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THE PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL SAFETY AND DISCIPLINE
AND HOW THESE PERCEPTIONS AFFECT TEACHING
METHODS AND STRATEGIES

by
James J. Lapsley

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Science in Teaching Degree
of
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at
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Approved by
Dr. Donna W. Jorgensen

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ABSTRACT

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THE PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL SAFETY AND DISCIPLINE
AN HOW THESE PERCEPTIONS AFFECT TEACHING
METHODS AND STRATEGIES
2003/2004
Dr. Donna W. Jorgensen
Master of Science in Teaching

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions teachers have concerning safety and discipline within their school and how these perceptions affect teaching methods and strategies. The study took place in a large rural area high school with a diverse multi- cultural background of students. This particular school has increasingly been scrutinized for the disruptive behavior of the students and the ability of the administration to handle these problems among the majority of teachers in the school. This study focused on the perceptions the teachers have about their school policies and procedures and the ability the school has in correcting disruptive behavior. Also, the study will look at how the gender and years of teaching experience influence these perceptions.

The results of this study indicate that there is a perception problem within this school. Furthermore, the analysis of data will show that there is a need for further studies concerning this issue in order to fully understand how this negative perception of school safety and discipline can possibly be corrected.

Acknowledgments

First, the investigator thanks all of the teachers that participated in this study. Without the help and assistance of these teachers, this study would have been impossible. The teachers openly expressed their opinions and views about school, school children, and the administration of the school. All of their cooperation will always be remembered. The investigator would also like to thank the Principal of the school for allowing this study to be conducted.

Secondly, the investigator must thank his wife, Jennifer, and his step-son, Andrew. They both gave their constant support in order to help this investigator finish this daunting task. Also, they forgave my absence at many family functions, days at the beach, and walks in the park to allow me to complete this project. I thank you both and love you with every bit of my heart and soul: thank you.

Lastly, the investigator would like to acknowledge his professor and advisor, Dr. Donna W. Jorgensen. Dr. Jorgensen demonstrates the dedication, kindness, understanding, and love towards her students that inspires this young promising teacher to become the very best. Words on this page will never fully express the gratitude this investigator will always hold dear to his heart towards his greatest inspiration during this process: Dr. Donna W. Jorgensen.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Schools across the country are making safety a top priority to ensure a safe and productive learning institution. Since the fateful day of April 20, 1999 in Littleton, Colorado, the Columbine High School shootings have sparked a number of studies testing the effectiveness of certain discipline and safety programs, but many schools are still perceived as unsafe and discipline procedures are a top priority. However, the problem of school safety and discipline are not a new phenomenon caused by the media attention given to the tragic events that took place at Columbine. The concern and negative perception of school safety and discipline has been an issue confronting administrators, teachers, students, and communities for over fifty years; however, the increased safety and disciplinary measures being taken now are adding to the negative perception of school safety. Willert and Lenhardt (2003) indicate that schools are not as unsafe as assumed; instead, they indicate that it is the negative perception school staff members and students have that is on the rise. Therefore, this study proposes to look at overall school safety as perceived by teachers and how these perceptions relate to teaching and student learning.

Background

The issue of school safety has consumed the nation for well over fifty years. In an article published in *Phi Delta Kappan* in 1978, Williams writes that the problem of school safety and discipline has continued to be a matter of top priority for educators across the nation for the past twenty years. He traces the problem and negative perception of school safety and discipline back to 1954 and an article that appeared in an

issue of the *Phi Delta Kappan* in 1959. The article of 1954 discusses a study that was conducted documenting two distinct problems in the nations public schools: “violence committed against teachers; the second was use of narcotics” (cited in Williams, 1978). The 1954 article referenced by Williams is clear evidence that the perception of the nations’ safety and discipline procedures within schools has been a concern for educators for over fifty years.

Though the issue of safety and discipline are not new concerns for the nation’s schools, the anxiety about creating safer schools is greater now than it was fifty years ago. The advent of the computer, twenty-four hour news programs, and more and more media coverage has made the perception of school safety and discipline the number one priority for many schools across the nation. The nation has been addressing the problem of school safety and discipline for half a century; why then has the problem progressively gotten worse instead of better?

Olweus (2003) notes that the researchers did not begin to study the phenomenon of school safety until the 1970s. He comments that researchers began to look at the issue of bullying and safer schools and the effects they had on children; however, American schools did not fully give the issue of providing our teachers and students with a safe and productive school environment until the 1980s. Until this point in our nation’s school history, safety drills and procedures were seen as precautions. Now, these procedures and policies are given as much attention as the schools’ curricula. Mabie (2003) notes in her article that when the increased awareness of alcohol and drug abuse became a serious concern, the use of Zero Tolerance policies began with federal and state drug

enforcement agencies in the early 1980's. The increased awareness of problems facing the school children became a nationwide concern.

Then, on that fateful April day in 1999 two boys in Littleton, Colorado changed the way schools would go about insuring the safety of their students. Also, the perception of students and the schools they attended would grow progressively worse among the surrounding communities and teachers. After the Columbine tragedy, schools nationwide began to vigorously address the effectiveness of school safety and discipline procedures. This attention given to the issue of school safety created a nationwide media frenzy addressing the safety of teachers and students. Even though the issue of school safety and discipline has been a concern, the increased awareness of the problem began to create an unfavorable attitude towards children and the schools they attend. Surrounding communities' negative perception of school children and the schools they attend is a direct result of the negative attention given to many schools across the nation and how they implement safety and discipline procedures. Mayer and Leone (1999) reported that the public's understanding of violence and disruption is a function of fact and perception. However, the negative perception of school safety does not stop with the surrounding community. The administrators and teachers who work in, and the students who attend, our public schools also hold negative feelings toward school safety policies and procedures. In the article by Willert and Lenhardt (2003), they reported that students felt that if an incident like Columbine could happen there, it could very well happen in their school. Teachers also held the same negative perception concerning their schools' safety policy and procedures. Willert and Lenhardt noted that the perception of school safety is

much worse than the reality. The need to change these perceptions is crucial to the resurgence of productive classroom learning experiences.

Statement of the Problem

During this investigator's student teaching, there were many "off the record" conversations among teachers addressing the concerns they had with the student body. Many teachers felt that the students were disruptive, unruly, and demonstrated a disregard for authority figures. These conversations led the investigator to further examine these comments. In order to fully understand the safety and discipline problem within this one school, it would be necessary to determine if these perceptions held by the teaching staff were leading to ineffective teaching methods and strategies.

It is important to understand how teachers feel about the procedures implemented by the school in order to ensure a safe and productive learning environment. If teachers do not feel that their school is serious about discipline procedures, the teachers will be reluctant to support these programs. If the handbook of school policies and procedures that is given to every teacher at the beginning of each school year is simply put in the back of the desk without any regard, the effort to change perceptions of school safety and discipline is futile. We need to see if the programs and procedures being implemented by schools are working. In addition, if teachers do not feel as though the school is supporting them in efforts to ensure a safe learning environment, do the teachers deviate from their normal teaching methods and strategies? The problem with the negative perception of school safety and discipline held by teachers is crucial to ensure a productive learning environment. Without the sense that they and their students are safe, teaching becomes secondary to ensuring safety. The fears of the teachers in this study are

real, and if these fears are not addressed, the school will continue to do our students and community a disservice. The growing concern of the behavior of children among teachers and the surrounding community makes this study a necessity. This is a problem that will not just go away.

This study is needed because we must challenge the school and the community to work together in order to instill proper behavior. This study will look at how this perception relates to the overall teaching methods and strategies used by teachers within the school. As school safety issues increase, Willert and Lenhardt (2003) believe the perception of school safety declines. The perceptions of school safety and discipline issues need to be a group effort. We need to see if the programs and procedures being implemented by this school are working; therefore, this study holds value because it will look at the perceptions teachers have of their students and the procedures implemented by the school in order to increase perceptions and performance of student discipline. Also, the study will ask teachers for possible solutions. If our student discipline and the perceptions of school safety are a problem, how should we address these concerns? As reported by Mabie (2003), in an interview, Ronald D. Stephens, Executive Director of National School Safety Center, states that we are forcing our children to go to these schools, but questions whether we ensure that they will be safe. The study will focus on the concerns of the teachers. This study will seek to reveal if this group effort exists. When we understand how our teachers perceive their safety, the safety of their students, and the efforts of the school to support them, we can attempt to meet the needs of everyone, which in turn will hopefully give everyone a better feeling about our schools.

The relevant literature will reveal that the problem of school safety and discipline is not a problem that is new. On the contrary, the literature will demonstrate how endless the search for a safer, more productive, and a more positive perception of school safety and discipline has been a longstanding concern for educators. The literature will show the attempts to solve the problem of school safety and discipline. In addition to the studies conducted by researchers to confront the issue of safety in schools, the literature will explain the numerous solutions suggested in order to improve the negative perceptions of school safety and discipline.

Research Questions

This study will look closely at the opinions teachers have about their safety, student safety and discipline, and the efforts of the school to improve any negative perceptions. There are many questions that this study will attempt to answer:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of school safety?
2. What are the teachers' perceptions of overall student performance and behavior?
3. Do negative perceptions of school safety have a distinct effect on teaching methods and strategies?
4. How will improving student discipline and perceptions of a safe school create a safer, more productive learning environment?

Definitions

Academic Performance: the efforts put forth by individual students to increase learning.

Discipline: a system of procedures, rules, or guidelines that attempt to correct or punish unacceptable behavior

Perception: what a particular individual believes to be true. A feeling that exists within an individual about someone or something.

Safety: a feeling. A perception one has of their own well being.

Safe School Planning: a systematic process to create and maintain an environment that is conducive to learning.

School Safety: the procedures and guidelines implemented by the school in order to ensure a productive learning environment.

Security: being able to pursue ideas, beliefs, and opinions without the threat of fear from other individuals.

Teaching Methods/Strategies: the performance and activities used by a teacher in order to increase student involvement and learning.

Violence: physical or verbal force used to injure, damage, or destroy; extreme roughness of action.

Zero Tolerance: policies implemented by schools which deal out severe punishment for all offenses, no matter how minor, ostensibly in an effort to treat all offenders equally in the spirit of fairness and intolerance of rule breaking.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

The following review of literature recognizes one problem facing many of the learning institutions across the country: safety. Since the eruption of violence within our schools has grown to enormous proportions, the concern about protecting our students, teachers, and other school faculty has increased over the last few years. However, the problem is not a new dilemma for schools across the nation.

In an article from *Phi Delta Kappan* dating back to 1978, Williams discusses the issue of safety and discipline problems; he uses an article from the same magazine that was published in 1959 to make a comparison between perceptions of school safety in the 1950s and 1970s. The problem encountered in schools of the 1950s and the 1970s bear an uncanny similarity. In both issues, school districts across the nation are attempting to combat the growing concern for student discipline and safety. Williams notes that the concern for safety and more strict disciplinary measures are still a major concern for schools in 1978 just as they were for schools in the 1950s; however, he notes that the problem has grown considerably worse.

The concern for school safety and discipline was due to the negative perception the public had of schools and school-aged children. The public perception of discipline in the schools, manifested in newspaper stories, congressional testimony and research dollars appears clear: the problems caused by our school-aged children are worse now than they have ever been (Williams, 1978). The solution to the continued negative perception of school safety and discipline was offered in the 1959 article. The solution to reducing the fears held by the public concerning their surrounding schools should be to

encourage self-responsibility (Williams, 1978). He writes that,

the solution to the perception problem, and more important, the solution to the discipline problem is already known. It is readily apparent in the 1959 *Kappan*.

The solution is self-responsibility. Unfortunately, many people then as now, tend to blame the environment and absolve individuals of accountability for their actions. (p. 387)

Since the publication of this article, the urgency for addressing the negative perception has only increased, a detail that seems to foster only more negative perceptions of school safety. Williams' 1978 article reveals that the problems being addressed by the nation in the late 1970s were nothing new. Looking back at the earlier concerns about school, we recognize that we are faced with an even bigger challenge today of providing safer schools for teachers and students.

In 1954 the perception of school safety and discipline became a reoccurring theme for educational leaders across the nation; the 1960s and 1970s offered very little relief to the problem. In the 1980s, the problem reached an all time high with the increase of drug and alcohol abuse by school children (Henault, 2001). Zero Tolerance policies were implemented by school districts across the nation in order to battle the continued negative perceptions the public held of schools and the safety of their children.

The term Zero Tolerance received national attention and recognition by the year 1988 (Henault, 2001). However, Zero Tolerance policies earned as much criticism as they did recognition. By the end of Ronald Reagan's second term as President of the United States in 1988, the term Zero Tolerance was known across the nation (Henault). Zero Tolerance policies did very little to solve the problem facing the nation's schools.

The policies were deemed unfair, unpredictable, and created a greater distance of trust between teachers and students. In fact, schools that implemented the Zero Tolerance policies have shown no decrease in school violence compared to schools that have chosen not to implement the policy (Henault). The idea behind Zero Tolerance was to create safer schools; however, the policy only created greater tension among administrators, teachers, students, and the surrounding communities. Henault states that Zero Tolerance policies have been proven ineffective in easing the growing safety and discipline problems facing schools. In his article, he claims that the implementation of Zero Tolerance policies has resulted in an increase in the number of students who are suspended or expelled each year. Therefore, the perception of school safety and discipline became increasingly tense among teachers and students. The Zero Tolerance policies not only failed to eliminate the concerns of safety and discipline in schools, but the advent of the policies also increased the negative perception of safety policies being implemented within the schools. Students began attending schools equipped with cameras, metal detectors, and drug sniffing dogs. The perception of school turned from a learning institution to a prison. This mentality tends to reinforce the perception that students are merely prisoners and teachers are prison guards.

When the disruption in the schools became too great to ignore, President Ronald Reagan appointed Ronald D. Stephens as Executive Director of the National School Safety Center (Mabie, 2003). The organization was formed in order to assist the nation's schools with training, up-to-date resources, and tools to counteract the disturbances caused by both violence and behavioral problems in the schools. Addressing the concerns for the nation's schools, Stephens believes it should not take an act of courage for parents

to send their children off to school; likewise, a child should not have to perpetually demonstrate the strength to attend. Parents and students deserve the right to have safe schools. We need to promote a place where teachers and students can go in order to learn free from the fear of being harmed physically or emotionally.

According to Mabie (2003), a safe school is a place where the business of education can be conducted in a welcoming environment free of intimidation, violence, and fear. However, the local community needs to become a close partner with teachers and administration in this goal of creating safe schools (Mabie). The idea behind the entire issue is that children need to have safer communities if they are going to have safer schools. Mabie indicates that creating safe schools cannot be accomplished without creating safe communities. Though the perception of schools held by the public remains negative, it is imperative that communities look closely at how well they are assisting the schools in changing this perception.

The disapproving perception held by the teachers, students, and the surrounding communities is a reality; the perception held by these parties may not be as accurate as they choose to believe. Mayer and Leone (1999) state that because of inaccurate methods for gathering data concerning school violence and discipline, the perception of violence is reported at a much higher rate than actual acts of violence.

The belief is that it is the perceived violence that causes much more of a disruption than actual acts of violence. When the perception that a school is unsafe becomes greater than actual events, the classroom no longer functions as a learning institution; instead, the classroom becomes disruptive and off task because of the fear that

engulfs the minds of both teachers and students (Mayer and Leone, 1999). It is the job of every individual to create safer schools.

As stated by Clarksean and Pelton (2002), the idea behind safe school planning is to ensure a place where every individual stepping into the building can be free to learn and study without the fear of interrupting the learning process. Clarksean and Pelton believe school safety is something that must be integrated into the school curriculum; it must become part of the school's policies and procedures. Students are vulnerable to falling short of high academic expectations, and teachers are susceptible to poor teaching methods and practices if their perceptions of school safety and discipline are negative; therefore safety and discipline need to be an integral part of the school philosophy. The two researchers have stated that safety and psychological health issues interfere with education. They reported it is difficult for our youth to learn and for teachers to teach if they do not feel safe at school.

If the perceptions of school safety are not seen favorably by teachers and students, and the teachers and students are failing to perform to a preferred scholarly effort, that means the idea behind creating safe schools is not getting the attention it deserves. In order to create safer school climates, the administrators, teachers, students, and surrounding community must make school safety an integral part of school life. The idea must come to life; it cannot just be spoken about and policies put in place without constant attention and enforcement (Clarksean and Pelton, 2002). If these issues are not addressed, then the negative perceptions of school safety and discipline will continue to outweigh the reality of the situation. Likewise, Cooper and Snell (2003) comment that school safety is an area that requires everyone to get involved in order to ensure the

safety and security of staff and students. When all participants take an active role in ensuring safety and discipline in the schools, the negative perception of the safety and efforts to promote safety are more likely to change. However, Clarkesean and Pelton (2002) raise the issue that many administrators implement safety programs in order to protect their own interests rather than to protect the students and the teachers. This idea may lead to some of the negative perceptions of school safety held by teachers and students. The perceptions created by the ineffective attempts to implement safety programs leads to misleading and unrealistic perceptions of the schools safety and discipline procedures.

Willert and Lenhardt (2003) believe that school violence is steadily declining; however, students' and teachers' perceptions about school safety continue to become more of a concern. As reported by Willert and Lenhardt (2003), the rates for fatal and nonfatal crimes are in decline. The climate of fear created by highly publicized school shootings spurs parents and school leaders to search for ways to increase the security in their schools. The facts show that violent crimes at school have declined from a high of 49 during the 1995-96 school year to 34 during 1998-99. From 1992-98, nonfatal school crimes—sexual assault and robbery—had declined from 144 to 101 per thousand. In 1998, a total of 252,700 serious nonfatal crimes were reported occurring either at school or on the way to school or from school. Also declining were the carrying of weapons and engaging in physical fights on school grounds (Willert and Lenhardt, 2003). The perceptions among students and teachers about school safety and discipline are drastically worse than the reality of the situation. Administrators are working diligently to implement the most up-to-date programs and procedures to ensure the safety of the

staff and student body, but their efforts go unnoticed because the students and teachers still feel threatened.

The climate of fear created by highly publicized school shootings spurs parents and school leaders to search for ways to increase the security in their schools. The continued rise in negative perceptions of school safety often leads to the lack of attention given to safety by administrators. Willert and Lenhardt (2003) believe this leads many students to feel as if they are truly not considered when it comes to ensuring safer and more fair discipline procedures within the school environment.

As previously noted in this literature review, Mayer and Leone (1999) say that the data gathering methods to assess school violence vary considerably, but perceived violence is consistently reported at higher levels than self-reports of violent incidents. Therefore, it is incumbent on educators, administrators, and the students to inform the surrounding community that the huge brick building at the other side of town is not a prison; it is a school.

McGrath (2003) agrees that administrators have become so consumed by and inundated with other school problems that a school safety plan is often adopted but put on the back burner. The idea of safety is never truly addressed until something horrific happens. Teachers often feel as though they are left in the dark when it comes to correct procedures and policies of the safety program being used (McGrath).

When it comes to ensuring the safety and discipline procedures within the school, the administrators are taking into account the actions and reactions of the parents; therefore, the teachers are often left feeling isolated from the school policies and procedures. The parents of the students are holding all members of the schools

responsible for the safety and protection of their children, and courts across the nation are siding with the parents (McGrath, 2003).

Walls, Nardi, and Von-Minden (2002) state that because of the necessity for administrators to appease the parents, teachers are left feeling helpless in determining the correct discipline measures to use in the classroom. It is this feeling of vulnerability that often leads teachers to ignore the academic performance of their students for a more caring environment. Walls et al. report that first year teachers are more concerned with improving student self worth than with improving students' academic performance. The dilemma of choosing between improving student academic achievement and promoting a safe, warm, and inviting academic atmosphere leaves many first year teachers ignoring the rules and procedures in order to promote scholarly achievement.

However, teachers with more experience are reluctant to disregard their own classroom policies and procedures; in fact, veteran teachers are more likely to ignore the demands of administration and run their classrooms as they deem necessary. Experienced teachers dwell less on teacher motivation and more on rules and grades (Walls et al., 2002). Again, we see how the separation of all parties involved does very little to ease the concerns of administrators, teachers, parents, and students. The perception of school safety and discipline does not only differ among teachers, students, and the surrounding community, Walls et al. note that it also differs among novice teachers, more experienced teachers, male teachers, and female teachers.

In order for a school to be perceived as safe, all members of the institution must agree upon policies and procedures. However, the previous article demonstrates the lines and factors that separate members of an educational institution. Lashway (1997) believes

when people in an organization share an explicit agreement on the values, beliefs, purposes, and goals that should guide behavior, that is when cooperation among all parties involved can occur. Based on this idea, schools across the nation are failing in sharing vision. Too often, teachers confuse the students because they do not enforce the same rules and policies. These contradictions confuse and have little effect on managing student behavior. Administrators, teachers and students need to work together in order to create a similar understanding of how they expect their school to be run (Lashway).

When a clear understanding of the policies and procedure is presented, it is up to all members of the educational society to pledge to support these policies. This guarantee to abide by the mission of the school can help all teachers work together to ensure a safe environment; it will also help all teachers perform better in the classroom. As stated by Lashway (1997), schools with a clear vision have a standard by which teachers can gauge their own efforts. Without the cooperation of all members of the school environment, a teacher does not have anything to which to compare effective and ineffective teaching methods and strategies. When all teachers expect the same behavior from the student body, the questions of correct and incorrect behavior are removed from the dilemma. Lashway's idea holds the belief that when all administrators, teachers, and students are speaking the same, a common ground can be formed which all members of the educational society can stand upon. It is imperative for this common ground to reach out to the surrounding community to ensure its effectiveness (Lashway).

Cunningham (2002) reiterates the idea that the school system is not independent of the surrounding community. However, this misconception seems to be the prevailing belief. Teachers need to be more involved with the community they serve in order to

reduce the negative perceptions of both teachers and the community. This is not a new concept. Cunningham noted that the school systems have recognized the need for public support and participation. The idea behind involving the community is a valid solution. The students who attend local schools are all members of the surrounding community; therefore, it seems crucial for the community to enforce the same policies and procedures implemented by the schools.

Often the negative perception teachers have of the community they serve makes a partnership virtually impossible. The community needs to be involved in the socially, physically, and mental development of the school children; in fact, the school policies and procedures will be ineffective if those same standards are not carried out in the community. Administrators see involving the community as an amenable solution to the problem of negative perceptions engulfing their schools, but the administrators and teachers have made only feeble attempts in promoting this solution. Cunningham (2002) noted that 78 % of superintendents in a recent Public Agenda survey reported they have processes under way to encourage public engagement; only 41 % say they actually solicit the input of the community prior to formulating policy. Only 4% of the superintendents viewed communication with the community as their most pressing concern. The idea to involve the community is real; however, as Cunningham reports, the efforts to engage these policies are merely fictional.

The involvement of the community with the school environment is a necessity. The world today is different than it was fifty years ago, but the problems facing schools are the same. Garbarino (1997) relates the change in student behavior directly to the negative environment children participate within their communities. He states that

children are most vulnerable to the negative influence of an increasingly socially toxic environment. As reports have shown, and continue to reveal, the problem will only continue to worsen.

Garbarino (1997) reports that the society facing children is more complex and difficult than it was thirty years ago; therefore, school districts need the involvement of the community to enforce healthier lifestyles. He cites the lack of adult involvement in the lives of children as a major cause of the deteriorating behavior of children. Teachers are faced with the knowledge of the difficult home life facing the students, and the teachers create a negative perception of the parental supervision that takes place. This perception creates an even wider gap between teachers and parents. The gap that separates all the participants in this problem seems to be much wider than the seriousness about fixing it.

Purkey (1999) noted that most parents, teachers, administrators, and students want their schools to be safe more than anything else. The easiest solution has been to implement police presence, metal detectors, security guards, and cameras within the school. The schools now resemble prisons rather than educational institutions. The effect of these measures has transformed teachers into prison guards and students into prisoners.

Though these measures are implemented to ensure the safety of all members of the school community, the presence of these tactics creates the negative perception. Purkey (1999) also stated that the use of these measures has led to the decreased morale among teachers and students. The safety measures being implemented in schools across the nation are a direct result of the negative perceptions of schools, and they have the opposite of the intended effect.

Though the schools appear safe with the increased security measure, teachers and students still feel unprotected. It is this fear of feeling unsafe that is harming many of our schools across the nation. The perception that a teacher or student has that he or she may be harmed or injured takes away from academic pursuits. Ascher (1994) cites the negative perception teachers and students have of their schools' safety as a direct influence on lack of effort and energy in the classroom by both teachers and students. Both parties are more concerned about getting through the day unharmed than they are about teaching or learning. The concern to correct the perception of school safety is only getting worse.

In Fitzsimmons' (1998) article titled *School-Wide Behavioral Management Systems*, she recommends a similar solution to a previous article to the growing concern over the behavioral and negative perception problem facing schools. She believes all children need to learn self-discipline. This solution resembles Williams' (1978) solution of self-responsibility. The comparison between the two articles shows that the problem that has grown worse over the past fifty years calls for the similar solution. The question educators and the members of the surrounding community need to ask themselves is what we are doing to create positive perceptions within our schools. Fifty years have gone by since the *Phi Delta Kappan* article, and the problem has grown to reach the front pages of newspapers across the nation; however, we are still no closer to a solution than we were fifty years ago.

The front page of the *Philadelphia Daily News* June 14, 2004 reads, "Schools' Rules: Time to Get Serious" (Dean, Lucey, and Polaneczky, 2004). Fifty years and now educators are declaring that they are going to get serious. Philadelphia schools plan on

implementing new codes for dress, attendance, language, weapons, respect, and parental involvement. The ratification of school code is nothing that has not been spoken about before. As we have seen, rules and procedures are continually being revised; however, will the perception held by teachers, students, and the surrounding communities support these modifications to school policy? Polaneczky (2004) noted that the change to school policies and procedures are long overdue.

The literature presented here demonstrates the continued concern for administrators, teachers, students, and the surrounding community to change the negative perception of our schools. The literature reveals the problems and solutions recognized by educators across the nation; however, the recognition of the problem and implementation of various solutions have done little to ease the negative perceptions facing our schools. The literature reveals the necessity for understanding the perceptions teachers have of school safety and discipline, and for implementing a practical solution to a problem that needs constant attention.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study was conducted in order to test the perceptions teachers in a single high school have concerning their safety and the safety of their students in order to determine if teaching strategies and methods are affected by these perceptions. Also, the study looked closely at how effectively teachers handle discipline problems within the classroom. Since discipline appears to be a major concern for schools across the nation, the ability a teacher has in handling discipline problems is crucial in providing a productive learning environment.

The Setting

This study was conducted in a very large school district located in a rural area of Southern New Jersey. The school, which was built in 1976, does not have the aesthetic appeal that many of the newer schools going up around the state are quickly becoming known for. The school resembles a prison with towers on the South and East sides of the building as well as on the West and North sides. The inside of the building, including the halls and classrooms, are color coded in dull, drab colors. Each wing of the building is a different color, and the rooms of the wings use the matching colors. The hallways are intimidating because it is very difficult to see who may be coming around the corners. This presents a problem for those who walk the halls because the design of the building lends itself to many unexpected accidents. Many freshmen entering the building complain about the difficulty in locating classes because of the poor configuration of the school. It is important to mention the poorly designed halls of this school because this is something that leads to built up frustrations.

Currently the total number of students enrolled in this school is 1382. The student body is made up of an extremely diverse population. The most current statistics on the breakdown of the student body show that 40% of the students are white, 38% are Hispanic, 19% are African American, 3% are Asian, and <1% are American Indian. There are 11.3 students for every teacher in the school. The socioeconomic status of the students is represented in the following: the percentage of students receiving free or reduced-priced lunches is 46%. This statistic reveals the drastic need for state help in supporting the students of this particular public school. The state average for students receiving free or reduced-priced lunch is 20%.

This public school is involved in the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program to assist students who are academically average students and places them in advanced classes. Because many of the students in this school are not as privileged as students in surrounding schools, the school has chosen to create an AVID department. The AVID program is for all students; however, the program targets students who are from minority, rural, low-income families that lack the tradition of going to college. The administration felt that in order to improve the performance of all students, the implementation of the academic, Federally funded program, AVID, would help the school with the mission to assist all students.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 25 out of the 136 teachers at the school. These 25 teachers were chosen based on their subject matter disciplines, gender, and years of teaching experience. Because of the small sample of representative teachers, the investigator wanted to get as wide a variety in the sample as possible. The investigator

approached each participant individually and explained the process and the purpose of the study. The breakdown of the participants is represented by 15 female teachers and 10 male teachers. The teachers all had different levels of teaching experience. The male teachers consisted of 3 teachers with 1-5 years experience, 2 teachers with 6-11 years, 1 teacher with 12-17 years, and 4 teachers with 22 or more years experience. The female teachers were represented by 3 teachers with 1-5 years experience, 4 teachers with 6-11 years, 1 teacher with 12-17 years, and 7 teachers with 22 or more years experience. The sample consisted of 11 English teachers, 6 math teachers, 4 science teachers, and 4 teachers of elective subjects.

Instruments

The instruments used by this investigator were a forced response questionnaire, a classroom observation, and a post observation interview.

The questionnaire for this study was a forced response survey. The investigator decided to use a forced response questionnaire (see Appendix C) in order to make the collection of data as thorough as possible. The questionnaire consisted of twelve questions. Eleven were forced response questions. One question was an open-ended question. The questions were designed to allow teachers to express their perceptions of school safety, discipline procedures, classroom management, and how all of these factors affect teaching methods and strategies. The questions for this survey were designed by the investigator based on informal conversations held with teachers in the school. The casual conversations held with teachers about their concerns about school safety and discipline guided the investigator in devising the questionnaire. The questions were based on teacher complaints about administration, students, and parents. Also, many teachers

expressed their displeasure to this investigator about the prior and current behavioral problems of the students. The investigator used the concerns of the teachers to reveal if this was the general consensus of the surveyed staff. While spending time in this particular school, the investigator also encountered first hand the behavior and discipline problems with students; therefore, the questions designed for this survey were done in an attempt to allow the teachers an opportunity to express their opinions and concerns. The questions were designed to allow the teachers to express their perceptions of the school's safety and discipline procedures.

Based on the answers from the questionnaire, the teachers were asked if they would be willing to allow the investigator to observe a class that the teacher felt demonstrated behavioral problems. The investigator used an observation rubric (see Appendix D). The observations took place in math, English, science, and elective classes. The observations took place in four English classes, two science classes, and four math classes. The investigator observed a total of ten classes.

Following the observation, the investigator used a post observation interview to further question the participants.

Procedures

The investigator began the procedure of this study by first contacting the principal of the school to ask for permission to conduct this study in his school. The investigator presented the principal with a formal letter (see Appendix A) stating the purpose of the study and requesting the permission to conduct the study using teachers as participants. The principal granted the investigator permission to conduct the study and wrote a letter (see

Appendix B), which was to be presented to the Institutional Review Board, stating his approval of the study.

Then the investigator presented the Institutional Review Board with a disposition form stating the purpose for the study was to ensure that students were receiving a thorough and efficient education regardless of the negative perceptions teachers may have concerning safety and discipline procedures of the school, and the approval letter from the principal. Following the completion of this disposition form, the Institutional Review Board granted the investigator permission to conduct this study.

After the approval to conduct the study was granted, the investigator presented the questionnaire to teachers selected by the investigator. Each teacher signed a consent form stating that all responses would be anonymous and that all the data gathered would be confidential and that no physical or psychological risks would be involved in this study. The teachers approached consisted of math, English, science, and elective teachers. The investigator chose teachers in the math and English departments because both of these classes run on a block schedule, which is one hour and six minutes long. The investigator wanted to see how the students and teachers performed in this setting. The investigator also approached the science teachers because of the difference in class time the students spend in these classes: forty minutes. The other teacher approached with the survey was an elective teacher. She was chosen to participate in this study because of her involvement in a particular violent action that took place in the school. The teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire and return it to the investigator's cooperating teacher's mailbox at the earliest convenience. Then the questionnaires were either collected or received in the mailbox, and the data was recorded. The teachers were asked

on the questionnaire to allow the investigator to observe the classes that the teachers felt were their most difficult based on behavioral problems.

When all questionnaires were returned, the investigator did not schedule classroom observations; instead, the investigator asked each teacher who agreed to a classroom observation if an unannounced observation would be permissible. Most of the teachers agreeing to an observation were comfortable with the investigator coming to a class unannounced. The ten observations took place over the course of two weeks. The investigator had a prepared sheet of specific details noting student behavior, teacher reactions, and student and teacher performance (see Appendix D). The observation form tracked how the teacher greeted students, how the students responded, and how quickly students became engaged in the daily lesson. The investigator took field notes about specific gestures, commands, tone of voice, pace of class, and any other specific details used by the teacher to instruct and manage the class. Also, the investigator took field notes on student reactions and responses to methods and strategies used by the teacher. Following the observation, the investigator scheduled an interview with the teacher.

The interview was designed to ask questions about the use of methods and strategies used by the teacher. Also, the investigator asked the teachers to discuss their perceptions of school safety and discipline, and how they felt the students and other teachers responded to these procedures. When the collection and completion of all questionnaires, observations, and interviews was completed by the investigator, all of the information and data was put together in order to perform an efficient analysis of data.

Data Analysis

The investigator reviewed all answers given on the questionnaire, totaling the number of responses given to specific questions that the investigator feels show a direct connection to safety and discipline perceptions of the teachers. Data was then disaggregated by gender and years of teaching experience. The participants were divided into male and female by years of experience in order to determine whether there is a connection of perception of safety and discipline in regards to these factors.

The reports for the observation rubric and field notes taken by the investigator were analyzed by the investigator to test the effectiveness of the teacher's management system used during classroom instruction. The field notes were used to determine specific strategies used by the teacher to maintain a productive classroom environment: tone of voice, facial expressions, greeting class, pace of lesson, dismissing class, and any other notes taken by the investigator that had an effect on the class. Finally, the investigator coded the interviews by looking for reoccurring responses to the following questions:

What is the biggest problem with teaching in this school?

What is the biggest problem with the students?

What is the root behind disciplinary problems?

What are some possible solutions?

Based on all of the above information, the investigator believed that a realistic approach to conducting further studies in this area could be developed in order to reach a solution to the negative perceptions teachers have concerning safety and discipline procedures within their school.

Chapter 4: Presentation of Research Findings

This study, which was conducted over an eight-week period, dealt with the perceptions teachers had concerning safety and discipline within their school. The objective of this study was to determine if teachers' perceptions of safety and discipline affect teaching methods and strategies which ultimately interfere with a productive learning environment. Twenty-five teachers, 10 male and 15 female with differing degrees of teaching experience, were asked to respond honestly to a questionnaire, demonstrate their normal classroom methods and strategies in an unannounced observation, and be as frank as possible in a one-on-one interview with the investigator. It was the hope of this investigator that all information provided by the participants would reflect their honest opinions and most typical teaching methods. In any study, it is impossible to guarantee that all participants will be as candid as the investigator could hope for; however, the results of this study reveal the necessity for educators to continue studying the perceptions teachers have concerning school safety and discipline in order to ensure safe and productive learning institutions.

The first part of this study was conducted through a forced response questionnaire (see Appendix C). The results of the questionnaire are presented by the following chart. There were eleven questions on the questionnaire. The possible answers for the questionnaire were yes or no responses. Questions eight and nine had a choice of four responses. Figure 1 reveals the breakdown of male and female participants, years of teaching experience, and how they answered the questions on the questionnaire.

Participant	Q1 years?	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 5	Q 6	Q 7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11
1	1-5	M	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Write up	<1/2	Y	Y
2	1-5	M	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Continue to teach	<1/2	Y	N
3	1-5	M	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Speak to student	1/2	N	Y
4	6-11	M	Y	Y	N	N	N	Speak to student	<1/2	Y	N
5	6-11	M	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Write up	1/2	N	Y
6	12-17	M	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Continue to teach	<1/2	N	Y
7	12-17	M	Y	Y	N	N	N	Write up	0	Y	N
8	22+	M	Y	Y	N	N	N	Verbally	<1/2	Y	Y
9	22+	M	Y	Y	N	N	N	Speak to student	0	Y	N
10	22+	M	Y	Y	N	N	N	Write up	0	Y	N
11	1-5	F	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	All methods	<1/2	Y	Y
12	1-5	F	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Verbally	<1/2	Y	Y
13	1-5	F	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Verbally	1/2	Y	Y
14	6-11	F	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Write up	1/2	N	Y
15	6-11	F	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Speak to student	1/2	Y	Y
16	6-11	F	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Speak to student	<1/2	Y	Y
17	6-11	F	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Write up	1/2	N	Y
18	12-17	F	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Speak to student	<1/2	Y	Y
19	22+	F	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Speak to student	<1/2	Y	Y
20	22+	F	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Speak to student	1/2	Y	N
21	22+	F	Y	Y	N	N	N	Speak to student	<1/2	N	Y
22	22+	F	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Speak to student	1/2	N	Y
23	22+	F	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Speak to student	1/2	N	Y
24	22+	F	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Write up	<1/2	N	Y
25	22+	F	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Write up	1/2	N	Y

Figure 1. Responses to survey questions by participant

Figure 1 shows all the participants and their answers to the questionnaire only. The chart does not represent any finding in the observations or interviews. The chart was organized by gender and years experience. Participants 1-10 were all males and participants 11-25 were all females. Question 1 reveals the years of teaching experience of each participant and question 2 reveals the participants' gender. The questionnaire (see Appendix C) should be used in analyzing this chart. Questions 3 and 4 on the questionnaire represented

the highest percentage of agreement among the teachers, a detail that shows that there is a concern facing this particular school regarding safety and discipline within this school.

Question # 3 was [D]o you perceive school safety to be a concern for your school?

All of the participants in this study responded to the question. Out of twenty-five teachers only one teacher felt that school safety was not a concern for the school. This means that 96% of the teachers responding to this questionnaire felt that school safety was a concern within their school.

Question # 4 was [D]o you perceive school discipline to be a concern for you school?

Again, all participants responded to this question. Out of twenty-five teachers only one teacher felt that the school did not have a problem with discipline in the school. That means 96% of the participants perceived discipline to be a concern for the school.

To demonstrate the reality these negative perceptions have on teaching strategies and methods, the investigator believes question eleven directly relates teaching methods and strategies used by these participants in the classroom. All twenty-five participants responded to the question. Out of twenty-five teachers, eighteen or 72%, responded that their teaching methods and strategies are affected by their perceptions of safety and discipline. This representative sample of teachers' answers reveals that strategies and methods are being influenced because of the negative perceptions held of school discipline and safety. In order to fully understand which teachers are being influenced the most by their negative perceptions, the investigator will break the answers of the participants into two groups: males and females. It should be noted again that there were five more female participants than male participants in this study.

Out of the ten male participants, five or 50% of the male respondents agreed that their methods and strategies were altered because of negative perceptions of safety and discipline. However, the female participants responding to the question show a drastic difference from the male participants. Out of the fifteen female participants participating in this study, fourteen teachers stated that their methods and strategies were determined by the perceptions of school safety and discipline. An alarming 14 out of 15 or 93% of the female participants felt their methods and strategies were being influenced by their perceptions of school safety and discipline. The overall results show that teaching methods and strategies among both males and females is at an alarmingly high percentage. This representative sample of teachers shows that perceptions of safety and discipline are affecting teaching methods and strategies of teachers in the classroom. The findings here will be further discussed in the observation and interview portion of this chapter. Since the negative perception problem obviously exists in this school, the investigator felt it important to see how these perceptions disrupt the productive classroom.

The next question to be looked at more closely is question number 9. Since this study was conducted to ensure that students are receiving the most thorough and efficient education from teachers, the study asked how much class time teachers are losing because of the negative perceptions of safety and/or discipline issues. The study needed to question how much valuable class time is being used by the teachers to address concerns and issues other than a productive learning environment for our students. Therefore, question nine asked the following of all participants: How much class time do you feel you waste disciplining students?

The participants were given three quarters of class time, one half of class time, less than half, and none as possible answers to the question. When we as teachers use too much time disciplining or correcting student behavior, we are ultimately taking away from student learning; therefore, the results of this question demonstrate the need for our teachers to find productive methods for disciplining students in order to create a productive learning environment. All twenty-five teachers responded to question 9. Out of twenty-five participants, 10 or 40% responded that they waste one half of the class disciplining students. This is a distressingly high number of teachers using valuable class time disciplining student behavior. Again, the investigator felt it important to see if the male participants or the female participants were encountering more difficulty in keeping their classes on task.

Out of the fifteen female teachers asked this question, eight teachers or 53% of the females said they waste one half of the class disciplining students. This is a drastic difference in numbers compared to the male teachers. Out of the ten males asked this question, two or 20% of the male teachers said they waste one half of the class time disciplining students. The difference of 33% reveals a need to further study the methods, which will be discussed in chapter five, used by both male and female teachers to discipline students. After looking at the rate of teachers responding that they waste one half the class disciplining students, the investigator wanted to see if the years of teaching experience had a connection to how much time was used disciplining students versus keeping students on task.

These findings reveal that the level of teaching experience did not really factor into how much class time was used disciplining or dealing with off task issues. The

findings in the observation and interview portions of this chapter will shed some more light on the use of class time by the participants. The numbers that follow reveal a possible connection between male teachers and female teachers in combination with years of teaching experience and how much class time they use disciplining students.

Looking at the female teachers first, the total number of female teachers responding who responded that they waste one half of the class disciplining students was eight. The results of the questionnaire show that one half or 50% of the female teachers answering (n=15) that they waste one half of the class time had less than eleven years teaching experience. One teacher had a level of experience ranging from 1-5 years and three teachers had a level of teaching experience ranging from 6-11 years. The more alarming numbers are found in the female teachers with 22 + years teaching experience. It should be noted that the majority (7 out of 15) of female participants in this study were represented by teachers with 22+ years of teaching experience; therefore, the numbers will be higher for teachers with 22+ years teaching experience. Four teachers or 50% of those who answered that they waste one half the class time on discipline said that they had 22+ years of teaching experience. All other participants to this question, which were 7 out of the total of fifteen female participants, stated that they waste less than one half of the class time disciplining students.

Out of the ten male participants who answered question 9, only two or 20% said they waste one half of the class time disciplining students. Teaching experience seemed to play more of a role in the male teacher answers than the female answers. Out of the two male teachers answering that they waste one half the class time disciplining students, one teacher had 1-5 years teaching experience and the other teacher had 6-11 years

teaching experience. So, from this representative sample of male teachers, it appears that as males gain years in teaching experience, they appear more in control of their classes. However, the fact that 50% of the female teachers have 22+ years teaching experience and are wasting one half of the class time is something that needs to be looked into. This investigator decided to compare the female teachers with 22+ years teaching experience to the male teachers with 22+ years experience in order to determine if more class time was being used disciplining students as the years of teaching experienced increased.

First, out of the twenty-five participants of the study who answered question nine only three or 12% of the teachers answered that they waste none of their class time disciplining students. In a direct contrast to the females, all three (3) male teachers that said they never waste class time disciplining students had 22+ years teaching experience. Out of the ten male teacher participants, only four or 40% of the male participants teachers had 22+ years teaching experience. Three teachers out of the four male participants with 22+ years experience said they waste no time disciplining students. Therefore, only 1 out of the 4 or 25% of the male participants said that they waste class time disciplining students. That one teacher responded that he used less than half of the class time to discipline students. This is an extreme difference compared to the female teachers with 22+ years teaching experience. Seven out of the fifteen female participants responding to this questionnaire had 22+ years experience. Four out of that seven or 57% of female teachers with 22+ years teaching experience said that they waste one half of their class time disciplining students. The remaining three said they waste less than half of the class disciplining students. The numbers represented here seem to reveal that males with more teaching experience are more productive in their classroom than females with

more teaching experience; however, the number of female participants with 22 + years teaching experience participating in this study almost doubles the number of male participants. It would be unfair of this investigator and the study to say categorically that males with more teaching experience are better at keeping their class on task. However, the findings here will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

So far, the numbers have shown that 96% of all of the teachers (n=25) participating in this study perceived safety to be a concern and 96% of the participants (n=25) perceived discipline to be a concern. Also, ten or 40% of all participants felt they wasted at least one half of the class time disciplining students. These numbers reveal that there is a problem of perception among this representative sample of teachers concerning safety and discipline in this school. Question 5 asked [D]o you ever perceive that your safety or the safety of a student in your class is at risk?

All twenty-five teachers responded to the question. Out of twenty-five participants, eight or 32% said they sometimes fear that their safety or the safety of a student is at risk. Although the questionnaire did not differentiate, the interview portion of this chapter will reveal some more detailed information about whose safety the teachers feared most. Out of the ten male teacher participants, two or 20% said they fear their safety or a student's safety is at risk. Out of the fifteen (15) female teachers questioned, five (5) or 33% fear their safety or the safety of a student is at risk. The teachers in this school, at least the ones taking part of this study, definitely have negative perceptions of their school's safety and discipline procedures. The next question that this investigator needed to asked was to determine if the negative perceptions were affecting teacher performance.

Question 6 asked do you ever fear coming to school because of the perception you have of school safety? Amazingly and refreshingly, out of the twenty-five teachers who responded to this question, only four or 16% of the participants said they sometimes fear coming to school because of the perceptions they have of school safety. These findings will be looked at more closely during the interview portion of this chapter. The questionnaire reveals that one out of ten or 10% of the male participants responded that they sometimes do fear coming to school because of the perception of school safety. Out of fifteen female participants, three or 20% said that they fear coming to school because of the perception they have of school safety. The male teacher who said he sometimes fears coming to school had 12-17 years teaching experience, and the female teachers who said they fear coming to school had 1-5, 12-17, and 22+ years of teaching experience respectively. Therefore, this study revealed that there was a fear among teachers from all ranges of teaching experience. The study here is dealing with a representative sample of the entire staff and faculty. The numbers represented here should not create fear or alarm in any teacher or student in this school that they should fear their safety; the numbers only suggest that there is a problem of perception in this school. The observations of classroom procedures conducted by this investigator will reveal a different finding than the numbers represented by the questionnaire. Teachers who perceived that their classes had behavioral problems volunteered to allow this investigator to observe their classes. Out of the twenty-five participants, fourteen classroom observations were conducted.

The investigator designed an observation rubric (see Appendix D) in order to assist with the classroom observation process. However, this investigator found that the field notes that were taken revealed more about the perceptions teachers have regarding

their students than the simple basic guides found on the observation rubric. Out of the twenty-five participants, only fourteen agreed to a classroom observation. Therefore, it should be noted that the original representative sample has become even smaller. The representative sample is made up of five male teachers and nine female teachers. Looking at the participant breakdown, the following teachers participated in the observation and interview process: Participants 2, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 20, and 21.

Although the numbers of participants in this portion of the study are small, the information was deemed valuable by this investigator to further continue this study.

To begin understanding the findings in the observation portion of this study, it should be noted that all participants felt they were allowing this investigator to observe their classes with the worst behavioral problems. This information is important to note because the observations of these classes revealed to this investigator that the students were responsive to the teacher and well behaved. This is in direct contrast to the perceptions the teachers had of these classes. The investigator was looking for the following: how the students enter the classroom, how the teacher begins class, the difficulty level of the teacher getting students on task, do the students seem to respect the teacher, and how the teacher handles disciplinary problems. In order to provide the reader with the clearest picture of the classroom activities, all observations were compiled and only the most reoccurring incidents are noted by this investigator.

How do the students enter the classroom?

Because of reoccurring threats and rumors of violence circulating around the school, this particular school participates in many drills, codes, and procedures in order to provide the safest learning environment. The school, at the time of this interview, was

conducting what is known as “Family-Time.” This code means that all teachers must be at their doorways prior to students entering the class. This is done to prevent any mishaps in the hallways in between classes. This investigator observed that out of the fourteen participants, only six or 43% of the participants were greeting their students at the doorway prior to the beginning of class. The observations showed that many teachers were too involved with students from previous classes to get to the doorway before the next class arrived. In many instances, the teachers were still dealing with students from other classes while the next class had already arrived and been seated. The investigator noted in all the observations that the students quickly recognized that there was a visitor to the classroom. The students were wondering if they were being watched or the teacher was being watched. The investigator did not answer any questions that were posed by the students. However, the fact that the students recognized that they were being observed seemed to have an impact on their behavior. The investigator observed that the students quickly gave the teacher their attention. This type of behavior observed by the investigator was in direct contrast to what the teachers had told the investigator prior to any observation. In the field notes taken by the investigator, it was noted in every single observation, that the students demonstrated proper school behavior; it was noted that the behavior of the students might have been a direct result of the presence of the investigator.

How does teacher begin class?

In almost every observation, the teachers just seemed to begin teaching. There was no recognition of any type of disruptive behavior. It should be noted that during the observations, there was very little disruptive behavior taking place, but the teachers did

not give any suggestion to this investigator that any type of disruptive behavior would be recognized. Instead, the teachers engaged in light-hearted banter with the students prior to really getting involved in the lesson. In almost every instance, the teachers approached the students with very light-hearted conversations. The teachers appeared to allow the students to unload any off task conversations in the beginning of class. The investigator noted that this type of interaction between teacher and students helped the teacher get the students' full attention. The teachers would open the floor to any off the topic discussions; however, almost every teacher used this conversation to take the lead of the classroom. The teachers would then use this opportunity to get the students into the lesson of the day. In the field notes taken by the investigator, every teacher used the first five to ten minutes of class time to allow the students to get themselves settled into their seats, get their books out, or discuss any off the topic conversations. If the discussions began to take over the class, the teachers would step in and bring the students back on task. However, it was noted by the investigator that the classes did not seem to stray too far from the topic or lesson of the day. Most teachers were able to get their students' attention just by clapping hands, raising their hands, or just by simply asking the students for their attention. It was noted by the investigator, that not one teacher had any difficulty getting the students started on the lesson of the day.

Does the teacher have difficulty getting students on task?

This investigator noted that the teachers did not have any difficulty getting the students on task; in fact, the observations revealed that the teachers had full command of their classes. The observations did not show any connection to classroom productivity dependent on gender, teaching experience, or subject matter. When there was an off task

comment or conversation, the teachers would just quickly and politely request that the students return to the topic of the lesson. Off task infractions happened in just three of the investigator's observations. The investigator noted in all observations that teachers all seemed to have full command of their classes.

Do the students seem to respect the teacher?

For the investigator, this was not an easy observation to make; however, based on the behavior of the students and the interaction of the students, the investigator observed students giving respect to their teachers. The investigator made field notes stating that the fact that the students were "well-behaved" based on the presence of a stranger in the room was a demonstration of the students respect for their teacher. The students were not aware of why or who this investigator was observing; therefore, the fact that they were on their best behavior reveals that an amount of respect was given to the teachers during the observation. Also, if the students thought they were being observed, they did not want to demonstrate behavior that would seem inappropriate for school. In every observation, field notes were made stating how willing the students were to offer suggestion, answer questions, and ask questions. The students observed in every class participated in the lesson prepared by the teachers. This does not demonstrate an amount of respect, but the investigator believes that the willingness of the students to make an attempt in order to make the teacher look good is a clear sign of respect.

How does the teacher handle any disciplinary problems?

During the observations performed by this investigator, there were minimal discipline problems. The fact that there was a stranger in the room leads this investigator to believe that there was a direct connection to the fact that there were limited

disciplinary problems. However, when a teacher did encounter a problem, the teacher just kept on teaching and the student did not receive any recognition from the teacher and there was no class time used for disciplining. The investigator noted in the observations that most of the discipline problems observed occurred in male teachers' classes. However, the reader should be reminded that female teachers responded that they used more class time disciplining students. The investigator noted that male teachers do experience discipline problems, but because they (the males) just ignore the problem and continue to teach, they may not recognize this as a discipline problem. In one class, the investigator observed a student sleeping on his desk. The teacher (who was a male teacher with 22+ years teaching experience) simply asked if the student would wake up. When the student refused, claiming that he was just tired, the teacher allowed the student to sleep. This situation and the strategy used by the teacher will be explored further in the interview portion of this study. The observations all revealed that teachers in this study simply continue to teach their lessons regardless of any type of disciplinary problem. It was noted by this investigator that there were no true disciplinary problems during the time of these observations. The interview portion of this study will reveal the surprise and delight of all the teachers taking part in the observation portion of this study by the behavior of the students. The teachers were extremely shocked at how well their students behaved. However, the investigator believes that teaching strategies and methods may have also been altered because of the presence of an observer in the class.

The investigator believes the observation portion of this study revealed a greater amount of respect from the students than the teachers previously perceived. All of the teachers observed for this study were extremely proud and delighted at the behavior of

their classes. The interviews that followed the observations will reveal how concerned the teachers were about the perceptions of school safety and discipline and how these perceptions were affecting their own teaching methods and strategies.

Interviews

The interviews used in this study were conducted in order to allow the teachers to express their perceptions and feeling about the school's safety and discipline issues that seem to interfere with a productive learning environment. This investigator believes that these interviews, which were conducted in the privacy of each teacher's classroom, are the factors that will guide further research on this topic. For the purpose of this study, the investigator used only those interviews of the teachers who were observed by the investigator. In order to better understand the perceptions the teachers have concerning safety and discipline procedures within the school, the investigator felt it would be necessary to question the teachers about the perceptions they have of the students, prior preparation, parents, and the administration of the school.

Each interview began in the same fashion. The teachers commented on how well behaved their students were during the investigator's observation. When asked why they felt their students demonstrated such outstanding behavior, the teachers responded that their students thought that the investigator was making notes on the teacher's performance. The students did not think that they were the ones being observed. The teachers told the investigator during the interview that students made comments about why the teacher was being observed, and they wanted to make sure the teacher got a good evaluation. Therefore, the students were assisting the teacher in order to help the teacher get a good observation report. The teachers noted how involved their students were in the

lessons provided by the teacher. This investigator asked why the teachers felt the students were so well behaved and each teacher responded by stating that the presence of a stranger in the room led the students to react differently to the teacher. This investigator brought it to the attention of each teacher interviewed that the behavior demonstrated by the students might be a direct connection to the respect they have for the teacher. The teachers responded that they did not feel that the respect the students have for the teacher had anything to do with their behavior; instead, they offered the suggestion again that it was merely due to the presence of the investigator. In each interview, the teachers did not really commend the students for the way they behaved; instead, they told this investigator that the behavior witnessed was rare and if an observation were to take place again, the observation findings would be different.

Overall, the teachers felt the students are not fully prepared to be students. It was the general consensus of all the teachers taking part in this portion of the study that the students lacked a good work ethic, responsibility, and respect for themselves or others. When questioned about what the teachers felt was the direct connection to these perceptions, the response found by this investigator to be the cause of these concerns was the prior preparation, administration of the school, and the parents of the students. The investigator discovered that the teachers felt the middle schools were failing in preparing these children to be students. The teachers interviewed expressed a concern for the way that their students were entering high school. The interviews uncovered that the negative perceptions these teachers have concerning safety and discipline are connected to the way that their students have been prepared for entering high school. They felt they did not have the proper exposure to correct student behavior. The interviews uncovered the

negative perception the teachers taking part in this study had towards their colleagues in the middle schools.

The majority of the teachers interviewed for this study expressed their lack of approval for the procedures that the middle schools use to prepare the students for further education. It was found by this investigator that the majority of the teachers taking part in this study believed that the middle schools were a direct cause of the poor skills and disruptive behavior of the students entering high school. During the interviews, every teacher expressed the concern for how the students were being prepared in the middle schools. The teachers believed they spent half of the school year getting the students ready for high school, a detail they believe should be covered during the middle school years of education. Also, the interviews revealed that the teachers felt that the middle schools were not requiring any accountability from their students; therefore, the students were entering high school with a poor work ethic and a disregard for authority. The interviews revealed that the teachers believed that the middle schools were a direct cause of the problems with the safety and discipline of the students. The interviews revealed that the negative perceptions the teachers taking part in this study have concerning safety and discipline begin even before the students enter the building. Teachers were forthright with their negative perceptions of the middle schools during the interview portion of this study. A cause of this possible problem in the middle schools was linked to the changing laws forbidding teachers to show emotion towards their students, especially at the middle school level. The interviews revealed that many teachers are frustrated that they are unable to demonstrate a more caring and nurturing atmosphere with their students. The inability to promote a more caring school is linked to the disrespect the students

demonstrate towards themselves and others in school. This lack of promoting a more caring environment was noted in the interview process as needed more than ever because of the lack of care that is given to the students at home.

It was discovered by this investigator during the interviews that all of the teachers taking part in this portion of the study believed the parents to be a direct cause of the disruptive behavior demonstrated by the students. Every teacher noted the lack of home care, supervision, rules, and expectations present in the homes of the students as a cause of the teacher's negative perceptions about school safety and discipline. In fact, the interviews revealed a negative perception held by the teachers of the parents of the students. The teachers interviewed admitted they are unable to control their students if the parents of the children do not expect them to exhibit basic, common, human decencies at home. The teachers participating in this study believe the lack of a home structure is harming the well-being of the children. The interviews revealed that teachers believe many of the parents of the students are too giving, which results in the students not feeling as if they have to work for anything; the students expect everything to be given to them. Also, the teachers interviewed stated that the parents do not expect or require their children to do anything to make themselves better. In fact, in these interviews conducted by this investigator, the teachers expressed the feeling that many of the parents they deal with do not demonstrate proper behavior. The teachers feel they are often being attacked by the parents of the children; therefore, the teachers revealed that they try to limit contact with the parents of their students. The interviews revealed that the teachers' negative perceptions of the students, safety, and discipline are often linked to the poor relations between teachers and parents.

During the interviews with the participating teachers, the investigator repeatedly heard that the administration is a major problem when it comes to the perceptions teachers have regarding safety and discipline. The teachers interviewed admitted that they are often helpless when it comes to disciplining their students because the administration does not back up the teachers on many issues. The majority of the teachers interviewed believe that the administration does more to appease the parents in order to eliminate negative relations between the parents and the school than they do to assist the teachers in the classroom. In fact, the teachers interviewed said that they do not trust the administration because of the lack of support given to the teachers. Because of this distrust, the teachers admitted that they are no longer in control of their classes or their students. It was noted by the investigator that the teachers said that they often felt attacked by the parents and the students because of the lack of support given by the administration. The parents and the students are aware of this lack of support; therefore, parents and students are more willing to challenge the teachers because they know that the administration will support them and not the teachers. The teachers admitted that the administration will always support the students and the parents first, and the teachers are left to take the blame. It is this feeling expressed by the teachers that is related to the negative perceptions the teachers have concerning safety and discipline. The teachers said they are left feeling helpless when it comes to dealing with issues of safety and discipline because of the lack of support given to them by the administration. The investigator discovered during the interview process that the teachers' negative perceptions are connected to their feelings of isolation from students, parents, and the administration.

All parts of this study were used by the investigator to reveal the perceptions teachers have concerning safety and discipline and how these perceptions affect teaching methods and strategies. The results of this study are alarming. The teachers participating in this study revealed that there is a lot of work that still needs to be done in order to fully understand how these perceptions restrict teaching in the classroom. The study also revealed that there is a lot of work that needs to be done in order to eliminate these perceptions. In reviewing the data, it is clear that there is a serious problem with the perceptions teachers have concerning safety and discipline; also, the data revealed some of the causes of the perception problem. The questionnaire, observations, and the interviews used to conduct this study will assist the investigator in determining if perceptions of school safety and discipline are affecting the methods used by teachers in the classroom; also, the study will assist the investigator in offering possible solutions and further studies to help teachers, students, parents, and administrators change how negative perceptions are formed and how the problem can be resolved.

Chapter 5: Conclusions, Implications, and Further Study

This study was used to test whether teachers had negative perceptions of school safety and discipline and how these perceptions affect teaching methods and strategies used in the classroom. The findings in this study are alarming. The perceptions teachers have concerning school safety and discipline demonstrated by the representative sample of teachers used for this study reveal that the perceptions teachers have are not getting better; in fact, the study revealed that the perceptions are growing worse. Though the study represented here is as accurate as possible, the investigator recognizes certain limitations.

Limitations

Since the perception of school safety and discipline requires the efforts of administrators, teachers, the surrounding community, and students, this study faced a number of limitations.

1. This study accessed the perceptions, thoughts, and opinions of only the teachers within the school; therefore, this study was limited to only the feelings presented by teachers.
2. This study was also limited to a small representative sample of teachers, so the investigator did not get a complete understanding of how the entire teaching staff feels about school safety and discipline. This further limited the generalizability of this study.

3. More female teachers were used for this study than male teachers; therefore, the study does not have an evenly distributed representative sample.
4. The twenty-five participants of this study were not all available for an observation and/or interview.
5. The behavior of the students during class observations may have been influenced by the presence of the investigator.
6. The behavior of the teachers during class observations may have been influenced by the presence of the investigator.

The limitations presented here represent the possible reasons why this study may require a more in-depth study on school safety and discipline. However, since these limitations have been noted, the reader can be assured that all the data presented here is accurate and true.

It has been noted that the perception teachers have concerning school safety and discipline can severely hamper teaching methods and strategies. The purpose of this study was to identify those perceptions of the teachers at this particular high school and how these perceptions relate to teaching. This study has shown that the perception teachers have concerning school safety and discipline does limit teachers and the way they teach. The teachers in this study admitted that they do alter their methods of teaching because of their negative perceptions they have regarding safety and discipline. Furthermore, the study revealed how these perceptions are formed and what can be done to ease this concern among teachers. The findings reveal that there are definitely more studies that need to be conducted in this area in order to make any further determinations.

Complaints among the teachers in the teachers' lounge were the catalyst for this study. The investigator engaged in "off the record" conversations with many teachers who were complaining about the behavioral problems of the students and the means by which the school was dealing with such behaviors. The teachers seemed very distressed about the problem, and this investigator wanted to know how this was affecting the classroom. This study has shown that the small representative sample of teachers taking part in this study do perceive their school to have a safety and discipline concern. Also, the teachers admitted that these perceptions do influence their teaching. It was not the intention of this study or the investigator to determine where these negative perceptions stem from; however, the study revealed the many causes of the perception problem held by the teachers.

The study has shown little to prove that the teachers alter their teaching methods and strategies in the classroom, but the study did confirm that teachers do perceive safety and discipline to be a problem, which ultimately harms the productive classroom. The study did reveal to this investigator that teachers are suffering from a feeling of isolation from the students, parents, and the administration. All of the teachers in this small representative sample complained about feeling secluded from the community of the school; it is this feeling that seemed to create the negative perceptions teachers had about the school.

The teachers complained that they were unable to control the behavior of their students because proper behavior was never expected from their middle school teachers and from parents. The number one solution to this problem that has been noted to be a concern for educators since the 1950s has been to get every individual involved with the

school active in the school community. However, this study revealed that there is too much separation among administrators, teachers, students, parents, and the surrounding community. In fact, many teachers participating in this study admitted that they purposely avoid contact with administrators and parents. For this investigator, the results presented here revealed that there should be further studies performed in order to fully understand and correct the perception problem facing schools.

Implications

The study presented here suggests that there is a great deal of work that needs to be performed in this school in order to rebuild the communication among teachers, students, administrators, and the surrounding community. Also, the study has shown that negative perceptions affect teachers in the following ways:

- Teaching methods are altered because of negative perceptions.
- The number of years of teaching experience does not influence the perceptions teachers have concerning safety and discipline.
- Female teachers are more likely to feel that they waste too much time disciplining students.
- Male teachers are more likely to feel as if they use none of their class time to discipline students.
- Students need to be encouraged to take accountability for their actions and behavior.
- Educators need to emphasize the importance for students to set high expectations for themselves and their work.
- Students need to learn how to be students in the lower grade levels.

- Teachers are likely to avoid communicating with parents because of the lack of support given to them by their administrators.
- Teachers need to seek better ways to communicate with the parents of the students in order to eliminate negative perceptions.
- Teachers need to search for ways to improve their perceptions of parents
- Programs and systems need to be provided for teachers in order to assist them in better understanding the home system of many of their students.
- A parent/teacher committee needs to be implemented in order to restore communication.
- Teachers need support groups in order to allow the teachers to express the feelings, opinions, and views of school safety and discipline.
- Teachers and administrators need to seek for ways to improve communications.
- Administrators need to seek better ways to support teachers, parents, and the students of the school community.
- Administrators need to provide more opportunities for teachers, parents, and students to interact in out of school settings in order to provide better communication systems.
- A more in depth study needs to be conducted to further understand this issue.

This study has provided and suggested many implications, but this investigator believes the greatest implication found in conducting this study is that further research is needed to reach a possible understanding and solution to this issue.

Further Study

This study focused on only on a small representative sample of teachers in order to understand the issue of negative perceptions held by the teachers. However, in order to fully understand this concern facing our nation's schools, more studies need to be conducted. It is recommended by this investigator that a future study would involve all members of the teaching staff; also, the students need to be included in the research. In order to complete further study, the administrators and parents should also be included to understand the perceptions held by all members of the school community. Without communication and involvement among all members of the school community, the negative perceptions will continue to spiral downward. It is imperative that we further understand the feelings of the students, administrators, and parents in order to reach an agreement on a possible solution. This investigator feels this issue needs to be studied further in order to restore the communication that has been lost among the members of this school. This study only scratched the surface of an issue that goes very deep, and this investigator believes that if further studies are not performed, the negative perceptions concerning school safety and discipline found in this school will continue to get worse.

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Appendix A
Letter to the Principal

Vineland High School North
3010 East Chestnut Avenue
Vineland, New Jersey 08361


February 27, 2004

Dear Mr. Peters:

Since I have had the pleasure of working with you and your extremely supportive staff, I have grown extremely interested in learning more about how your teachers conduct their classrooms in such an exemplary manner in some extremely adverse situations. As a graduate of Vineland High myself, I have strong expectations for the success of the students, the teachers, and the town, and I am committed to becoming the best possible teacher that I can become. Your staff has been extremely helpful in guiding me through some very difficult and trying situations so that I have been able to handle them professionally and successfully. Because of this supportive environment, I know that I would be very fortunate to conduct my master's research project here at Vineland High North. I would appreciate your approval to allow me to further understand how your teachers are so capable to teach and manage their classrooms under some very difficult times here at Vineland High North by granting me permission to conduct my research on Teachers' Perceptions of School Safety and How it Affects Teaching Methods and Discipline Strategies.

I have had the pleasure of teaching in your fine facility since the end of October, and I am constantly impressed by the dedication of your teachers to teach in a "business as usual" manner. I not only commend you and your dedicated staff, but I wish to further explore how they maintain such professionalism in the classroom. I look forward to working with you more in the very near future, and I know that my research will be nothing short of a success with your help and the help of your staff. Therefore, I wish to thank you in advance for your support as I complete my research and my thesis. Naturally, I will share the results with you at the completion of the project.

Sincerely,


James J. Lapsley

Appendix B
Letter of Approval to Conduct Study



Vineland High School

NORTH BUILDING
3010 EAST CHESTNUT AVENUE, VINELAND, NJ 08361
(856) 794-6800 • FAX (856) 507-8781

March 2, 2004

To Whom It May Concern:

I hereby grant James J. Lapsley the permission to conduct his research project entitled, "The Perception of School Safety and Discipline Procedures and the Effects These Perceptions Have on Teaching Methods and Discipline Strategies" at Vineland High School North to complete the requirements set forth by Rowan University in order to obtain his Masters in Science of Teaching.

James Lapsley has met with me, and he has described his methods of collecting data. I have approved his request to conduct and collect his data necessary to fulfill his educational objectives.

Sincerely,

Mr. Theodore E. Peters
Principal

Appendix C
Forced Response Questionnaire

9. How much class time do you feel you waste disciplining students?

3/4 classtime

1/2 of class time

Less than 1/2

NONE

In the space provided, please write any additional information you feel would be helpful in clarifying your answer to question 9.

10. Do you feel it is your responsibility to discipline students outside of your classroom?

YES

NO

11. Does the perception you have on safety and/or discipline in your school/classroom affect your teaching methods and discipline strategies?

YES

NO

Thank you for the time that you took to complete this survey. I appreciate the valuable time that you took to consider your answers and returning this in a timely fashion. When you have completed the survey, please return both the consent form and the survey to Mrs. LoBiondo's mailbox.

If you would be willing to take part in an interview and an observation of one of your classes, please circle one or both of the following and include contact information.

Interview

Observation

Contact Information

ALL ANSWERS AND PAPERWORK ARE CONFIDENTIAL AND WILL REMAIN ANONYMOUS.

Appendix D
Observation Rubric

Observation Form:

Teacher Name: _____

Class: _____

Period: _____

Length of Class _____

1: How does teacher begin class?

2: How do the students enter the classroom?

3: Does Teacher have difficulty getting students on task?

4: Do the students seem to respect teacher?

5: How does teacher handle any disciplinary problems?

Additional Comments: