

New Research in Educational Leadership

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Across the nation, quality leadership and positive school climate are critical to the success of every principal, student, and school. As a result, this study examined the Positive Intervention Strategies That Reduce Referral Reports in 7th and 8th Grade Classes.

Positive Intervention Strategies Reduce Referral Reports in 7th and 8th Grade Classes

Abstract

This action research study evaluated the positive effects of strategies to change disruptive behavior in a junior high school learning environment. Data were gathered for the purpose of enlightening junior high school teachers to the fact that there are effective alternatives to their traditional way of handling classroom management. From this research, junior high school teachers acquired information that would help them implement new and more effective classroom management strategies that would decrease their number of student office referrals. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected for this action research study. Quantitative and qualitative data had to be collected in order to answer four research questions, test two hypotheses, and reach conclusions. Data were collected from teachers who taught seventh and eighth grade junior high students. Quantitative data were collected from student office referrals. Surveys were used for the collection of qualitative data. Data were collected over a four-week period before the intervention and over an eight-week period during the intervention. A comparison was made between the data collected before the intervention and the data collected during the intervention. Teachers used their customary strategies to manage their classrooms before the intervention. Research-based classroom management strategies and a researcher-designed classroom management behavior log were used during the intervention period. The analysis of the data showed that the intervention had a positive impact. A t-test analysis of the collected data revealed that the mean of the total referrals during the intervention was statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ significance level as compared to the total of student office referrals collected before the intervention.

Introduction

Research has proven that the junior high school learning environment can be more conducive to learning when effective classroom management strategies are implemented (Anfara, 2010). In essence, effective classroom management strategies provide access to effective teaching and learning in the classroom. Classroom management is sometimes referred to as classroom discipline. Teachers focus on the positive structures of classroom management as being related to discipline because discipline is necessary in order to maintain a stable classroom environment. These elements have existed within the educational arena for years and have always been factors that had some influence on the learning environment. For example, polls designed to evaluate the opinions of public educational institutions (Rose & Gallup, 2006) consistently recognized classroom management/school discipline as a major problem. Moreover, in a more recent Gallup Poll of 2011, school discipline was paralleled to over-crowdedness and lack of parental support. This was second only to a lack of financial support (Phi Delta Kappa, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

The use of present classroom management strategies by junior high teachers at the research site has been ineffective as noted by the excessive number of students being referred to the office for disciplinary action. The research intervention was designed to change the classroom management strategies of junior high school teachers by addressing the problem of excessive office referrals, which are instruments used to transfer students out of the classroom and into the office.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this action research study was to determine how and to what extent the use of research-based classroom management strategies and a researcher-designed classroom behavior management log for changing disruptive behavior in a junior high school learning environment would bring about an improvement in teachers' classroom management skills to decrease the number of office referrals of junior high school students.

Research Questions

This action research study aimed to determine whether a decrease in the number of student office referrals written by junior high school teachers would occur while implementing research-based classroom management strategies and a researcher-designed classroom management behavior log. The following research questions and hypothesis guided the action research study:

- R₁ Can the use of strategies from research-based classroom management Interventions by junior high teachers decrease student office referrals of junior high student?
- Ho₁ There is a statistically significant difference in the number of student office referrals written before interventions while using current classroom management strategies as compared to the number of student office referrals written during interventions using research-based classroom management strategies and a classroom management behavior log.

Nature of the Study

This action research study utilized qualitative and quantitative data in order to determine the impact of strategies to change disruptive behavior in a junior high school learning environment. The collaborative action research method of Argyris and Schon (1996) was used to plan and implement the intervention for the study. Junior high school teachers (those teaching seventh and eighth graders) were targeted for the intervention. The teachers voluntarily participated in the study, understanding that participation meant no compensation. Moreover, no penalties were given for not participating or if anyone chose to opt-out while the intervention was implemented.

The qualitative data collected in this study was the following: (a) a pre- and post-test survey pertaining to present strategies being used; (b) a survey pertaining to the use of choice theory/learning circles as a strategy; (c) a survey pertaining to the use of dialogue journals as a strategy; and (d) the use of a classroom management behavior log as a strategy. The collection of quantitative data was important to determine whether the intervention made a positive impact by decreasing the number of student office referrals written by the junior high school teachers.

Review of Methodological Issues

This is an action research study making use of quantitative and qualitative data to determine how and to what extent strategies to change disruptive behavior in a junior high school learning environment will decrease the number of student office referrals of students in seventh and eighth grades. The building of relationships between teacher-student and student-student were important for the subjects of this research study at the particular research site. The intervention choices can be justified based on the fact that the consequences of excessive office referrals are affecting all stakeholders of the research site, but especially teachers and students. According to Beaty-O'Ferrall, et al. (2010), one of the major elements of effective classroom management is the development of a valued relationship between the teacher and the students in the classroom. Culturally, the organization strives to maintain a culture of learning, but with student behavior problems, as labeled by the junior high teachers, the culture of the school is negatively affected.

Systemic thinking must become foundational for the continued success of the organization. According to Senge, et al. (2000), the whole of an organization is comprehended and addressed while examining the interrelationship between the parts.

Based on the research of Senge, et al. (2000), as related to the current action research study, the seventh- and eighth-grade students are pieces of the whole organization. Additionally, Senge's findings were associated to the study in that failing to include what occurs with these grade levels as not affecting the whole will not lead to the appropriate actions needed to correct the problem. The manner in which teachers at the higher grade levels handled discipline was not as detrimental to the organization as what the seventh- and eighth-grade teachers were doing.

Research has indicated that teachers' actions in their classrooms have twice as much of an effect on student achievement as assessment policies, community connection, or staff collegiality; and a large part of teachers' actions involves the management of the classroom (Beatty-O'Ferrall, et al., 2010). According to Klassen (2010) teachers without effective classroom management skills are negatively affected in their daily routines because they must stop teaching in order to write referrals and, oftentimes, it is difficult to get back on track after such interruptions. Christie, et al. (2005) declared that students are affected because they are deprived of knowledge when they are not in the classroom and often become at-risk for dropping out. It was inferred by McIntosh, et al. (2010) that parents and the community as a whole are not at ease when students are out of school, and there are complaints from parents about students being out of class or school unnecessarily for very minor infractions or violations or rules. Christie, et al. (2005) concluded that knowing the whereabouts of children is important to parents, the community, and the entire organization..

Research Design

The most common and familiar approach is the Triangulation Research Design (Creswell, Plano, Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003). The Triangulation Research Design allows for the use of both quantitative and qualitative data pertaining to action research. The use of the Triangulation Design has assisted researchers in understanding the research problem by allowing for the collection of dissimilar, but corresponding data, on the same topic. This study was designed to change the classroom management strategies of junior high school teachers due to the observed writing of excessive student office referrals by the teachers of the research site. Student office referrals are the instruments used for the transference of students from their regular classrooms to the administrative office for misbehaving or breaking established rules and procedures in the classrooms. In order to change the classroom management strategies of the junior high school teachers, professional development had to be provided pertaining to effective research-based classroom management strategies and a researcher-developed classroom management behavior log. The research-based classroom management strategies combined Choice Theory with Learning Circles and Journal Writing between the teachers and their students. The researcher-developed instrument used in the study was a classroom management behavior log.

The professional development transpired after student office referrals on junior high school students considered as misbehaving in the classrooms were collected from these junior high school teachers for four weeks. During this four-week period, teachers were not aware that these office referrals would be used as part of the action research study, and 122 were written. Data were collected from teachers using their pre-existing trends of classroom management before the intervention. Moreover, the teacher participants were not informed of the number of referrals given to students during this time. Teachers were not made aware that data were being collected because an intentional decrease in the number of student office referrals written by the teachers based on their current classroom management strategies could have skewed the results.

There were a total of twelve teachers participating from grades seven and eight, plus the school's secretary in the capacity to take notes/minutes. The twelve participants had agreed to four hours of training during a first session and for three hours of training each day for a total of five days during the next week, which was the week of spring break. However, on the Monday of spring break week, they completed the total professional development in five hours, for a total of nine hours. Since the session on Monday consistently advanced with minimum replications of the presentation, the participants inquired as to whether they could remain beyond the agreed-upon time of three hours in an effort for completion. Thus, the professional development was completed on that day. The implementation of the strategies began the following week for eight weeks after the students and teachers returned from spring break.

During the first professional development session, the participants were informed that data collection of student office referrals from the four previous weeks would be used for comparison to student office referrals written during the intervention. The participants were then introduced to the classroom management strategies through a visual presentation along with hand-outs.

The presentation outlined how to implement the intervention, while giving participants the opportunity to evaluate their own classroom management strategies. Student office referrals, already on file but with names blacked-out, were given to the participants, who then evaluated how the strategies could have prevented the office referrals from originally being written. Those office referrals were grouped into the three different strategies that would have best benefitted the students to remain in the classroom. Other activities included further explanations and answers to questions asked pertaining to the implementation.

The second professional development session started with the school's secretary presenting notes from the previous session by giving each participant a copy of the notes. With these copies in hand, an oral review of what had taken place during that session was discussed by everyone present. Following the recap, the participants had the opportunity to role play by acting out teacher-student scenarios.

During the role play for Choice Theory and Learning Circles, those acting as teachers used specific questions to ask those acting as students whenever their behavior was inappropriate. Those acting as students were working in groups to complete assignments that required all of their cooperation. The negatives and positives of how the teachers handled the misbehaving participants were discussed.

During the role play for Journal Writing, the participants acting as teachers made up writing prompts to start the dialogue with teachers acting as students. Those acting as students were instructed to respond to the writing prompt by including additional information, such as questions, family matters, academic problems, problems with other teachers, and secrets, for example. The roles were performed in the same reversed manner. The daily writing prompts, for ten days, to be used during the implementation of the intervention were discussed.

Copies of the classroom management behavior log were given to each participant. An example of how the log should be completed was also given. Participants practiced filling out the log. The infractions for which the log should be used were also discussed.

Target Population, Sampling Method, and Setting

Target Population and Sampling Method

The target population was seventh- and eighth-grade teachers along with their students. Special education teachers were included in the sample because they instruct regular students daily. All teachers who made contact with the seventh and eighth grade students were included in the population. All seventh- and eighth-grade students were included.

Sample size - There were twelve teachers: five men and seven women. Two of the twelve teachers were special education teachers, who not only served as resource teachers for special education students, but for regular students as well. One-hundred-thirty students were included in the sample size. Of those 130 students, fifty-nine were seventh graders, and seventy-one were eighth graders. Among the fifty-nine seventh graders were twenty-four boys and thirty-five girls. The eighth graders consisted of thirty-one boys and forty girls.

Setting - The setting was a 7th–12th grade public high school. Of the seventh- and eighth-grade students included in the study, approximately twenty-seven students (to one teacher) were in the classroom during a class period. The teachers received a daily 90-minute planning period. Each day, the students attended four classes, and the block-scheduling allowed for 90 minutes in each class. Classes taught included science, math, English and history.

Instrumentation

The collection of data came from seven sources. Quantitative data were collected from student office referrals that were written before and during the intervention. Student office referrals were used as a measurement tool for the number of referrals received before the intervention. Student office referrals were also used as a measurement tool for the number of referrals received during the intervention. Only the student office referrals of those teachers volunteering to participate in the study were used.

In reference to qualitative data, first, a survey of current classroom management strategies, which was used as the pre- and post-survey, was given to the teachers. This source helped answer the research questions by comparing teachers' current trends of classroom management with different research-based strategies. Secondly, a survey surrounding the use of Choice Theory with Learning Circles was given to the teachers after the completion of this particular strategy, which lasted for two weeks. This survey added to the positive evidence from this research-based strategy that the option to make favorable choices is readily available to them.

Results

Table 1 presents the overall data collected to test H_{01} : “There is a statistically significant difference in the number of student office referrals written before interventions while using current classroom management strategies as compared to the number of student office referrals written during interventions using research-based classroom management strategies and a classroom behavior management log”. The data in Table 1 demonstrates the differences in the number of referrals written before and during the intervention. More student office referrals were written in a four-week period than in an eight-week period, and the results of the analysis of this data were significant because of these differences. Data pertaining to the students’ office referrals written by the nine participating teachers before the intervention and those written during the intervention are included and labeled as such in Table 1 below. The teachers are only identifiable by a numerical code. Student office referrals were received and counted collectively, as well as individually for each teacher. Within each teacher’s file, the student office referrals were grouped according to the particular classroom management strategy being implemented during a specific two week period. During the last two weeks, a combination of the strategies could be used.

Table 1
Data Collection of Student Office Referrals before and During Intervention

Teacher	Total Referrals Before Intervention (4 weeks)	Referrals During Choice Theory (2 weeks)	Referrals During Teacher-Student Journals (2 weeks)	Referrals During Classroom Mgmt. Log (2 weeks)	Referrals During Combination of Strategies (2 weeks)	Totals Referrals During Intervention (8 Weeks)
1	8	2	2	0	1	5
2	5	1	1	0	0	2
3	14	6	2	0	0	8
4	8	0	2	0	2	4
5	15	4	5	2	1	12
6	18	3	7	3	2	15
7	12	2	3	1	1	7
8	17	3	2	2	1	8
9	25	8	6	4	2	20
TOTALS	122	29	30	12	10	81

Using the paired correlated *t-test*, the .05 level of significance was the basis for rejection of the H_{01} , which stated a statistically significant difference existed in the number of student office referrals written before interventions while using current classroom management strategies as compared to the number of student office referrals written during interventions using research-based classroom management strategies and a classroom management behavior log. The *t-test* tested the relationship between the number of student office referrals written before interventions while using current classroom management strategies as compared to the number of student office referrals written during interventions while using the research-based classroom management strategies and a classroom management behavior log. Figure 1 provides an illustration of the individual teachers’ writing of student office referrals during the implementation of the intervention.

Figure 1

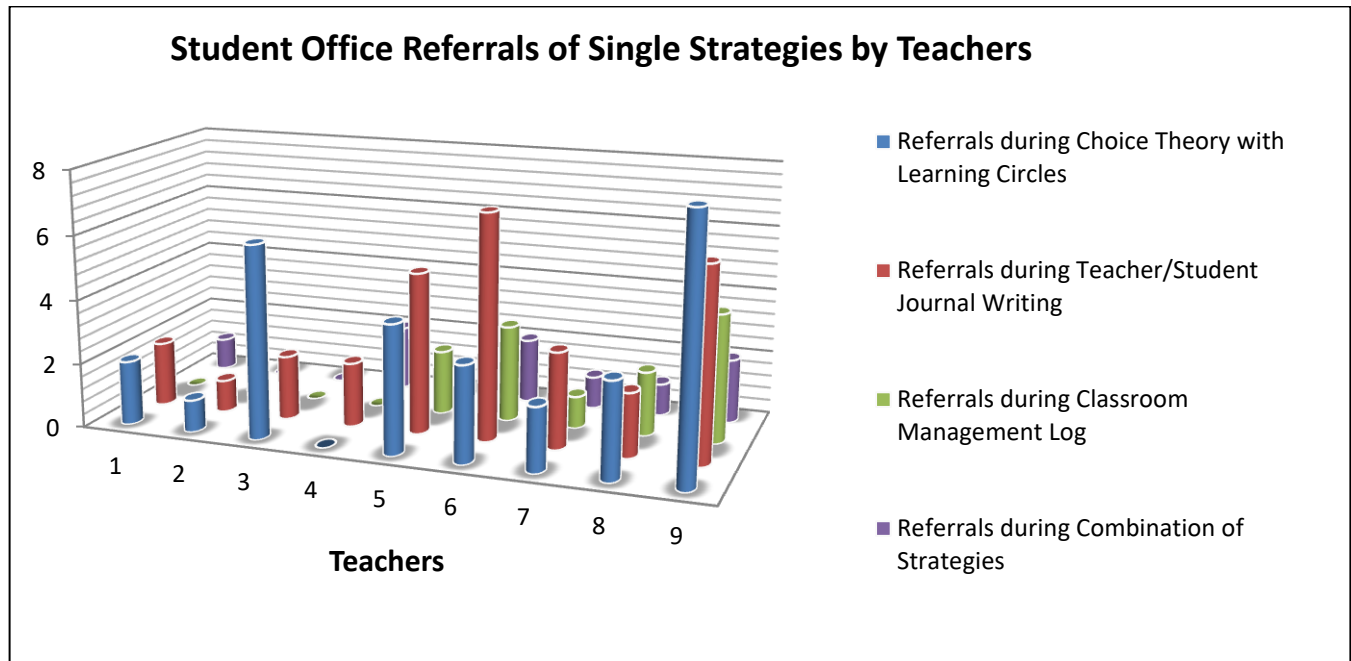


Table 2 statistically illustrates the results of calculating the means, standard deviations, *t-value* and significance for the collective group of data obtained from the nine teachers in the action research study.

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, t-value and Significance for Student Office Referrals Before and During Research-Based Classroom Management Strategies and a Researcher Designed Classroom Management Behavior Log

Written Office Results for Teachers	Student Referrals	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value	Significance
Total referrals before the intervention		13.56	6.15	6.81	0.000136
Total referrals during the intervention		9	5.72		
<i>n</i> = 9			<i>df</i> = 9-1		<i>p</i> < 0.05

Summary

This action research study assessed the effectiveness of research-based classroom management strategies and a researcher-designed classroom management behavior log in decreasing student office referrals written about junior high school students by their teachers. Examining the effectiveness of the strategies on the number of student office referrals written included an analysis of the number of student office referrals written for one month before the intervention and how many were written for two months during the intervention. Opinions of the teacher participants were also analyzed as qualitative data.

A descriptive analysis of the collected data was completed on student office referrals before the implementation of the intervention and during the intervention. The analysis revealed that for four weeks before the intervention, 122 student office referrals were written about junior high school students as compared to 81 student office referrals being written for an eight-week period during the intervention. In reference to the qualitative data collected, participants had more positive comments pertaining to those strategies used during the intervention in comparison to those used before the intervention.

The descriptive breakdown of the student office referrals was followed by a correlated dependent two-tailed *t-test* analysis with equal variance. The decision to analyze recognizing the data as correlated was based on the fact that there was a connection between who the participants were before the intervention and who the participants were during the intervention. The outcome of the intervention depended upon whether the new classroom management strategies being utilized would make a difference. The use of the two-tailed *t-test* predestined that the results could go in either direction—in favor of the null hypothesis or against it. The mean of the total student office referrals written during the four-week period before the intervention was 13.56 compared to a mean of 9 for student office referrals written during the intervention. The standard deviations for the “before” and “during” student office referrals written were 6.15 compared to 5.72, respectively.

Discussion

Classroom management strategies affect all stakeholders. The school districts, school administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community are concerned about classroom management. Efforts to provide opportunities for teachers to teach and students to learn begin with effective classroom management strategies.

School administrators—principals and assistant principals—are responsible for the everyday operation of the local schools. The foundation at all levels within the school points to the leadership. Their responsibilities and duties extend far beyond what might be written into a contract or list of required duties. The school administrator, as the leader, in collaboration with other stakeholders, sets the stage for the mission and goals of the school. The attitudes and practices of the teachers also reflect the leadership. For the school administrators, the objective is to have as few as possible student office referrals brought to the office daily.

According to O'Connor, et al. (2011), in order for classroom management to be effective, there must be positive teacher-student relationships. Teachers must not only establish rules in their classrooms, but must also enforce them. In order to enforce rules, there must be clearly defined consequences for misbehavior. The establishment of the positive relationship between the teacher and student will allow other aspects of classroom management to work, such as establishing and enforcing rules with consequences (O'Connor, et al., 2011). Teachers having to stop teaching to write student office referrals takes time away from their teaching, and this interruption further takes away from their students' learning (Irvin, et al., 2006).

Research studies, according to Irvin, et al. (2006), prove the benefits of using effective classroom management strategies as a deterrent to excessive student office referrals, which usually result in the suspension of students. Effective classroom management strategies are research-based and have been tested in multiple settings. This action research study further pursued the quality of research-based classroom management strategies by having them implemented in a junior high school setting in a rural community. In relation to the literature pertaining to research-based classroom management strategies, Irvin, et al. (2006), focused on established research that laid the foundation for this current action research study. Literature that would be significant for the beginning and ending of the study was thoroughly reviewed.

The Data in Table 1 indicated there were 122 student office referrals written during the four-week period before the intervention, and 81 were written during the intervention, which spanned over eight weeks, a reduction from thirty per week to ten per week. Teacher 1 had written eight student office referrals using current classroom management strategies before the intervention compared to five written during the implementation of the intervention. Teacher 2 had a difference of three fewer student office referrals during the intervention. There were fourteen student office referrals written by Teacher 3 before the intervention and eight written during the intervention. Teacher 4 had a total of eight student office referrals before the intervention and four during the implementation. Student office referrals written by Teacher 5 totaled fifteen before the intervention and twelve during the intervention. The total of referrals written by Teacher 6 was eighteen before the intervention compared to fifteen written during intervention. Teacher 7 wrote a total of twelve referrals using current classroom management before the intervention, and seven were written during the intervention. The teacher with the greatest decrease in student office referrals during the intervention was Teacher 8, who had written seventeen before the intervention and eight during the intervention. Finally, Teacher 9 wrote twenty-five student office referrals before the intervention and a total of twenty during the intervention. In order to determine if the intervention made a statistical significance, a two-tailed correlated *t-test* was performed.

The mean for the total number of student office referrals written before the intervention was 7.41% higher, and the standard deviation was .43% higher than the mean and standard deviation for the number of referrals written during the intervention. The t-test results indicated that these differences were enough to be statistically significant at the $p < .05$ significance level (Table 2) given a p value of 0.000136. This result suggests that there is a statistically significant difference in the number of student office referrals written before interventions while using current classroom management strategies as compared to the number of student office referrals written during interventions using research-based classroom management strategies and a classroom management behavior log.

In comparing the pre- and post-surveys, both of which contained the same questions, the participants had higher reviews for the strategies used during the intervention as compared to those classroom management strategies they used before the intervention. Questions on the pre- and post-survey included the following: (a) "How satisfied are you with your current classroom management strategies? Describe classroom management strategies that work and those that are not successful; (b) How successful are student office referrals in solving your classroom problems? Provide examples of student office referrals that work and do not work; (c) To what degree do your students have in-put into the classroom management strategies? If students are allowed in-put, describe the in-put you allow them to have."

The highest degree of satisfaction for all questions was 5, and 1 was the lowest level of satisfaction. There were no level 5 responses from participants for Question 1 on the pre-survey as compared to 55% choosing level 5 on the post-survey. Question 2 generated no level 5 on the pre- or post-survey, but level 4 received 44% on the pre-survey and only half of that on the post-survey. Another significant observation pertaining to this question was the fact that before the intervention there were no responses of level 1, but after the intervention there were 22% of participants agreeing to the lowest level for the use of student office referrals. Before the intervention, there were 77% of the participants at the lowest level, 1, of allowing students to have in-put into classroom management strategies compared to no participants being at level 1 after the intervention.

Conclusion

In reference to the findings from this action research study, research-based classroom management strategies and a classroom management behavior log did have a statistically significant impact on the number of student office referrals written for junior high school students by lessening the number of student office referrals written during the intervention as compared to the number written before the intervention. The intervention had both positive and negative impacts on the participants. Based on the findings in the action research study pertaining to strategies for changing disruptive behavior in a junior high school learning environment, the researcher concluded that the implementation of research-based classroom management strategies does make an impact by decreasing the number of student office referrals written about junior high school students. Secondly, the use of the researcher-designed classroom management behavior log made an impact by decreasing the number of student office referrals written about junior high school students, but the teacher participants had no choice but to allow students to remain in the classroom, based on the design of the instrument. Also, in reference to the classroom behavior management log, it was less likely to be used by the majority of the teachers as a future intervention. It was further concluded that teacher/student relationships improved through the use of journal writing between the teacher and students. Finally, peer relationships and cooperation were positively improved through the use of Choice Theory with Learning Circles.

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