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BEHAVIORAL MANAGEMENT IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

An Urban Approach

Nancy R. Macciomei, Douglas H. Ruben

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Behavioral Management in the Public Schools

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An Urban Approach

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PREFACE

Nearly half a century ago the paralyzing educational problems of urbanized students were well documented. These problems existed for a variety of reasons. Poverty, street gangs, and poor educational expectations plagued inner-city, underprivileged students in many discriminatory ways. Racial tensions sparked classroom unrest and cast a shadow of distrust among teachers and students. Inequities between working class and middle class grew more divisive and propelled ethnic, religious, and political prejudices, stereotyping the socially undesirable. Fears of communism infected youthful minds, further proliferating views that the world was unsafe and that threats of inland invasions were imminent. Believers of Armageddon harbored hatred and dispassion and felt their only offense against a cruel society was self-preservation. They built fallout shelters, radically protested against the government, and condoned their school-age children's unmerciful teasing of suspicious classmates.

Urban life in the 1950s clearly had its own turmoil. Untempered social hostilities built on suspicion created a precarious life for inner-city neighborhood students. Their anger and distrust were nebulous, not specific. Targets of malicious or aggressive acts simply were the surrogates for bigger, more intangible problems that could not be confronted.

Proliferation of distrust, anguish, and fear of domination powerfully fueled urban decay 50 years ago. Fear mobilized a delusion that some students were good, and some were bad. Some students held patriotic, devout Christian values self-perceived as superior, while other students randomly labeled as outsiders were vilified and segregated from mainstream school activities. Animosity channeled its way malignantly through peer interactions and teacher-student relationships. An undercurrent of conspicuously heated tension filled the classrooms and spread like a virus onto playgrounds and athletic fields.

But anger never turned uncontrollably and unpredictably violent. Belligerent feelings used to, and still do, explode in harsh verbal exchanges, fistfights, and even threats of vengeance, the latter of which rarely were carried out. Students hurt each other, but they did not kill each other; acts of aggression rarely were arbitrary and capricious.

That is contrary to today's shocking headlines of random school-ground shootings, stabbings, beatings, and bewildering carnage. Many urban schools no longer are breeding grounds for suspicion; they are war zones. Rapidly emerging in inner-city as well as suburban classrooms is a jungle mentality of survival of the fittest. Weak subversives who are academically conscious are literally outnumbered by street-smart gang members dominant in force and weaponry. Accessibility to firearms from illegal purchases or liberally minded, gun-collecting parents produces a growing arsenal contributing to youth crimes. Murderers under 15 years of age constitute a staggering statistic of school-age arrests related to homicide and robbery. Teenage gunmen, for example, riddled a playground of children 13 to 18 years old in San Francisco's Chinatown. In Richmond, Virginia, a 14-year-old opened fire on a coach and teaching aide during a shooting spree following gang-related arguments. From February 1997, until May 1999, eight school shootings erupted unexpectedly in elementary and high schools, leaving several children seriously wounded or fatally shot. From Alaska to Colorado to Georgia, firearm crimes by juveniles reached epidemic proportions and completely shattered the tradition of school as a safe paradise for learning.

Current urban school shootings are disastrously destroying the sanctity of education. Harmless name-calling and fistfights during the 1950s incredibly have advanced into homicidal acts of prepubescent vengeance. Distraught youngsters betrayed or devastated by their peers now are self-proclaimed vigilantes. They regain their honor by killing instead of slicing tires or toilet-papering household shrubs. Fayetteville, Tennessee, 18-year-old Jacob Davis exemplifies this contagious pathology. Despondent over his girlfriend's dating another guy, he hunted down and fatally shot his rival, Robert "Nick" Creson, as Creson entered the school parking lot. And why? Because the Fayetteville youth, consumed with jealousy, did not know what else to do.

This is precisely why *Behavioral Management in the Public Schools: An Urban Approach* came about. Urbanity poses uniquely complex and demanding behavior problems exhibited in school-age children. While always a challenge for educators, urban students now represent more than a challenge. They are unknowing perpetrators of a deadly trend in impulsive and psychopathic crimes that completely rewrite the moral codes of conduct and force educators to revise enforceable interventions. The disheartening exigencies of modern, inner-city schools sadly warrant a fresh start at old questions, Why do kids get in trouble? What should teachers do about it?

This book responds to these innocent questions with a ready prescription for teachers at their wit's end. The book introduces effectively proven strategies to assess and manage at-risk behaviors while promoting healthy adolescent self-esteem. Besides teenage shooters, concerns also arise regarding high truancy rates, low test

scores, fears of student safety, and, consequently, minimal instruction due to continuous classroom disruption. Traditional programming once solved many of these headaches. Now it does not. Discipline interventions are old-fashioned, recycled versions of strategies used with low-risk populations and, more dangerously, are predicated on untenable theories about the causality of behavior.

A fistfight in gym, for example, now goes beyond a garden-variety case of improper behavior punishable by suspension or moralistic discussion with the assistant principal. Antiquated methods are replaced by innovations directly linked to practical, everyday issues such as (1) is this an abused or neglected child who knows only how to fight to survive?; (2) is fighting the only mode of communication this child knows to express feelings?; and (3) is removal of fighting achievable through such options as problem solving and peer mediation?

The brutal reality underlying revisions of school management techniques is this: traditional interventions relied on methods that were presumed effective and based on scientific principles of behavior change. But the kids are different, and environments they operate in are different. Even if the principles of behavior change are scientific, the variables of environment and lifestyles remain untested empirically and thus limit standard procedures used in the past. Such limits may now mitigate or preclude old procedures and warrant new procedures involving the new variables of environment and lifestyles.

Qualifying variables relative to high-risk, urban behavior is the subject of each chapter. The book is therefore divided into two parts covering etiological and classroom strategy issues. Part I is on "Problems in Urban Schoolchild Discipline" and overviews recurrent problems observed in urban students against a backdrop of ineffective strategies. Changes in methodology optimistically adopt a realistic perspective on student delinquency and indicate a shift in discipline philosophy.

Part II is on "Current Advances in Urban Behavioral Management." Intimately explored are teacher-tested, effective methods used on behaviorally disruptive students from kindergarten to high school. Chapters are technically explicit as well as informative on problems of cultural diversity, sustaining motivation, and collateral effects of instructional decay on student learning. Incentive-based strategies employ startling, creative uses of computers, classroom monitoring, and curricula assessment rarely visible in urban school settings. Peer-mediation procedures, in particular, borrow from concepts of participative management and a self-regulatory workforce. Students under peer monitoring are increasingly prone to class conformity and improve in self-paced work.

But let the truth be spoken. Managing high-risk students may not be appealing to many educators. After all, teaching is a two-way street, reciprocally involving eager learners and motivated instructors. Knowing this, the editors offer a word of empathy: educators who work with urban children and parents discover intrinsic rewards in reaching successful goals. Inherent rewards may be neither as immediate nor as obvious as instructors would like them to be. That is why the goals have to be different. Goals that seek to *teach students with minimal interruption and maximal skill learning are goals worth pursuing*. Teachers and administrators who

accept this alternate thinking will succeed in instructing children and making urban obstacles another unit in the total school curriculum.

PART I

PROBLEMS IN URBAN SCHOOLCHILD DISCIPLINE

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BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS IN URBAN SCHOOLCHILDREN

Nancy R. Macciomei

Emotional and behavioral problems of school-aged children in the classroom rank as the number one concern of educators, administrators, and the general public. There have been significant activities in the development and implementation of programs as well as the reauthorization of laws that qualify for exceptional programming. However, most students do not qualify for special programming. They continue to disrupt learning for themselves and for others; their intensity, frequency, and duration of inappropriate behaviors create an unsafe and disorderly environment. Across the nation, schools in the urban areas have problems that seem to be more extensive and intensive than ever before.

Most public schools try to educate all students utilizing traditional activities and instructional methods. However, the most complex and demanding task of all educators who work with students exhibiting serious problem behaviors is day-to-day classroom behavior management. Pupils who are chronically disruptive, defiant, withdrawn, or aggressive possess minimal social or functional communication. Such deficiencies often are difficult to handle even in one-to-one situations. Traditional classroom behavior management is possible but not always reliable. Management of pupil behavior in group settings, organizing the curriculum, arranging and individualizing instruction, and evaluating students' learning all constitute current methods (Kerr & Nelson, 1998).

The recurrent difficulty lies not with methodology per se, but with *social validity*. Procedures ideally prescribed for classroom management simply do not fit the urban child's repertoire of oppositional behavior. This chapter introduces the wide range of malcontents typically encountered in urban classrooms and overviews reasons for defective behavioral programming. First reviewed is the urban ambience of the classroom. Second, failures of past discipline are considered. Third examined are underlying causes of discipline problems related to teacher-student and systemic school intervention. Fourth, routine behavior dis-

turbances are explored. Fifth, factors influencing lack of school control are noted. Finally provided are a rationale and purpose for teaching self-control to high-risk students.

THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

A city or urban setting reflects a place where populations tend to cluster into neighborhoods on the basis of related social characteristics. Common social characteristics might include amounts of education, lifestyle, stage in life cycle, occupation, religion, or race. American cities have become a collection of diverse groups reflecting differing values. To some, the values contrast with their own. To others, certain values are viewed as oppositional. Within the urban setting, ethnic and social differences are combined to create a true melting-pot society.

Urbanization includes a variety of distinct and intense interests and attitudes that create a variety of social problems. Urban social problems are the dilemma of sizable numbers of people gathered together to live and function within the city limits. Many parts of urban America live in cities that were once blossoming and now are slowly deteriorating. The neighborhoods surrounding many cities are also characterized by high crime rates and low socioeconomic status, with as many as 80% or more of school-age children receiving free or reduced lunches (Beck & Gabriel, 1990). Bound by poverty and unemployment, the ghetto population and working poor live out lives devoid of the niceties that other Americans may enjoy. These characteristics have significant implication for social problems that manifest both at home and in the classroom.

The number of children with behavior and emotional problems living in urban areas (population over 60,000) has risen within the last five years. Conservative estimates suggest that 15% of all children in metropolitan areas would be considered highrisk children (Wood et al., 1985). However, only one-tenth to one-third of these children are receiving minimal, if any, services to alter behaviors. The wide range of childhood emotional and behavioral dysfunctions may be factors brought on by living in these stressful conditions. Vulnerability and environmental stressors may disrupt a child's capacity to achieve acceptable coping and social behaviors. Disruptive behaviors in the classroom are likely to have been created by a mixture of familial, societal, and individual hardship factors.

The behaviors demonstrated in classrooms each day reflect a limited capacity to problem-solve, observe, reflect, and use self-control and self-management. Common behavior problems stem from a lack of impulse control (Carr et al., 1994) The urban child demonstrates high degrees of aggressive behavior, a limited capacity to cooperate, and a lack of control with self-direction. Children living in these conditions are considered high-risk for problematic behaviors and emotional problems. The results are evidenced by disillusionment and antagonism toward traditional educational practices and defiance toward authority figures. Secondary results are negative self-concepts and general underdevelopment of skills for coping with life's problems. Other effects are high delinquency and dropout rates, gross limitations in basic learning skills, and excessive misbehavior in the classroom. There is

also evidence that urban children have learned to adapt to harsh or unstable circumstances by means of impulsive, unstable, and often explosive actions in their community.

Most of society, which controls pathways to economic, social, political, and personal success, demands higher levels of self-control and forethought. Unfortunately for our city children, these levels are not readily attainable by urban school-age children who find the action-impulse mode appropriate for their everyday existence.

Student's Response to Urban Inequities

Urban schoolchildren are currently demonstrating high levels of frustration and impulsiveness. This is largely because of their increased awareness of social inequities. Students' frustration, anger, and hostility respond to a single realization: they have been victims of a negative environment, a realization that may then trigger emotional energies that are not being dealt with effectively inside the urban school. Braaten (1987) agrees that educators need effective, nontraditional motivational and behavioral management programs that will help urban children do things well, gaining control over their own lives.

Implementing such programs in large school systems is often difficult and not done on a consistent or extended basis. If presented over a long, consistent period, the interventions within the next chapters may be productive in helping children retain the education that they need. The biggest challenge we face as educators is stepping outside our own cultural orientation so that we can develop a greater appreciation for, and understanding of, those who are different. We must be able to utilize and depend on nontraditional teaching techniques that reflect our commitment to educate all students.

DISCIPLINE IN THE PAST

Discipline has always been connected with a goal or purpose. Individual discipline is often thought of as organizing one's impulses to attain a goal; group discipline demands control of impulses of the individuals in a group to attain an accepted goal. Throughout most of American education, fear of corporal punishment was a major instrument of student discipline. Infliction of physical pain was justified on the same grounds as were the harsh penal codes for adults. Wood et al. (1985) concur that this was considered a humiliating disciplinary system. The American colonists, coming from a land where flogging was common in schools, took it for granted that corporal punishment should be used to control the children in the schools they established in the New World.

In the recent past, in making a decision about punishing a student, an administrator generally chose among the following options:

- Verbal punishment ("chewing out")
- Detention (student stays after school)

- Assigned work around the building
- Suspension
- Expulsion
- Corporal punishment

Corporal Punishment

While the use of corporal punishment in the schools may be legal if state law and school board policy permit it, there continues to be considerable disagreement on the part of teachers, parents, and educational authorities about its desirability and effectiveness. Supporters of corporal punishment argue that nothing else has worked with some students and that some students respond only to physical punishment. This is usually because students experience punishment at home. Supporters also debate that physical punishment is effective because it makes the student think twice before committing the same offense and is a deterrent to other students who might break a similar rule (Horner et al., 1994).

Opponents harshly take issue with these traditional viewpoints. Lobbying against punishment, regardless of what the Supreme Court rules, many professionals claim corporal punishment is cruel and inhumane. Also, corporal punishment holds considerable potential for child abuse. Lastly, Gorton (1983) states that there are more effective, nonphysical alternatives to correcting students' misbehavior. Although surveys have shown that more than two-thirds of the states authorize school districts to utilize corporal punishment in the schools, no school district in America is required to have corporal punishment as policy.

Boonin (1979) recommends that educational authorities consider the following guidelines, extracted from various court decisions and recommended by education authorities:

1. Corporal punishment should not be used at all except when the acts of misconduct are so antisocial in nature or so shocking to the conscience that extreme punishment seems warranted.
2. The particular offenses that will result in corporal punishment should be specified. Also, the nature of the corporal punishment that will be permitted should be made explicit.
3. Evidence that other, nonphysical methods were used earlier in an attempt to help the student improve his or her behavior should be required before corporal punishment is employed.
4. Corporal punishment should not be used in situations where physical restraint is more properly called for. Staff working with high-risk, aggressive students should take courses in nonviolent crisis prevention interventions.

Consider the Nonviolent Crisis Prevention Strategy

On a more personal note, as an elementary assistant principal within a downtown, urban setting, I utilize nonviolent crisis prevention strategies throughout the

day. I effectively approach explosive children, restrain students physically, and confront irate or very upset students and parents. Crisis prevention techniques can be utilized by all staff members and will help to create a safe environment while allowing the uncontrolled student to regain control. Most often, I allow a child to cool down before I process the misbehavior with the child.

Many times the child is ready to go back to class and carry on with his or her day. Most often a child needs immediate consequences such as time-out, community service, or writing a letter of apology. Other times the child is sequestered in a private office excluded from his peers, also called in-school suspension (ISS); is sent home for a short-term suspension (therapeutic leave); or begins out-of-school suspension (OSS). I call the parent (if there is a phone) or follow up with a note home. Last, with every behavior problem, regardless of the consequence, I always document the incident for later review and substantiation for my choice of intervention.

Effectiveness of Punishment

The school administrator may need to punish a student to set an example for the rest of the student body but should not operate under the illusion that punishment will somehow remove the roots of a problem. Another serious misperception of punishment is believing the student's misbehavior will disappear forever. Campbell et al. (1990) state that there is minimal evidence that physical punishment is an effective technique for preventing misbehavior from recurring. However, it is recognized that removal of all negative consequences associated with the violation of a rule or regulation could, over time, render such rules and regulations meaningless (Gorton, 1983). Research has also found that there is the possibility that punishment may lead to other undesirable behaviors that may demonstrate more serious problems.

Students need to know that they are accountable for their behavior and that negative consequences will result from inappropriate behavior. It is realistic to impose certain punitive measures that may be necessary. However, the decision as to whether or not to punish should be based on a diagnosis of the cause of the student's behavior. When an administrator selects the type of punishment, caution should be exercised to consider the following factors:

- The cause of the misbehavior
- The severity of the offense
- The habitualness of the offender (frequency)
- The personality of the offender (how he or she responds to different punishment)

Systematically introducing punishment is controversial. Application can be tricky and accidentally trigger untoward reactions from students. Then, too, overuse of punishment can sabotage not only methodology but also respect for the teacher and the teacher's dignity. Awareness of potential problems is naturally critical. Additionally, educators may wish to follow simple guidelines when using any variation of