

I received consent for this study by emailing the administrators and asking them if they were willing to participate. When I met with the administrators I provided them with two consent forms, one in which they signed the form and returned to me, and the other in which they kept for their records. Throughout the interview process, administrators were aware that their participation was voluntary. The rights of the participants are being protected because pseudonyms are used and the names of the participating school districts are not disclosed.

Data Collection

Data was collected during this study in order to determine the effectiveness of supports that are provided to middle school students who are placed in In School Suspension. Data was gathered through interviews. I interviewed a total of five administrators, among the four suburban districts that participated in the study. During the interviews I tape-recorded the responses of all five administrators, when I had received their consent to do so. By recording the interviews, I was able to listen to the tape several times in order to further analyze the participants' responses. I also took written notes during all four of the interviews. Since I took these notes, I was able to review them when analyzing my data.

Data Analysis

To analyze my data, I listened to the interviews again. While re-listening to each interview, I took detailed notes regarding the In School Suspension protocols and services that each school district employed. After thoroughly taking notes, I looked for commonalities and differences among the responses by color-coding them with a highlighter. I also recorded quotes that were important to my study. Next I made a T

chart listing the major points that I wanted to focus on in order to determine the effectiveness of each In School Suspension Program. One side was labeled successful traits, and the other side was unsuccessful traits. I listed the traits of each school based on whether or not I felt they were effective as evidenced in the research that I had read and labeled them by school district. By clearly organizing the responses by school districts, comparing and contrasting the different districts, and then creating a T-chart by referencing the research articles, I was able to find patterns among the data.

Findings and Discussion

Upon reviewing and analyzing the data from the four interviews, several similarities and differences were observed. A similarity that was found across all four districts, at the middle school level, was the manner in which students were made aware of the school's code of conduct. Each district provided opportunities for the students to recognize what appropriate and inappropriate behavior entailed and the consequences of not following the rules. For example, all four districts had an assembly during the first week of school in which the administrators discussed proper behavior. In addition, each district provided the students with planners and in the planner, the code of conduct is explained, along with the consequences. Therefore, each student had a clear understanding of the behavioral expectations.

All four districts had an In School Suspension room. For three out of the four districts that I interviewed, the In School Suspension Room was shared between the middle school and the high school. In one of the districts, the middle school had its own In School Suspension Room. A shared In School Suspension room with high school students that are older than middle school aged student's sends the message that

misbehaving is a common norm. Middle school students tend to look up to the high school students. Perhaps, having separate In School Suspension rooms is beneficial as it could help middle school students have the opportunity to receive age appropriate support and guidance without the worry that high school students are judging them.

Mendez and Knoff (2003) recommend that the title “In School Suspension” room not be used so that this designation does not have a negative connotation. Only one district that I interviewed had a unique name for their In School Suspension room. They called it the “reset room.” The administrator stated the following about the name change:

We want it to be a suspension center and an alternative education center for kids that struggle under the traditional confines. I felt the need to change the name entirely. This year we revamped it all and gave it a fresh coat of paint. We named it the Reset Center because everyone gets to go down there and reset their focus, and I am so thrilled with it right now. (Friend, Personal Interview, March 7, 2013)

The above quote from the administrator illustrates the importance of providing a positive setting for students to reflect upon their behaviors and making changes that support their education and social development. The set up that is found in Friend’s school relates to the works of Fetter-Harrot, Steketee, and Dare (2009) who write about the importance of a positive school climate when students are disciplined. Unlike Friend’s school, the other three districts used the title In School Suspension room.

Along with the name of the room, I also acquired information regarding the size of the In School Suspension room. One administrator explained that when he first became principal of the middle school, the In School Suspension room was a large space; however, he moved the In School Suspension room to the old English as a Second

Language room and moved the English as a Second Language room to a regular sized classroom. The reasoning for this was because the administrator felt that the “size of the room [In School Suspension room] indicated that we wanted a lot of people inside there” (Marshall, personal interview, March 18, 2013). I agree that the size of the room is a reflection of its intended purpose. For example, if it is too large of a space, its implications are that many students can be accommodated in it. If the space is too small however, it could feel jail like and most likely would not be able to store all the supplies and materials necessary for the students to accomplish their work. Cramped In School Suspension rooms tend to reflect the punitive model (Morris & Howard, 2003) of In School Suspension as it sends the message that the space mainly serves as a holding spot for the students while their time is being served. Most students under the punitive model spend their time catching up on sleep, completing tedious busy work or work that is past due. Some teachers drop off work for their students that consist of material that is currently being covered in the classroom. However, students in In School Suspension are unprepared to complete it effectively because they have not had the opportunity to learn the content. Jim Newtown admits that students in In School Suspension “are missing out on direct instruction” (Newtown, personal interview, March 8, 2013). When learning is brought to a halt, it adversely impacts the student. Instantaneously, the student’s self-esteem is diminished and motivation is stalled.

What is interesting about the punitive model is that students typically enjoy having the day off. They learn what they need to do in order to get the day off again in the future. As a result, many of the same kids continue returning to In School Suspension. Marshall explained the following:

Kids will tell you they intentionally act out so they don't have to do regular schoolwork. I don't have any data to prove this, but I suspect some of the students actually plan to act out in different classes at the same time so that they can get into the In School Suspension room (Marshall, personal interview, March 18, 2013)

Marshall's comment supports the cyclical nature of an ineffective In School Suspension program. Furthermore, it supports the idea that the space really needs to be thoughtfully arranged with just enough room to accommodate computers, supplies, student materials, and tables so that the In School Suspension teachers can effectively collaborate with students.

Dickinson and Miller (2006) as well as Pokorski (2010) explained that In School Suspension teachers should be certified and have a counseling background in order to support the students both academically and emotionally while they are in the In School Suspension room. Out of the administrators that I interviewed, only one district has a certified special education teacher in the In School Suspension room. The other middle schools have aides. Justin Friend intentionally hired a certified special education teacher for his program so that the teacher can serve as the service provider for individuals with disabilities. In response to what makes a good person to have running a successful program, Justin Friend's response included:

You have to have standards and be strict but also find a way for kids to respect you. It's all about the person. The common denominator as far as how successful it is, is the person you have running it. A lot of times I knew who the right person would be, I just didn't want to pull them out of the classroom and sacrifice them,

but you just have to do it. It impacts your whole school when you have a program that's running right. (Friend, Personal Interview, March 7, 2013)

The above quote is referring to the school environment as a whole. Friend stresses the importance of maintaining an environment that is supportive of student success.

There were also differences and similarities among the referral processes that are used. For example, in three out of the four districts, teachers can send students to the In School Suspension room; however, in one of the districts that I visited, teachers have to refer students to the administrator and the administrator would first talk to the teacher and then to the student. By checking in with the student, the administrator is able to build a stronger rapport with the student. In reference to districts that allow teachers to send students directly to the In School Suspension room, Chris Carlson, the principal of the school that refuses to employ this technique, stated that "I can't handle you is the message the teacher is sending to student when kid is sent out" (Carlson, personal interview, March 12, 2013). By talking to the student, Carlson believes there are positive benefits when the administrator can have a conversation regarding the student's actions and can then determine the student's consequence for his/her misbehavior. The administrator assigns consequences depending upon the severity of the student's behavior. These consequences can entail lunch detention, staying in the main office for the remainder of a class, or time spent in the In School Suspension room. Also, by making these decisions, the administrator has the final authority, without putting pressure on the teachers to decide what the consequence should be. Vanessa Pitler, who is the assistant principal at Chris Carlson's school, added that this process is thoughtful because the teacher does not have to spend time during class instruction to determine the student's

consequence, and the administrator has the opportunity to investigate the student's behavior as well as to recognize patterns that this student has exhibited in other classes. This method of having the administrator decide on the consequences of student misbehavior avoids over-use of the In School Suspension room. Teachers are less likely to send a student out of the classroom for minor behaviors in this method because of administrator involvement. Whereas in the other districts, because of the different tolerance levels of teachers and the lack of direct administrator involvement, teachers are more likely to send students directly to the In School Suspension room as a quick fix, thus contributing to the cyclical nature of In School Suspension. I believe educators must be aware of the alarming disproportionate referral rates of students based on race, gender, and disability. Having such awareness will force teachers to be more attentive to their own biases.

In response to the referral process in his district, Marshall stressed that In School Suspension is a necessary process if "in spite of the teachers' interventions" the misbehavior continues and is distracting other students from learning. (Marshall, personal interview, March 18, 2013). Marshall is referring to classroom management strategies that help to minimize misbehaviors. For instance, classroom arrangement and the overall function of the classroom must serve both the teacher and the students. When students are in close proximity to the teacher, and can move about freely to access materials, their overall behavior tends to be more acceptable because the environment is supportive of their needs. Transitions from one activity to the next, if used correctly, can avoid disruptions and fidgety behavior during instructional times. These activities can be as simple as changing locations from their desks to the floor to indicate a change in

instruction. Another possibility is to allow for stretch breaks, or bathroom breaks, which provide an opportunity to move. These examples of transitions will allow the students the ability to return to the task and to focus. Differentiating instruction to meet all learning styles is imperative. Instruction needs to be challenging yet achievable for everyone. Disruptive behavior can occur if the material is too hard for the student and also if it is too easy for the student. When instruction is too difficult, students will give up. If the content is simple, students will become bored. Effective teachers strive to anticipate their students' needs and implement preventative strategies in order for their students to achieve success.

Once a student is placed in the In School Suspension room, different districts have varying expectations of student accomplishments in the designated room and the role of the teacher and aide. The common theme for expectations, however, included staying attentive and awake, being respectful, and completing schoolwork. The main difference was the way in which the work was expected to be completed and how students' time was spent upon work completion. For example, in one school district, the students were given one assignment at a time. The students sit at tables in this school district in order to have direct access to the certified special education teacher. This allows them to receive support and instruction from the teacher to accomplish their assignments. After the students complete one assignment, they receive their next assignment. The purpose of this timing of the assignments is to provide the students with ample time to thoroughly complete an assignment accurately, as well as to keep track of each homework assignment. Students are less likely to become overwhelmed with the load of schoolwork than if it were to be given to them in a stack. The administrator of this school phrased

this process as “meticulous control over work production” (Friend, personal interview, March 7, 2013). After the students complete all of their assignments, they work on practice regents exams and also participate in community service projects. This prevents boredom and keeps students productive while serving their time in In School Suspension. In the other three districts that I visited, students were given a pile of work and were expected to stay awake and complete the tasks. After the students completed their assignments, the aides in the In School Suspension Room would collect the assignments and place them in the teachers’ mailboxes. After students complete all of his/her tasks, they are expected to read and remain seated, without falling asleep. This method is ineffective because as Matthew Marshall implied in his interview, kids would rather have the day off than complete their regular schoolwork.

Along with different student expectations in the In School Suspension Room, there are also different expectations for the teachers and aides across the four districts. Three of the four districts revealed that the aide’s responsibility is to supervise the students, take attendance, and keep the room orderly and quiet. Although, the responsibility of the special education teacher at Friend’s district includes these elements as well, his duties are more complex. He is responsible for keeping the schoolwork organized for every student, assist them in completing it, provide supportive materials, maintain communication among teachers, parents, and administrators, provide services to special education students, provide students with old regents exams for practice, assign community service hours on school campus, and be the student advocate. Each of the three districts other than Friend’s school admitted that the role of the In School Suspension teacher is not a rewarding job. I believe the lack of responsibility and student

involvement is what makes it not rewarding. They are working within the punitive model, as described by Morris and Howard (2003), which is not supportive of student interaction. Their job is boring because their responsibilities enable them to sit behind a desk all day. They also see many of the same kids due to the reality that the program is punitive, not consequential.

Another program that correlates to the findings of Fetter-Harrot, Steketee, and Dare (2009) of creating a positive school climate, is the initiation and follow through of students' behaviors through re-entry plans. One of the school districts that I interviewed has a mandated re-entry plan for students to exit the "reset room." The purpose of the plan is to allow a smooth transition back to the classroom setting. The principal explained that when students are in the "re-set room" grades go up and students will be transitioning back to their classrooms. The principal, parents, teachers, and student meet together to formulate the re-entry plan that outlines student's expectations and goals that the student needs to meet when he/she exits the "re-set room." This is important because the student is held accountable both from home and school. The other three districts that I visited do not provide a re-entry plan; instead students leave the In School Suspension room and return to the classroom.

	Middle School and High School A (Justin Friend)	Middle School and High School B (Jim Newtown)	Middle School C (Chris Carlson and Vanessa Pitler)	Middle School D (Mathew Marshall)
Name of In School Suspension Room	Re-set room	In School Suspension room	In School Suspension room	In School Suspension room
Teacher Certification	Certified special education teacher	Aide	Aide	Aide
Referral Process	Teacher sends student to Re-set room. Behavior report form goes to Dean of Students, Dean of Students fills out their part and calls home immediately.	Teacher sends student directly to In School Suspension room with work to complete. The In School Suspension teacher is notified and releases student at the end of the period. Teacher is required to call home at the end of the school day.	Teacher sends student to office, administrator waits for teachers side of the story, talks with student, and then the administrator decides consequence. A behavior report is completed and sent home to parent.	Teacher calls In School Suspension teacher to inform the student is coming, and the reason why. Teacher sends student with work. Teacher fills out behavior form at end of the school day and calls home.
Work Completion and Student Responsibility while in In School Suspension Room	Complete assignments one at a time, when work is complete take practice regents tests, study, and community service hours	Complete their work and be quiet	Be productive, cooperative, and respectful. There are different expectations depending on student (some are not in the right frame of mind to complete schoolwork).	Complete schoolwork, when finished read.
Re-Entry Plan	Formal plan is written especially if the behavior is a	If student has spent longer than a class period in In	Contact to parents	None-Response to Intervention (RTI) is

	<p>pattern. The re-entry plan is signed off by principal, parent, and student. The principal then checks in with teacher to see how the transition to classroom has been going. The purpose of this is to see if the student is being given a hard time for what he/she did or if student is being glorified by peers.</p>	<p>School Suspension, then there is a conference with parents.</p>		<p>planned for the future</p>
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Conclusions

In this research, the types of In School Suspension models in four suburban school districts in upstate New York were analyzed. The research question that guided this study was: What educational services and resources are students provided during In School Suspension? The findings of the study provide a roadmap for administrators to consider when implementing In School Suspension programs, particularly at the middle school level.

The participants in this study were five administrators. By interviewing the administrators and thoroughly analyzing their responses to the questions that I had written, it was evident that there is a lack of consistency between In School Suspension procedures throughout the four suburban middle schools; however, successful practices,

which enabled students to receive support and resources in the In School Suspension rooms, were found.

One successful aspect that was identified in this study was regarding the In School Suspension room supervisor. One of the schools in this study has a certified special education teacher in the In School Suspension room, whereas the other three schools have aides. It is important for schools to have a certified teacher in this setting because they can provide adequate academic instruction and support to the students.

According to Mendez and Knoff (2003), the name of the In School Suspension room is significant. Three of the schools in this study called this location the In School Suspension room; however, one of the schools named it the “Reset Room.”

Administrators may wish to rename the In School Suspension room so that there is not a negative connotation, which may cause students to experience lack of motivation. A positive name, such as the Reset Room can help students recognize that they can experience success.

Three of the four districts have a similar referral process when it comes to admitting students to the In School Suspension room. Teachers have the ability to send a disruptive student to the In School Suspension room with work to complete. One district however, does not allow teachers to refer a student to the In School Suspension room. The procedure the teachers must follow in this district is to send the disruptive student to the office. The teacher is then expected to describe the situation that occurred to the administrator, and it is the administrators’ duty to determine the consequence. The administrators at this district recognize the varying tolerance levels of teachers and use this procedure to avoid overuse of the In School Suspension room. School districts may

wish to adopt this procedure because it prevents In School Suspension from being used as a consequence for minor infractions or as a quick fix for the teacher. This approach steers away from the one-size fits all programs of district-wide protocols and zero-tolerance policies and requires conducting an analysis and considering the individual when determining which type of consequence is most appropriate for the situation.

The way in which down time is handled during a suspension is reflective of the successfulness of the In School Suspension program. One district in particular recognizes that after the student has completed his or her required work, the student can participate in other activities during In School Suspension, rather than just spend the remaining time at his or her seat. Therefore, at this school, students take old Regents exams and complete community service projects. The community service hours can include landscaping the grounds of the school or helping out in the cafeteria at the intermediate school. The other three districts simply expect their students to stay awake and read when their work is complete. Administrators should consider filling the down time more purposefully so that students do not see In School Suspension as a day off from school.

Among the four school districts, one district takes special care in ensuring a smooth transition back to the classroom after a student has spent time in the In School Suspension room. It is not until the student is caught up on his/her academics that he/she is able to return to the classroom. When his/her grades reflect the ability to return to class, the administrator sends an email to all of the student's teachers informing them. There are many purposes for notifying the teachers. First, it allows the principal to share any growth and successes that the student has experienced. Most importantly, it opens

the door for communication between teacher and administrator. This imperative step shows the teachers that the administrator is accessible. Finally, a formal written plan is required and must be signed by the student, teacher, and parent so that everyone is aware of the expectations upon the student's return to the classroom setting. Several days later, the administrator at this school will follow up to see how the student is doing. He is checking to see if peers are glorifying the student or if the student's peers are giving the student a difficult time for what he/she has done. Two of the four districts believed a transition plan was not necessary since their In School Suspension room is not typically used for more than two consecutive days. A contact to parents always happens. However, there is currently no follow-up procedure in place. The remaining district admitted that the student is just released when their time is up and that connecting with parents directly is difficult within the population of this district. It is recommended that administrators make every effort to have open lines of communication among teachers and that there are several opportunities to create that home and school connection for the best interest of the students.

This study contained limitations. One of the limitations was time. Since this study had to be completed within a certain amount of time, I did not have a larger participation pool. In the future, I would interview more administrators in order to gain data regarding the different types of In School Suspension procedures and programs. Another limitation of this study was that referrals and students' grades were not collected. In the future, I would collect this data so that I would be able to measure the effectiveness of academic support in the In School Suspension setting.

The study opens the door for further investigations regarding the lack of uniformity of In School Suspension programs. For example: How does classroom management strategies or lack there of impact the frequency of students in In School Suspension? How are In School Suspension supervisors held accountable for student progress in the In School Suspension room? Therefore, more studies need to be constructed to address such questions in the field.

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Appendix

In School Suspension Interview Questions

1. How are students made aware of the school's code of conduct?
2. Does your school have an In School Suspension Room? If no, why not? If yes, can you describe the setting?
3. What type of behaviors/actions result in a referral to In School Suspension (ISS)?
4. What type of procedure is followed for referring students to In School Suspension?
5. Whose responsibility is it to carry out the disciplinary action?
6. What is the student's role/responsibility during ISS?
7. What is the classroom teacher's role during this time? Is there communication between ISS and classroom teacher?
8. What responsibilities does the ISS teacher have?
9. Is the In School Suspension teacher certified?
10. What resources do the students have access to (computers, books, tutors, instruction, counselors)?
11. Do students with disabilities receive any additional support/materials and services while they're in ISS? (If so, please provide examples)
12. Is there an action plan to follow up on the behavior that caused the referral for disciplinary action?
13. What measures are taken to ensure a smooth transition back to the classroom setting?

