A Qualitative Study Exploring How Perceptions of Problem Student Behavior Impact Building Relationships in an Urban Middle School District

A Doctoral Thesis Proposal Submitted by

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Abstract

This study explored how problem student behavior prompts relationships, as perceived by students, teachers and administrators. It also researched and documented the resources used to implement individual, classroom and school-wide behavioral interventions. Current conceptualizations suggest that successful intervention cannot be one-dimensional in nature but must consist of cooperative interactions that promote emotional support, reward competence, and also promote self-esteem (Ajzen, 2011a; Bandura, 1977; SYoon, 2002).

This study was guided by the following three research questions:

1. What contributes to problem student behaviors, as perceived by administrators, faculty, and students?
2. How does problem student behavior impact relationships in a school community, as perceived by administrators, faculty, and students?
3. What strategies, practices, or use of responses could better support students identified as evidencing problem behavior, as perceived by students, teachers, and administrators?

This study used a multi-site focus group method at three similar public middle schools. Both Bandura’s theory of efficacy and Ajzen’s theory of planned behavior served as the theoretical lenses to guide this research project. Many significant themes emerged from this research. Of note was that students engaged more in academics when teachers and administrators are perceived as caring. Lack of student academic comprehension influenced problem student behavior. Lastly, the inconsistent delivery of pro-social programs negatively affected positive relationships among stakeholders in a middle school setting.

Keywords: problem behaviors, perceptions, self-efficacy, relationships.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Problem of Practice

There is little consideration of the students’, teachers’, and/or administrators’ collective perspective when addressing problem student behavior within school communities. All stakeholders perspectives should be heard and are essential when developing a behavioral intervention model (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012).

It is essential to look at all aspects of why students intend to engage in problem behavior (Ajzen & Cote, 2008). Students’ perception and self-awareness need to be investigated. And students’ perceptions of their school and school environment may further lend insight into the cause of their behavior. With this in mind, students’ views of their school environment may include a sense of belonging, self-validation and the quality of relationships with both adults and peers within the school (Barile et al., 2012; Davidson & Lang, 1960). Without adequate support, students with or at-risk for emotional and behavioral problems often engage in disruptive behaviors that interfere with classroom instruction (Maag, 2012). Problem student behavior will continue at the same rate during the school year, especially when no or ineffective behavior interventions are offered (Gresham, Lane, & Lambros, 2000).

Teachers reflect on their teaching style, relationship with students, and curriculum (Poulou & Norwich, 2002). Teachers address problem student behavior through classroom management techniques which when implemented effectively contributes to positive relationships and time on learning (George Sugai & Homer, 2006). Teachers and administrators engage problem student behavior daily; responses vary in a positive or negative manner (Thompson & Webber, 2010). Self motivation and efficacy affect the effort they invest in

Students’ educational experience and family life may also contribute to the way they behave in school, as well as negatively impact their sense of self-efficacy (Bracke, 2012; Hill et al., 2004). The student may present as a low academic performing student, have a negative effect towards school and engage in problematic behaviors (R. W. Greene, 2009). Research-based school-wide interventions suggest teachers and administrators need to understand the intentions or antecedents, that a student may choose to act in a certain manner to develop an effective intervention (Marchant et al., 2009; George Sugai, 2009).

Teachers and administrators will often be the ones responding to the problem student behavior using their past experiences and perceptions of the student to determine the resultant consequence (Noltemeyer, Kunesh, Hostutler, Frato, & Sarr-Kerman, 2012; Thompson & Webber, 2010). Teachers and administrators need professional development training to heighten their awareness of problem student behaviors and the myriad reasons students may be engaging in those behaviors (Narvaez, Khmelkov, Vaydich, & Turner, 2008; Noltemeyer et al., 2012; S Yoon, 2002). Assessment and forethought are crucial prior to selecting individual, classroom, or school-wide interventions to combat problem student behavior (Lewis, Sugai, & Colvin, 1998). The training of school staff to address problem student behavior and implementation of school-wide positive behavior supports continue to be inadequate to address the students who engage in problem behaviors (Rusby, Crowley, Sprague, & Biglan, 2011). This study will look at the perceptions of students, teachers, and administrators as it relates to observed problematic behavior, relationships, and intervention to address problem student behavior.
Significance of the Problem

Teaching and learning in many schools are interrupted by problem student behaviors, like temper outburst, noncompliance, and verbal and physical aggression (R. W. Greene, 2009). These problem behaviors make it extremely difficult for school staff, peers and parents to establish positive relationships with the problem behavior child. As Sutherland (2008) writes, “The student’s lack of motivation, frequent disruptions, and aggressive behavior can overwhelm a teacher’s attempts to provide such instruction, especially within a classroom context where multiple students present multiple academic and behavioral needs” (p. 223). Many urban problematic students are faced with poor or low socioeconomic status, dysfunctional family structure, and low self-esteem. These students are more likely to experience academic problems, lower achievement scores, and grade retention (Gutman, Sameroff, & Cole, 2003). Problem student behavior makes it difficult for students to form connections to the school community. Although students may feel emotionally connected to the school, if they are not actively participating in school or do not use social skills techniques, they are less likely to succeed socially or academically (Wang & Eccles, 2012).

Problem behavior students need a school community that will evaluate and understand their social and emotional needs (Davidson & Lang, 1960). Teachers and administrators are in need of professional development to evaluate problem student behaviors and cooperatively develop an effective intervention (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Ross, Romer, & Horner, 2012). Research by Jennings and Greenberg (2009) identified: “Teachers who are trained set the tone of the classroom by developing supportive and encouraging relationships with their students, designing lessons that build on student strengths and abilities, establishing and implementing behavioral guidelines in ways that promote intrinsic motivation, coaching students through conflict situations, encouraging cooperation among students, and acting as a role model for
respectful and appropriate communication and exhibitions of pro-social behavior” (p. 492).

Additionally, research has examined the impact of family involvement in relationship to the success of development and implementation of effective behavioral interventions and support plans (Eber, Sugai, Smith, & Scott, 2002).

At present, school communities have inherited the role to provide social skill development (Goldstein & McGinnis, 1997). Students have the opportunity to develop skills to form a strong sense of efficacy to set academic and behavioral goals. According to Bandura (1977), people motivate themselves and form beliefs about what the can achieve. Social-Skills training assist problem behavior students to develop a high sense of self-efficacy. This will establish productive academic success and self-regulative efficacy for students to behave more socially acceptable manner (Bandura, 2001; George Sugai, Simonsen, & Horner, 2008). Social skill development in the classroom setting insures all students the opportunity to discuss problem student behavior and how these behaviors affect relationships between classmates and teachers (Charney, 2002). Basic educational skills also need to be develop to increase task engagement, therefore, increase the efficacy of instruction procedures, resulting in increase in achievement (Sutherland, 2008).

Ultimately, schools must look at all aspects of the student, teacher, and administrator’s belief system and past experiences when addressing problem student behavior at their schools. As Warren (2006) writes, “Although school-wide positive behavior support has been implemented in hundreds of schools thus far, many professionals in education and psychology remain, for the most part, unfamiliar with this proactive alternative for increasing positive student behavior” (p.187). Teachers and administrators must take into consideration their own perceptions of the students, staff and school community as a whole before adopting a school-
wide positive behavior support. They must also explore the students’ perception of individual teachers and administrators as they adopt a behavioral intervention (Barile et al., 2012; MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013; Micek, 2014). Throughout this process, interventions are targeted at a number of different levels, including the school as a whole groups of students that may require more focused intervention, supports for individual students with challenging behavior, and the facilitation of school, family, and community partnerships (George Sugai et al., 2008; Warren et al., 2006).

Ideas for students, teachers, and administrators to address problem student behavior can be analyzed through both the theory of planned behavior developed by Icek Ajzen (1985) and theory of efficacy developed by Bandura (1977). For purposes of this research project, Ajzen’s theory of planned behavior and Bandura’s theory of efficacy is used to explore how relationships are developed, identification of specific actions, strategies, and use of resources currently utilized in a urban school district to ameliorate and/or address problematic student behavior.

Furthermore, the theories were utilized to understand and develop plans to contribute to the identification of recommend actions, strategies, and use of resources in addressing problematic student behavior in schools.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of the research is to investigate the observations and perspectives of students, teachers and administrators in relationship to problematic student behavior in an urban middle school setting. The research questions of the study are as follows:

1. What contributes to problem student behaviors, as perceived by administrators, faculty, and students?
2. How does problem student behavior impact relationships in a school community, as perceived by administrators, faculty, and students?

3. What strategies, practices, or use of responses could better support students identified as evidencing problem behavior, as perceived by students, teachers, and administrators?

**Theoretical Framework**

The educational theories relating to the impact of students’, teachers’, and administrators’ perceptions in regard to problem student behaviors will be discussed to inform the qualitative study. In this case, self-efficacy theory and the theory of planned behavior will be used.

**Self-efficacy theory.** Albert Bandura (1994), defines self efficacy as “one’s self judgments of personal capabilities to initiate and successfully perform specified tasks at designated levels, expend greater effort, and persevere in the face of adversity” (p. 71). In other words, self-efficacy is a person’s belief in his or her ability to succeed in a particular life situation. Bandura described these beliefs as determinates of how people think, behave, and feel. His research indicates that self-efficacy can have an impact on everything from psychological states to behavior and motivation (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1993, 2001).

Albert Bandura’s theory focuses on how children and adults operate cognitively on their social experiences and how these interactions then influence behavior and development of the child. His theory was the first to integrate the notion of modeling behavior as a form of social learning (Bandura, 1977). Peer modeling is particularly important to the middle school learner. This method raises the individuals’ beliefs that they have the ability to succeed in a similar manner. In addition, Bandura also introduced several other important concepts, including reciprocal determinism, self-efficacy, and the idea that there can be a significant temporal
variation in time lapse between cause and effect (Bandura, 1993). The lapse time between cause and effect can influence ones’ self-efficacy. Bandura (2001) offers, “People judge the correctness to their perceived and operative thinking against the outcomes of their actions, the effects that other people’s actions produce, what others believe, deductions from established knowledge and what necessarily follows it” (p.10). This is strongly reinforced by how the teachers and administrators perceive students and their reaction time addressing the problem behaviors. According to Bandura (1986), if we had to experience everything we learn, we would not have adequate time and opportunity to learn very much.

An individual’s emotional state can change his or her self-efficacy. A positive mood can enhance self-efficacy, and a problem mood can diminish it. As Bandura (1993) stated, enhancing one’s mood toward the positive could greatly increase his or her sense of self-efficacy. (Bandura, 1993). Bandura believes that students with strong self-efficacy traits are resilient and ultimately are more likely to achieve their personal goals. Bandura (1977) writes, “Outcome expectancy is defined as a person’s estimate that a given behavior will lead to a certain outcome” (p.193). On the other hand, students with low self-efficacy believe they cannot be successful with their personal goals and also have a more difficult time reacting to setbacks (Bandura, 1995). Some behavioral students also toil with academics and may feel schools’ challenging tasks as threats to be avoided. Bandura has expanded his scope of social learning theory to the field of health psychology in order to look at the whole child development into adulthood. In addition, enhancing self-efficacy beliefs will assist students to successfully change and maintain behaviors crucial to health, including stress management, exercise, diet, safe sex, smoking cessation, and overcoming alcohol abuse (Bandura, 1995; Maddux, 1999). The areas
of behavioral, physical, emotional and social development all play an important role in a child’s development.

**Theory of planned behavior.** One of the more prominent concerns of all educators, and the public in general, is the lack of student ownership and behavior control. Icek Ajzen’s work (1985) investigates individual’s intention to perform a given behavior. Intentions are assumed to capture the motivational factors that influence behavior; they are indications of how hard people are willing to try, of how much of an effort they are planning to exert, in order to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Thus, intentions can be deemed as motivators of behavior. Proactive positive reinforcement strategies designed to prevent the development and influence student attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavior ultimately share that student intended behaviors are utilized in our educational settings (Obrusnikova, Dillon, & Block, 2011). Social validity is described as the value society places on a product and how society must evaluate its effectiveness based on goals, procedures, and outcomes (Miramontes, Marchant, Heath, & Fischer, 2011). Educators have been evaluating problem student behaviors for decades. A student’s motivation and level of self-control are in question by educators when addressing problem student behavior. Educators need to evaluate the frequency of the problem student behavior as well as the students’ perception of the action. The students’ perception of the extent to which performance of the behavior is easy or difficult motivates the continuance of the behavior (Conner & Armitage, 1998).

According to Ajzen, three conceptually independent determinants of a intention to perform a behavior related to Theory of Planned Behavior are:

- Attitude toward the behavior
- Subjective norm regarding the behavior
- Perceived behavior control
Attitude toward the behavior refers to the extent to which a person positively or negatively evaluates his or her performing a behavior. Subjective norm refers to perceptions of social pressure from significant others to perform the behavior and perceive behavior control concerns the perceptions of the easy or difficulty of performing the behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1991). When students, teachers and administrators develop existing favorable intentions or favorable intentions produced by an intervention, the intentions are likely to be enacted to the extent that the behavior is under volitional control (Ajzen, 2015). Research suggests that attitude and perceived behavior control contribute to the likelihood of the behavior recurring (Ajzen, 2011a). Ajzen writes (2011), a person can produce a positive or negative overall attitude toward the desired behavior. “The positive or negative valence of each outcome contributes to the overall attitude in direct proportion to the subjective probability that the behavior will produce the outcome in question” (p.94). This is the desired outcome of many individual/classroom/school-wide behavioral interventions.

According to Ajzen (1991), the subjective norm is considered to be a function of salient normative beliefs of an individual. While subjective norm relates to perceptions of general social pressure, the underlying normative beliefs are concerned with the likelihood that specific individuals or groups (referents) with whom the individual is motivated to comply will approve or disapprove of the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). It was found subjective norms though to be the only predictor of teacher behavior, suggesting it may therefore be the most important determinant of teaching adaptive behaviors in relation to working inclusively with children with SEBD (students with emotional/behavioral disorders). If this is the case, school principals have an important role in communicating clear expectations of an inclusive ethos to staff, providing them with appropriate support and training, and promoting a collective sense of efficacy.
Subjective norm looks at a given behavior to a certain outcome or to some other attribute, such as the cost incurred in performing the behavior. The attitude towards the behavior is determined by the strength of these associations and by the beliefs that are salient at the time (McGregor, 2015). The subjective norm is viewed as a high predictor of teacher behavior suggesting it may therefore be the most important determinant of teaching adaptive behaviors in relation to working inclusively with children with SEBD. If this is the case, school principals have an important role in communicating clear expectations of an inclusive culture to staff, providing them with appropriate support and training, and promoting a collective sense of efficacy (MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013). They may come from a culture in which parents were never expected to be involved, or simply may not have had role models that provided examples of parental involvement (Bracke, 2012).

Perceived behavioral control refers to the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior and the acknowledgement of obstacles and constraints. The theory of planned behavior recognized the possibility that many behaviors are not subject to volitional control and can vary along the continuum from absolute possession to absolute lack of control (Poulou & Norwich, 2002). Also, with regard to predicting behavior intention rather than behavior, teachers’ beliefs and level of perceived behavioral controls were found to predict behavioral intention. The relationship between teachers’ feelings and behavioral intentions was mediated by the relationship between beliefs and intention and perceived behavioral control and intention. This suggests that holding positive feelings toward children with SEBD may lead to positive beliefs and high perceived behavioral control levels, which in turn may lead to a higher level of behavioral intention (MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013).
Finally, in reflecting on avenues for research with the theory of planned behavior, one good indicator of the usefulness of models such as the theory of planned behavior (and theory of reasoned action) is their power to help design effective interventions that produce behavioral change. (Conner & Armitage, 1998).
Chapter II: Literature Review

The researcher reviewed literature of theory and research that has contributed to a definition of self-efficacy and theory of planned behavior. The researcher also reported findings of studies that link perception of problem student behavior.

My literature review will be presented in relationship to four areas concerning this study:

1. Research on why students are engaging in problem behavior in school;
2. Perceptions and responses toward problem student behavior by students, teachers and administrators;
3. Identified influences on self-efficacy toward problem student behaviors in school;
4. Identified influences on individuals’ intentions to perform a given behavior.

These four bodies of literature, taken together, provide a clear and detailed foundation for this study.

Evaluating Research on Why Students are Engaging in Problem Behavior in School

Students who are struggling academically in school invariably suffer emotional pain (Sutherland, 2008). Students will often look around the classroom and see their peers “getting it” and come up with the feeling that they are incompetent or inadequate. This attitude of poor self-image by the students will send them down in a problem spiral. As a defense mechanism, the students will act out typically by “blaming, denial, procrastination, irresponsibility, laziness, and acting out” (L. J. Greene, 1998). Given a sufficient degree of actual control over the behavior, a classroom teacher must evaluate the antecedent as the intention of carrying out the problem student behaviors (Ajzen & Madden, 1986). These behaviors stand out, and teachers can easily identify them. Classroom teachers commonly respond to these defense mechanisms of acting out behaviors as a means to obtain attention. In actuality, they are methods the students
have for deflecting attention from their inadequacies. Students exhibiting disruptive problem behaviors such as task avoidance, inattentiveness, hyperactivity, and aggression are at risk of school failure because of the effect these behaviors have on their ability to learn. Furthermore, one student's disruptive problem behavior often impedes other students' ability to learn by distracting the teacher from a focus on the academic progress of the whole classroom (Thompson & Webber, 2010).

Students may also exhibit withdrawal and shyness behaviors, which can pose frustrating challenges to the teacher and can take valuable time away from the teacher’s ability to present the classroom lesson. Teachers can encourage more positive behaviors in their students by making preventive techniques part of their everyday classroom management strategies (Charney, 2002). The peer mentoring programs, cooperative learning, academic choice, and after-school activities can act as deterrents to some of these displayed problem behaviors (McLean, 2007; Mertens, 2005).

**Perceptions and Responses Toward Problem Student Behaviors**

The research in this area suggests that the profile of problem student behavior is not easy to identify and is very complex. Although several students who have engaged in problem behavior in the past share various risk factors, it would be difficult to identify a student at-risk, especially in a school where many students are diverse and share the various risk factors (Gutman et al., 2003; Sutherland, 2008). Therefore, it is essential to look for other alternatives in assisting educators to identify who the potential problematic students may be.

Further research is needed to gain insight on behavioral intentions and what motivates students to engage in problem behavior in the first place. Research results are supporting effective behavioral support methods such as school-wide models benefit student academic
outcomes and effective practices benefit social behavior (George Sugai et al., 2008; Warren et al., 2006). Students who engage in problem behaviors need more support to adjust and be productive students. Students who exhibit persistent problem behaviors require proactive behavior intervention and support plans that are high intensity, scientifically based, individualized (George Sugai et al., 2008). School administrators and classroom teachers need to recognize the intention of problem student behavior when developing such behavioral interventions (MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013).

As students move from an elementary school model into middle school, there are expectations for the students to gain a higher level of independence; frequent peer harassment and adult supervision decreases (Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009). It becomes difficult for parents to develop productive relationships with their adolescent’s teachers due to multiple teachers and to the variety of academic courses offered at the middle school level (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Parents’ overall attitude and belief of education, either positive or negative, will also reflect on the children’s school behavior and academic performance (Bracke, 2012).

In far too many cases, schools commonly use punitive consequences that remove students from the classroom and school activities. Unfortunately, results of these efforts intensify emotional and behavioral problems and contribute to disassociation of peers and the formation of friendships with other students who engage in problem behaviors (Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004).

A line of research investigates the perception and role of the classroom teacher. Research indicates that novice teachers may be more reactive in response to discipline issues; in contrast, experienced teachers may be less reactive, more patient, and potentially expend less energy in addressing discipline issues (Noltemeyer et al., 2012). Seasoned teachers may not perceive that
an incident warrants administrative action and will deal with the students engaging in problematic behavior themselves. Novice teachers are more likely to use harsher discipline strategies and involve administration to assist them in dealing with students who engages in problematic behavior (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1977; MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013).

Indeed, novice teachers viewed behaviors such as eye rolling as major breaches of classroom rules and "blatant disrespect," while experienced teachers deemed such behaviors as "garbage behaviors intended to hide insecurities." To some novice teachers, the act of a student questioning the teacher was a sign of disrespect; but to other experienced teachers, this behavior was a sign of potential leadership (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012) p. 226.

Recently the role of the assistant principal has changed. Research notes that assistant principals are evolving towards a multilevel manager from the traditional disciplinarian role. The assistant principal is put in a position motivated by stakeholders’ expectations to produce positive outcomes regardless of school department policies and procedures, at times notwithstanding the assistant principal’s own beliefs, option and/or past experience (Sergiovanni, 2001; Stone, Jawahar, & Kisamore, 2010). (Cooley & Shen, 2003) stressed that many principals find themselves mired in situations beyond their control that involve labor issues, students’ and parents’ concerns, and school security/violence. Assistant principals supervise teacher lesson plans and curriculum on top of their disciplinary role. They now need to prioritize and screen their daily task to complete their diverse role. Research suggests that school administrators may want to consider the source of behavioral referrals before making disciplinary decisions. Less experienced teachers make more frequent and reactive discipline referrals than more seasoned teachers (Noltemeyer et al., 2012).
If researchers, teachers, administrators, and behavior specialists were able to reach a deeper understanding of the current perceptions and practices of classroom teachers, they might be better suited to help teachers achieve a smooth transition from the traditional behavior modification classroom management model to a school-wide behavioral support system (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012; MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013; Stone et al., 2010). This could include a better understanding of all stakeholders’ intentions; the data they use to assist their planning; and the types of social, emotional, and behavioral support strategies they implement in their school community.

**Internal Influences Which May Cause Students to Engage in Problem Student Behaviors in School**

Teachers and school staff can influence children’s development in ways similar to competent parents. Positive safe and strong social and academic interactions between school staff and students assist in their development (Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999). Socialization skills developed at the school level are mediated to some degree by student’s subjective perceptions of their developmental experience as well as their own self-regulating behavior (Bornstein & Lamb, 2010). Researchers note that students who engage in problem behaviors lack optimism and a positive mood which will affect their motivation and self-efficacy (Privitera & Campbell, 2009). Students, therefore, believe they cannot live up to the expectations set by the school and parents.

Selecting the “best practices” or the most effective intervention can be difficult and will take all stakeholders “buying in” to the intervention. Research in the area of School-wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS) noted students who chronically smoke in the bathroom are noncompliant and have trouble getting along with adults. Schools make the mistake of "getting
tougher” and giving warnings. Teachers, administrators and even parents make the assumption that if you get tougher, at some point the students will give in. But students who engage in problem behaviors are already good at noncompliance and being highly resistant to threats in general (Ajzen, 2011b; Jackson et al., 2009; Shirley & Cornell, 2012; Slonje & Smith, 2008). What the teachers or administrators may perceive as punishment is actually reinforcement for students who engage in problem behaviors. Students will engage in avoidance behavior and will disrupt the lesson in order to be sent out of the classroom or to the office. This, at times, is actually a way to get more peer and adult attention or just to get out of a class, thus achieving their avoidance goal. Some students will perceive suspension as giving them “permission” to go home to be with friends, watch TV, or play computer games (Stone et al., 2010; Thompson & Webber, 2010).

Parental involvement is very important when it is related to student achievement (Bracke, 2012). Parents, as well as schools, punish children for bad grades or for not working up to their potential. In many cases the grade itself is punishment enough. When students are working to their potential and still are not making the grade, using negative punishment is not beneficial to their self-esteem nor will it motivate the students to work harder (Hill & Tyson, 2009). To improve the students’ ability to succeed, parents can work on strengthening study habits, communicating with the teacher, and asking questions about the students’ day. When children perceive they can never live up to their parents’ expectations and that no matter what they do it will never be good enough, they often stop trying (Bandura, 1993; Bracke, 2012). The positive approach occurs when children are aware that their family and school are working together to ensure student success. Research indicates this approach will reap more benefits (Hill et al., 2004; Katz, Kaplan, & Buzukashvily, 2011; LaForge, 1998). When students perceive parents
and the community value schools, the students will achieve. The value of success and a positive school experience will contribute to the development of an internal desire to be successful in school and in life. To gain and express the skills and the behavior necessary to do so is the goal of society (Roskamp, 2009).

Adolescent students play a more active role in their education and educational decisions. They develop a “sense of efficacy, ability to make decisions about course selection, and ability to understand how courses and extracurricular activities are related to goals and aspirations in the immediate time frame and for the future and thereby decrease their need for direct parental involvement” (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Demographic factors such as socioeconomic status and ethnicity are associated with achievement outcomes as well. Ethnic minority adolescents and adolescents from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds are at increased risk for lower academic performance, completing fewer years of schooling, and having lower career aspirations (Bracke, 2012; Hill et al., 2004).

Students who engage in problem behaviors at times do not perceive that their actions warrant disciplinary action. The students may have a diagnosis of Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or another diagnosis that contributes to the problem behavior. Research has noted teachers may perceive more inappropriate behavior than actually exists and then react more confrontationally to the students engaging in the behavior (Ajzen, 2011b; MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013). This could result in poorly managed classrooms, frequent classroom disruptions, increased office referrals, and lower academic outcomes. The potential for the exacerbation and creation of behavioral issues affirms the need to provide these teachers with intense support in order to increase confidence in their classroom management ability and to help them become less reactive (Noltemeyer et al., 2012). Many school districts place disruptive
students in the same classrooms, which students perceive as a no-win situation. Pas, Bradshaw, & Mitchell (2011), conducted a study investigating the validity of office discipline referrals. They found that students who engage in problem behaviors stand out from their peers in classrooms in which a high proportion of the students do not engage in problem behaviors. However, similar students in a classroom with many students who exhibit behavior problems may not stand out and thus are less likely to be sent to the principal’s office (Pas, Bradshaw, & Mitchell, 2011).

**Exploring Problem Student Behavior Prevention Systems**

To address the individual needs of at-risk students who exhibit poor academic skills and antisocial behaviors, many elementary and middle schools looked toward individual and school-wide prevention programs. Most of the programs that are adopted as school-wide initiatives claim to curb the increasing number of antisocial behaviors in children (Creswell, 2009; Heaverin, 2006). These programs can address the problem behaviors of choosing to act out, in and out of the classroom setting. The programs will teach skills to the teachers and peer groups on how to respond to the problematic antisocial behaviors when they occur and the implementation of preventive strategies to address the problem behaviors (Locke, Silverman, & Spirduso, 2010). School-wide positive behavioral support approach engages the entire school environment when developing a pliable intervention plan. Behavioral expectations are developed and identified by all stakeholders. Individual behavioral support plans are implemented when school-wide prevention program prove ineffective. Individual behavioral program will address and identify the intent of the problem student behavior (Godin & Kok, 1996; Poulou & Norwich, 2002). Research has identified three common elements of individual/classroom/school based prevention management are:
1. Social Skills Instruction

2. School-wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS)

3. Positive Behavior Management

Social skills instruction teaches students how to identify and control their behaviors. Lessons can be implemented individually or whole classroom. Students are taught concepts such as listening, cooperation, and asking for help. Antisocial students will learn techniques to control their behaviors and replace their inappropriate behaviors with positive ones. Social skill development will promote students’ awareness of behavioral intentions and build self-esteem (Ajzen, 2015; Bandura, 1993). Social skill training will assist the students to learn more effective ways to get attention from teachers and develop friendships from their peers that they require. These skills, when presented in addition to individual/classroom/school discipline practices, establish common expectations for behavior in the school and classroom settings (Ajzen, 2011b; Locke et al., 2010; Maxwell, 2005; McLean, 2007).

The *Responsive Classroom Model* also utilizes this approach. When students display disruptive behaviors, they will be asked to “cool off” and reflect on the behavior within their classroom as the first step of the teacher’s intervention (Ajzen, 2011a; Hodgkins, Orbell, & Sheeran, 1997). The term *time out* is not preferred. As the second step, each classroom teacher pairs up with another classroom (Buddy Classroom) and the student will be asked to “cool off” in that classroom. This brief time away allows the students time to regain control before returning to class (McLean, 2007).

School-wide primary prevention activities may include teaching conflict resolution, emotional literacy, and anger management skills on a school-wide or universal basis (Bandura, 1993). Such interventions have the potential not only to establish a positive school climate but
also to divert students mildly at risk of antisocial behaviors (George Sugai, Sprague, Horner, & Walker, 2000).

The school-wide application of positive behavior support (PBS), also known as effective behavior support (George Sugai et al., 2008), is one such prevention-minded approach to student discipline that is characterized by its focus on defining and teaching behavioral expectations; rewarding appropriate behaviors; continual evaluation of its effectiveness; and the integration of supports for individuals, groups, the school as a whole, and school/family/community partnerships (Creswell, 2009). Research suggests that a successful positive behavior support system applies a collaborative, problem solving model to identify and monitor evidence-based practices. This may include function-based behavior support plans and direct social skills instruction (Bandura, 1977; Heaverin, 2006; George Sugai & Homer, 2006). Monitoring and assessment of the implementation of a positive behavior support system is crucial for its longevity in a participating school.

A majority of students who do not respond to primary prevention will respond to more individualized secondary prevention efforts, including Positive Behavior Management, academic support, mentoring, and social skill development. Secondary prevention strategies also include small-group social-skills lessons, behavioral contracting, specialized tutoring, remedial programs, counseling, and mentoring. Students who exhibit a more frequent display of antisocial behavior require more intense interventions. These interventions assist students to self-reflect and understand the intent of the problematic behavior they exhibit (Ajzen, 2011a; Bandura, 2001; Poulou & Norwich, 2002). This may include individual counseling, family services, and outside community agencies to address the students’ needs (Heaverin, 2006; McKevitt & Braaksma, 2004). Screening, identification, and development of an intervention are all very
important components to addressing students who engage in problem behaviors. “When students are accurately identified through proactive screening methods, the likelihood of matching interventions to individual needs increase” (Schoen & Schoen, 2010). Assessment of what behaviors, time, location, individuals and staff involved all play a part in the students’ behaviors.

Assisting students with adapting to school rules, understanding the consequences of inappropriate behavior, and helping students understand the impact of their behavior on the classroom environment are all critical components in developing effective interventions when dealing with students who engage in problem behaviors (Elswick & Casey, 2012).

Current research has focused on problem student behavior by implementing a global approach (Lewis et al., 1998; G Sugai, Horner, & McIntosh, 2008). Research suggests that a school-wide, pro-social behavioral approach that identifies all stakeholders in the school environment as active participants is crucial in curving problem students’ behavior. Utilizing a data-driven prevention program, research suggests, is a more effective approach than the traditional problem discipline approach. It is important to investigate all aspects of why students engage in problem behavior as well as the strategies utilized to reduce problem behaviors. Through a rigorous evaluation of the research available in the area of problem student behaviors and the stakeholders participating in prevention programs, this researcher hopes to be able to expose the current practices and perceptions in urban middle schools when addressing problem student behaviors.
Chapter III: Research Design

Self-efficacy theory evaluates what beliefs the student learner possesses regarding their ability to be academically successful and follow instruction. This holds true for the teacher and administrator. Efficacy for the teacher and administrator involves not only personal skills and competencies but also how related factors, such as resources, impact effective teaching strategies and student/family support impact their self-beliefs. Theory of planned behavior investigates individuals’ intention to perform a given behavior. Educators spend countless hours addressing problem student behavior. Intentions are assumed to capture the motivational factors that influence behavior; they are indications of how hard people are willing to try, of how much of an effort they are planning to exert, in order to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Thus, when teachers or administrators address problem student behavior, the antecedent or intentions can be deemed as motivators of behavior. Proactive positive reinforcement strategies individual, classroom and/or school-wide designed to prevent the development and influence student attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavior ultimately share student intended behavior are utilized in our educational settings (Obrusnikova et al., 2011). Monitoring and assessment of the implementation of a positive behavior support intervention is crucial for its longevity in a participating school. The two lenses help to explain how problem student behavior is perceived as a complex process acquired in and out of the classroom as well as how a students’, teachers’, and administrators’ self-efficacy may impact their perception of students who engage in problematic behavior. This, in turn, helps the stakeholder to see the relevance and necessity of their interactions, which may impact their behavior towards a student who engages in problematic behavior.
Research Questions

The following research questions were explored through this qualitative study examining the impact that student, teacher and administrator perceptions play on problem student behaviors:

1. What conditions, circumstances, and/or events, as perceived by students, teachers, and administrators, have contributed to problem student behaviors?
2. How does problem student behavior impact relationships in a school community, as perceived by administrators, faculty, and students?
3. What strategies, practices, or use of responses could better support students identified as evidencing problem behavior, as perceived by students, teachers, and administrators?

Methodology

Utilizing the qualitative approach, data was collected by interview process, field observations, and examining documents (Creswell, 2009). Focus groups allowed the researcher the opportunity to ask open-ended questions. Open-ended questions allowed participants to respond in any manner they choose. Open-ended questions provide primarily qualitative data and are frequently used in exploratory research (Maxwell, 2005). The essential goal of this study was to hear the perspective students, teachers, and administrators in the areas of self-efficacy, student behavior, school climate, behavioral support interventions, and any other issues relevant to their decision-making process. Utilizing several types of respondents revealed a broader perspective and allowed the researcher to answer questions about the relationships between the responses from different types of respondents (Light, Singer, & Willett, 1990).
Site and Participants

Sites were selected from the Brockton Public Schools, which serves a large urban community in Brockton, Massachusetts. The City of Brockton is the 7th largest city in Massachusetts with a population of 95,849 as of July 1, 2015. Brockton ranks in the upper quartile for Population Density and Diversity Index when compared to the other cities, towns and Census Designated Places (CDPs) in Massachusetts. The City of Brockton has a median household income of $49,272 and an average household income of $62,684. The cities per capita income is $22,388 ("Hometownlocator Brockton," 2016). In this study, three Brockton Public Middle Schools were selected as sites for this research. The middle schools include students from Grade 6 through Grade 8, comparable staff and student population size. Each of the middle schools houses Regular Education classrooms, a Bilingual Program, and a City Resource Program for students who are on Individual Educational Plans (IEP). Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch program at site A 70%, site B 86% and site C 71% of the enrolled student population ("Brockton Public Schools website," 2016). Student enrollment and diversity data for each middle school selected for this research study and district data is listed in Table 1 (Schools, 2016).
Table 1

Enrollment and Diversity Data (2014-15 School Year)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population Total Count</strong></td>
<td>456</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>17,186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American or Black</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>55.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-race, Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>52/2</td>
<td>52.8</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>51.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>47.8</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>48.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selected Populations (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Learner</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantage</td>
<td>39.5</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students w/Disabilities</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Language Not English</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>55.1</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In many cases of collecting data, the researcher was able to utilize a sample group of data for the project or observations. This sample group, called a subset, consists of a sampling of the larger group or population which the researcher may be studying (Nussbaum & Cohen, 1996, p. 9). The researcher inferred what was meant by the data he collected and found a correlation to the larger population. It was important to select the proper sample size, but selecting the appropriate sample from the studied population was the researcher’s priority.

In this study, six to eight students at each school were identified and asked to participate in a focus group as the target student population. These students were selected from a target population identified by the school as “chronic school offenders” – students who frequently are referred to the office for engaging in problem behavior. Light, Singer & Willett (1990) identifies this type of sampling as a “probability sample”; every member of the target population has some
chance of being included. The teacher target population consisted of six to eight teachers who have had experience with problem student behavior. They were also asked to participate in a focus group. The first students and teachers who volunteered to participate and have the consent form signed were selected to participate in my study. The majority of teachers and staff were female, and roughly 40% are from diverse multicultural backgrounds. The assistant principal at each school was asked to participate in an interview for this study.

**Data Collection**

Data collection for this qualitative study consisted primarily of three student focus groups and three teacher focus groups, one assistant principal each at each middle school. The assistant principal at each school was asked to participate in an interview process linking questions asked in the student and teacher focus groups (see Appendix A). Each teacher focus group were asked questions to seek insight on problem student behavior in and out of the classroom setting (see Appendix B). Each student focus group was asked a series of questions to gather perspectives of problem student behavior at each individual middle school (see Appendix C). Guiding questions were asked to each focus group and discussion followed. Discussion of challenges addressing problem student behavior with which the students, teachers and administrators experienced was completed. Discussions lead to determining whether the classroom teachers received any formal professional development to assist them in interacting with problematic student behavior. Archival analysis and a historic research strategy to investigate perceptions, interventions and behavioral outcomes were utilized in this study (Yin, 2003).

One of the main goals of the focus group sessions was to determine the extent to which the target population felt consumed with problem student behavior, aligned with relationship building at each site. The participants also shared how they felt about their current role in the
individual, classroom and school-wide positive behavior support implemented at their schools.

Many of the questions asked were developed by the researcher and “they do not tend to use or rely on questionnaires or instruments developed by other researchers” (Creswell, 2009). Using a qualitative approach, many of the questions asked initially will assist my research to develop more meaningful questions later in my study and will focus the research towards a particular area (Maxwell, 2005). Qualitative questions assisted this researcher to focus on the “meaning of events and activities to the people involved in these events and activities.” The questions reflected or influenced “the physical and social context on these events and activities.” Lastly, these questions were designed to engage discussion in order to share views, opinions and experience from each focus group selected (Maxwell, 2005).

Utilizing a qualitative approach assisted this researcher to investigate research questions by examining the participant’s responses by group and across each focus group. Utilizing open questions allowed participants to respond in any way in which they chose. Open-ended questions selected provided primarily qualitative data and assisted in this exploratory research and case study interview system (Yin, 2003). It is noted, many cases of collecting data a sample group of data will be used for the project or observations. This sample group is also called a subset of the larger group or population which this researcher utilized in this study (Nussbaum & Cohen, 1996, p. 9).

**Data Analysis**

When conducting this qualitative study, there were several components of analysis that were utilized. Creswell (2009) stated, “Qualitative procedures rely on text and image data, have unique steps data for analysis, and draw on diverse strategies of inquiry” (p.173). This researcher’s role was to collect the data and “build an extensive collection of detailed records
concerning context, people, actions, and the perceptions of participants,” referred to as thick description (Locke et al., 2010). There were a variety of steps followed in completing this qualitative analysis. This researcher utilized steps provided by Creswell (2009) to record, compile, and identify common themes during each of the focus group sessions. According to Creswell (2009), researchers need to “organize and prepare the data for analysis” and “read through all the data.” This process assisted the researcher to transcribe discussions of each focus group and to sort and arrange the data into different categories and themes. A coding technique was utilized to organize the material gathered in the focus groups into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to the information gathered. Saldana describes coding as a “method that enables you to organize and group similarly coded data into categories or families because they share some characteristic – the being of the same pattern” (Saldaña, 2012). Themes were then developed by the outcome of effective coding methods during this study. This study will follow this procedure for analysis of data collected.

Maxwell (2005) offers additional frameworks on analyzing qualitative data used during this research study. He notes that the researcher reads and reviews all interviews, transcripts, observational notes and/or documents gathered. His view of coding is not to count things but to “fracture” the data and rearrange them into categories. These categories can be organized into broader themes and issues (Maxwell, 2005). Maxwell insists it is important to view the categories in a conceptual point of view utilizing three categories of analysis:

1. Organizational: “broad areas or issues that you establish prior to your interviews or observations, or that could usually have been anticipated”.

2. Substantive: Description of participants’ concepts and beliefs; they stay close to the data categorized, and don’t inherently imply a more abstract theory”.

3. Theoretical: “place the coded data into a more general or abstract framework” referred to as Etic categories (p. 97-99).

The student focus groups were asked parallel questions to seek out differences or similarities in their perceptions of problem student behavior. More specific follow-up questions were developed toward each specific group based on their initial responses and themes that emerged through each discussion. The teachers and administrators were asked parallel questions initially to evaluate for differences or similarities in their perceptions of problem student behavior. This process allowed teachers to discuss experiences and development of their perceptions that influence the manner of interaction with students who engage in problematic behavior, school policy and procedures, and relationship building in their school community. More specific follow-up questions were based on teachers’ initial responses and themes that emerged from focus group discussions.

The data analysis included a review of information obtained through focus groups and field observations to gather a rich source of data from multiple sources. An audio recording of the discussion during the focus groups was utilized and then transcribed. Before the analysis began, this researcher provided a copy to the focus group participants in order to verify transcript accuracy. The participants were able to mark the transcript or make changes/additions depending on how the transcript reflected what they wanted to say or had thought they said. Data from the focus group interviews was recorded. This researcher listened and transcribed the discussions that took place during the focus group and then read through the transcriptions to ensure its accuracy. This researcher then duplicated the process of the interview analysis with the transcription of each focus group recording. The same coding for each focus group was utilized, so that similarities and/or differences between each focus group data could be noted.
Archival analysis and a historic research strategy to investigate perceptions, interventions, and behavioral outcomes were utilized. Information collected and correlated from each site was added to the data for analyses. Analyses of different documents that reported the types of rule infractions, rates of recidivism, and escalating consequences were conducted. This researcher evaluated suspension rates at each site. Suspension rates 2014-2015 indicated site “B” 366 days of suspension, site C 204 days of suspension and site “A” 108 days of suspension recorded. Site “B” had twice as many of days of suspension than site “C” and three times as site “A”.

These documents were utilized to make inferences about the types of infractions that resulted in categorizing problem behavior students—the number of students who were repeatedly assigned to detention and/or suspension. Identification of the types of individual, classroom, and school-wide intervention techniques added insight to focus group discussions. As the investigator, this researcher examined the documents for behaviors and occurrences associated with problematic behavior only. Student names, along with all other indicators, were removed or not included on any document and, thus, remain confidential. By analyzing the documents, this researcher was able to corroborate the perceptions of the students, teachers, and administrators at each school site.

Themes were drawn from within and across all groups including the students, teachers, and administrators. This researcher then viewed this data through a theory-based evaluation process to further assess his notion to the theological framework present in this paper. As According to Mertens (2005), “Theory-based evaluation is an approach in which the evaluator constructs a model of how the program works using the stakeholders’ theories, available social science theory, or both to guide question formation and data gathering” (p.52). This process was
helpful to this researcher to challenge his hypotheses, ideas, and assumptions and to determine whether the information gathered was influenced or guided by Self-Efficacy Theory and/or The Theory of Planned Behavior.

**Validity and Credibility**

Several steps were implemented to assure the validity and credibility throughout this research process. This study continues to draw interest to this researcher because he himself is and educator working with problem student behavior within a middle school setting. In relation to this researchers’ bias, it is documented: The researchers have their own theories, beliefs, and perceptual lens (Maxwell, 2005, p. 108). The researchers need to understand how their own beliefs about the nature of the case study may influence their interpretation of the data collected. The researchers must identify personal bias when implementing their research skills and techniques during a case study approach (Yin, 2003). All of these factors were taken into consideration during this research process. Data was collected from several different perspectives and from several different methods. Although this researcher is an active School Adjustment Counselor in the Brockton Public School district with a strong interest in the subject matter, he was extremely interested in the findings of this study regardless of the results. His aim was not to prove a hypothesis or grounded theory; therefore, he is not personally vested in the outcome. His only goal was to share a perceptive towards problem student behaviors from the lens of students, teachers, and administrators.

In addition, utilizing data from several focus groups and different sites only furthered the reliability of the information gathered in this research study. Reliability had to do with the quality of measurement utilized in this study. In its everyday sense, reliability is the "consistency" or "repeatability" of the researcher’s measures. In research, the term "reliable" also means
dependable in a general sense. The term “reliability” means "repeatability" or "consistency". A measure is considered reliable if it would give the researcher the same result over and over again (assuming that what the researcher is measuring isn't changing!) Reliability is a ratio or fraction “true level on the measure.” Reliability cannot be computed because the variance of the true scores cannot be computed! (Duffy, 2010, Lecture Wk. 10). This researcher will continue to be objectively interested in the perceptions of any participants in a research study as to the relationship to students who engage in problem behavior.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Many steps were taken to protect the human subjects of this study.

**Informed consent.** Participants were made fully aware of the purposes of the research study. This researcher solicited questions from the participants on the nature of the research. Brockton Public Schools’ informed consent form and Northeastern’s consent forms were officially signed by all participants, with an in-depth explanation surrounding the meaning of each form. Participation was solely voluntary, and the participants were free to stop their involvement in this research case study at any time in the development of this researcher’s Doctoral thesis. This researcher also obtained approval of the Brockton Public School to conduct his research in their school district (Creswell, 2009).

**Confidentiality**

As Lewis (2001) stated, “The researcher must arrange to respect the privacy and confidentiality of the individuals in the research study” (p.307). To provide future confidentiality, all identifying information pertinent to my participants was secured away from others. No information was disclosed with any identifying traits to expose the participants. A coding system was utilized to identify participants who provided information through the focus
groups (Creswell, 2009). This researcher undertook responsibility for transcribing any and all interviews. Recorded information was destroyed after the information was transcribed.
Chapter IV: Research Findings

The purpose of this research was to investigate the observations and perspectives of administrators, faculty, and students in relationship to problematic student behavior in an urban middle school setting. Based upon the goals of this research, the theoretical framework adopted for this study, and the methodology of the study, the following three research questions were developed:

1. What contributes to problem student behaviors, as perceived by administrators, faculty, and students?

2. How does problem student behavior impact relationships in a school community, as perceived by administrators, faculty, and students?

3. What strategies, practices, or use of responses could better support students identified as evidencing problem behavior, as perceived by students, teachers, and administrators?

Summary of Study Sites, Participants and Data Collected

As discussed in chapter three, the participants included in this study consisted of 18 students, 18 teachers, and 3 administrators from three public middle schools in Brockton, Massachusetts. The three schools shared the commonality of serving grade 6-8 students from the Brockton Public Schools, and represented primarily an urban population. Likewise, the configuration of each school was similar in size and demographics (i.e. student body population, age, gender, ethnicity/race, socio-economic level, literacy level, and health). The participation of students in each focus group setting was based upon the frequency and exposure to problematic student behavior. Students who had engaged in first hand problematic student behavior presented a personalized perspective in addressing this study’s research questions. The
participation of teachers in each focus group setting was based upon the teachers’ availability of time and willingness to participate in this research project. Each site provided teachers across a range of academic subject area, grade levels, and experience. Such a range of teaching experience is essential to the research questions of this study, as the views and perceptions of interacting with students who engage in problematic behavior in building and maintain relationships were considered. In each middle school, the administrators were the assigned assistant principals in the identified middle school in this research project. The assistant principals and school adjustment counselors were relied upon to assist the researcher in selecting the student focus groups. The students were recruited from a pool of students who the principal and the adjustment counselor felt could contribute to a better understanding of how administrators, teachers, and schools can better serve perceived problematic student behavior. The target groups were a majority of students who were enrolled in social skills groups, counseling, and/or RtI (response to intervention) groups.

Data collected in the qualitative study process consisted primarily of three student focus groups and three teacher focus groups at each middle school totaling nine focus groups. The assistant principal at each school was also asked to participate in an interview process linking similar questions asked in the focus groups. Guided open-ended questions were presented orally to each focus group, and discussion followed. During the focus groups, the researcher asked participants to answer questions in order to address the three research questions. After each focus group the researcher transcribed the interview and began reading and noting the emerging themes and perspectives. Each focus group’s transcript enabled the researcher to clarify the collected information in order to draw reliable conclusions regarding the types of problematic
behavior, relationship building, and practices of each individual middle school in this research project.

**Research Question 1:** What contributes to problem student behaviors, as perceived by administrators, faculty, and students?

The first research question explores the emergent themes concerning social and academic responses to problematic behaviors. Three themes were carefully identified through an iterative process of coding the perceptions of administrators, faculty, and students at three different middle schools. The three themes identified can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2**

Themes emerging from the question: What contributes to problem student behaviors, as perceived by administrators, faculty, and students?

- **Students have outside family/neighborhood issues that are carried over into the school**
- **Students are not at the academic level at which causes them to be angry and frustrated**
- **Problem student behaviors are not consistently addressed by administrators, teachers and parents**

**Students have outside family/neighborhood issues that are carried over into the school.** Students who participated in the study expressed how family dynamics influenced the behavior that students exhibited both in and out of the school setting. The participants shared how the relationship of family members set the tone of how the problematic students’ days will start. At school “A” students felt that on days that there were verbal fights with their parents or disagreements with their parents, they were more prone to exhibit negative behavior towards others. An eighth grade student stated that: “When my mother pisses me off, watch out.” He
added, “I can be mad all day.” Students discussed relationships with siblings that also contributed to the negative behavior that they displayed during the school day. An eighth grade student who attends school “C” shared that her sixth grade sister would “take my clothes and when I would see her in school with it on, we would yell at each other and get in trouble with the teachers.” Student participants were concerned with how teachers and adults at their schools never asked why they were upset or behaving in a problematic manner. Other students stated that several family members would move in and out of the home disrupting the consistency of routines. Throughout the focus groups, students added that disturbances at home affected their ability to sleep and complete homework, which contributed to problematic behavior at school.

Teachers across each study site indicated that students who engaged in problem behaviors discussed how their family dynamics influenced their behavior in school. Teachers at each site noted many students are from a single-parent household. Many of the students have the mother as sole supporter of the family. They stated that students would say to them, “I don’t care what she thinks” or “She will not do anything.” Teachers at site “C” spoke about grandparents stepping into the role of caregivers. They added that many of the grandparents are out of touch with the types of behavior that the grandchildren are engaging in and cannot implement discipline at home. One teacher from school “B” explained that she has taught students who experienced various forms of trauma, such as a death, abuse (physical or sexual), and/or neglect within the family. She continued to explain that students will become disruptive in order to seek assistance in order to cope with the trauma. Teachers at each site mentioned students will be preoccupied by their housing situation and neighborhoods during the school day. At site “A” teachers pointed out that they have students who just entered the United States who are now living with relatives until the families can secure their own housing. An English as a
Second Language (ESL) teacher added, “At times they will share bedrooms, and after time this will become stressful and will take a toll on the entire family.” He continued to explain that in his experience family expectations on education vary from family to family: “In general in families who place a high value on education, students do better behaviorally and academically.” He added: “The students in his class whose families really don’t care are the behavior problem.” Teachers at each site shared the same sentiment and expressed that students are aware of how their families value education.

Administrators who participated in this study explained that the stability of the family unit drives the various types of behaviors in which the students engage. The administrator at site “A” worked at several middle schools within the district, and he appreciated the neighborhood in which his current school is located: “This is a quiet neighborhood; most students live in single family homes.” He continued: “There are family issues that students, especially behavioral students, deal with, such as divorce, foster care, and one-parent households”. Across other study sites, the administrators explained how the family dynamics influenced how the students behaved in school. Issues of poverty add stress on the students, for example, if the students participate in the free-lunch program or their sneakers are not brand named. In this case, the administrator at site “B” has observed that some of his behavioral students become disruptive when confronted about their attire or the brand of clothing in order “to save face.”

Students are not at the academic level at which causes them to be angry and frustrated. Students at each site discussed avoidance behavior as well as how their peers do not complete assignments in class. Students from site “A” were quick to call each other out on the types of behavior they engage in to “get out of work.” Students at site “C” gave an example of their behavior in one eighth grade classroom and stated: “When the teacher is talking, they’re
just laughing.” A female student spoke up and defended the teacher during our discussion by responding: “You guys don’t even give him a chance. You just want to get kicked out of class.”

Students at all sites stated that they learned more and engaged more in academics when their teachers are caring. Students at site “B” discussed that they are more willing to ask for assistance and clarification when teachers speak positively and are genuinely sincere. A female student at site “B” spoke up and shared: “It’s their expression when they say it. Sometimes you think they really don’t mean it, but sometimes they do,” referring to the teachers. On the other hand, a student from site “A” explained that when students do not work or understand the lesson; he felt a negative interaction with the students who engage in negative behavior towards the teachers. He went on to explain: “So it’s like since they’re basically saying that they’re not going to try because the teacher is not going to help them.” This focus did acknowledge students will misbehave when the lesson is difficult or when they want to get out of completing the class work. Overall, students who participated in this study did not openly state that their lack of academic performance influenced their negative behavior.

Teachers did share their experiences working with students who engage in negative behaviors and how the students’ academic understanding contributed to their behavior in the classroom. Many teacher participants felt that there was a direct correlation between the students’ understanding of academic material presented and their behavioral outburst. During one focus group interview, a seventh grade teacher shared his experience regarding students’ academic levels. Firstly he explained that in some classes: “They don’t think they’ll ever understand it. I can think of about two, three kids this year who have acted out because they think their history of math has not been good; and they think that they can’t do it. So they’re just going to act out.” Secondly he added: “They’re not going to do anything. They’ll do anything
to avoid having to do what they need to do or to try to learn.” He explained that it is difficult to encourage and motivate when the students have a low expectation of their abilities and shut down. Teachers of all experience levels agreed upon this sentiment. Another teacher who has taught middle school for eighteen years at site “B” spoke about a strategy she utilizes to accommodate the academic gap. She suggested: “. . . a leveling of the work because sometimes they just can’t do what you have assigned, so sometimes it helps if you have something else that they can do to preoccupy them.” Another factor cited by participants was the students’ perception or self-image. A sixth grade teacher from focus group “C” felt: “They don’t want anybody to know that they don’t understand, so they’re going to be a fool.”

Each administrator who participated in this study agreed that accessing the curriculum is a challenge for many of the students and contributes to problematic student behavior. They each encountered these students for disciplinary action. Although they agreed that this is a factor, their examples varied. The administrator at site “B” shared her view of why students refuse to complete work, “Well, I think with some students, I think the reason especially is that sometimes I think they’re struggling academically. They might be lost; they might not know what’s going on, what the material is, and they act out to save face—to other students, to the teachers.” The administrator at site “A” stated: “Sometimes I think that students are looking for attention; sometimes negative attention is better than no attention at all. . . . We’ve got, kids who don’t get a lot of attention at home, aren’t very academically strong, so they can’t really get attention that way, by being successful. So, sometimes they resort to acting up and get negative attention. And, again, negative is better than nothing at all in some cases.” At each site, the administrator reflected upon the students’ emotions and how the classroom interruptions are triggered by various social and emotional factors. At the third site, the administrator at site “C”
expanded on the emotional factors that he has encountered when addressing problematic students. The emotional state of the students also contribute to the behavior that the students are exhibiting: “I think when a student feels frustrated is that either they can’t do the work, or they feel like they can’t do the work.” He added: “And then they’re going to act out because they just kind of want to smoke screen the fact that they don’t feel that they can do what everybody else’s doing”.

**Problem student behaviors are not consistently addressed by administrators, teachers and parents.** Participants in all focus groups indicated that inconsistent interactions and consequences contribute to students engaging in problematic behavior. **Student** participants felt the intervention and/or consequences did vary between the students who were identified as problematic behavioral students and students with “good” overall behavior. Students’ at all three sites discussed incidents of “good” students engaging in problematic behaviors in which the intervention and/or consequences were dealt with differently by teachers and/or administrator. At all three sites students felt that there is positive bias towards “good” students over the frequent problematic student. One student from focus group “A” shared: “If it’s a good kid, the good kid might do something wrong. They (the teachers) might not even pay a lot of attention to it. They might just let it go.” Another student spoke up and added: “Some teachers that I know do that all the time.” Students at site “C” explained that this inconsistency extends to other areas of the school that differ from the classroom setting. A female student stated: “If you get caught saying like a swear in class, then she’s (the teacher) going to say something; but there’s sometimes like kids swear in the lunchroom, but no one really cares.” Across other study sites, students spent some time discussing how the adults will change their demeanor when other adults were present. One male student who is enrolled in the ESL (English as a Second
Language) program at site “A” had the insight to identify the change in his teacher’s behavior when the principal walked into the classroom:

The teachers’ attitudes change. Yes, this teacher we know she’s only 26. She like (sic) every time she’d be yelling before the principal is in the hallway coming down. She’s talking; she’s being rude and stuff. When she hears the door open and she sees the principal, she starts acting all nice. She starts acting, “Oh, come on you guys.” She starts acting different. So I say, “Why are you acting different, Miss X.” And she says, “Nothing, I always act this way.” And I say, “No, you don’t.” And then she got mad.

Students at all sites demonstrated their observational skills during our focus group interviews by sharing examples of judgmental and inconsistent interactions. Students were quite aware of how other students behaved (positively or negatively) in different settings. During our interview students felt “ganged up on” or “targeted as a behavior problem.” A female student at site “C” shared: “The teachers had it out for me since the first day of school. My math teacher told me I’m not like your last year teachers; I will have you kicked out of my class.” She continued to explain how she felt hopeless; and no matter how she behaved, she would not succeed in this classroom.

While the inconsistency of addressing problem student behavior discussed with the teacher participants indicated various issues at all sites, teacher participants felt that there is a clear disconnection between the administration and the classroom teachers’ perception of behavioral consequences. Two out of the three sites felt a perception of inconsistency in support from the administration. Only site “C” professed to understand the administration’s point of view in addressing problematic student behavior. For example, one teacher stated in focus group “A”: 
As a school as a whole, we are more active, not proactive, about things. I think it creates a lot of problems. And we’re not consistent. And there’s not any reinforcing in the office. The kids say, ‘Send me to the office’ because they have Lego’s down there, and it’s frustrating.

A teacher participant at site “B” also felt that inconsistency between the teachers’ approach to intervention and the office administrations were present at their site as well. Teacher participants did not feel opinions were validated or supported. Many of the teachers felt that consequences were totally dependent upon the administrators; they were not a collaborative effort with all stakeholders. An eighth grade teacher shared:

There is no follow-up with the office. You send a kid out and then either you never see them again and you don’t know that happened to them or they come waltzing back into your classroom ten minutes later. And I have to then go talk to X about being suspended. You thought the kid was being suspended. They (the administrators) should talk to me when that happens, or I should be included in the conversation and/or present when the parent comes in.

Although, teacher participants at all sites felt a lack of support from the office administration, teachers also discussed the inconsistency between teachers and grade levels as well. Another teacher at site “B” shared: “There’s also no consistency among the teachers, among grade levels. So what I feel is important in my room and the way the kids should act in my room is not consistent with what other teachers in the 8th grade will let their students do.”

Teacher participants at site “C” shared that they experienced more inconsistency with the suspension practices than the daily interventions and consequences in the classroom. Teachers added that they felt supported by their fellow teaching staff and that the administration should
make attempts to share the rationale behind the consequence with problematic student behavior handed down by the administration. Teacher participants at site “C” expressed their understanding of administration’s action and did admit that the actions are inconsistent.

Families will add to the perception of inconsistency and a judgmental view from school staff. Many teacher participants added that family members will support their child and defend their problematic behaviors in school. Teacher participants described several cases of families contributing to the inconsistency and felt some parents had a negative impact upon the manner in which the school delivered consequences. One teacher noted: “This sends a mixed message to the students and makes it difficult for the students to learn right from wrong.” She added: “Just as an example, I had a student who got suspended for a different conglomerate of behavioral things, and he came back with a new pair of tennis shoes—or sneakers—whatever you call them. And I was like “Oh! You got a new pair of shoes this week; like it was nothing.”

The administrator participants shared their experiences in dealing with inconsistency and judgmental interactions with problem student behavior. Each administrator felt that there were multilevel reasons behind these actions. They expanded on how many stakeholders contributed to the operations of a school; and because of the mere fact that we are dealing with people, there is bound to be inconsistencies. One administrator explained that the students’ behaviors change in different environments: “When they’re (students) in one particular class, they’re, you know, performing up to what the expectations are. Then you see them in a different class, and they’re just a totally different person. And then it’s not just that one day; it’s a consistent thing.” He continued to share his views on the students’ perception of consequences and how the students “pick up quick which teachers follow through or not.” The administrator at site “A” sided with this sentiment. He added, “There’s the teacher consistent with what he or she does for
consequences and for different infractions—that sort of thing—as opposed to a teacher who is loose or inconsistent. A student who might be dynamite with a teacher who’s on the ball might totally fall apart in a class where the teacher does not have the classroom management properly in place.” Personalities and the manner in which teachers conduct their own behaviors in the classroom were discussed at length with the administrators during the interviews. Reputation of the teachers or students can add to premature judgment and how relationships are or are not formed. This administrator added:

You know a student who is trouble is frustrating for a teacher. It can be difficult for a teacher. Again, we’re adults; we’re professionals and all that. But when a student is habitually misbehaving, it can be difficult for a teacher to really wipe the slate clean on an everyday basis and give the student a fresh start. So it’s kind of like going into a classroom with one or two strikes already against the student.

Policies and procedures affect the perceptions of appropriate interventions and consequences delivered to students who engage in problematic behavior. Students, teachers, and administrators expressed concerns with current policies and procedures and how they contribute to inconsistencies and judgmental views of problem student behaviors. A seventh grade teacher felt that her school was consistent when dealing with problematic student behavior. She explained: “People on the outside kind of stop it. Whatever the rules or the laws are now, all they are doing is changing things. We may have great things in place, but sometimes I feel like it gets cut off.” Administrators noted that suspension policies have changed and now reflect a “Due Process Approach.” One administrator stated, “Many of the teachers have a hard time understanding that we need to show evidence and build a case.” Students are also aware of the difficulties in suspending someone under the current policies. During the student interview at
site “C”, a male student described that after “acting out” and telling a teacher “to fuck off,” the school could not suspend him “because it was a substitute teacher and it’s my word against his. I followed up with what would happen if your regular teacher reported you. He laughed, ‘I would’ve been busted.’” This type of incident just adds to the feeling of frustration and the inconsistent view of the participant in this research study.

**Research Question 2: How does problem student behavior impact relationships in a school community, as perceived by administrators, faculty, and students?**

This second research question explores the emergent themes concerning school-wide cohesiveness, instructional time, and the students’ social and emotional status. Through an iterative process of reviewing the transcripts and coding, three themes were identified that reflect the perceptions of administrators, faculty, and students at three different middle schools. These are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

*Themes emerging from the question: How does problem student behavior impact relationships in a school community, as perceived by administrators, faculty, and students?*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem student behavior sets a negative tone across the school community</th>
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<td>Instructional time with students who engage in problem student behavior is compromised as well as their classmates</td>
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Problem student behavior sets a negative tone across the school community.

**Students** who participated in this study reflected upon their experiences observing problem student behavior. Many participants described their own behaviors and how the consequences of
their actions affected their relationships in and out of the classroom. A female student at site “C” reflected on her behaviors and shared: “When one kid is bad, they (the teachers) shouldn’t take away from all the good kids who are doing something good. They should just at least send the bad kid to another class to do their work so the good kids can have more fun.” She added: “I feel rotten sometimes; I know they (classmates) don’t like me when I get the teacher going.” Throughout each interview session student participants reflected upon how their behavior caused negative consequences to other classmates. The discussion at times moved from self-centered behavior towards a more empathetic mood. One eighth grade student described a class where two of his peers talked constantly. He stated: “The people in the back who are good can’t hear anything, so I wanted to yell at them and tell them to shut up.” At site “C” two participants started to argue when the other stated: “I don’t care about the others in my class.” The response from another student was: “Maybe they don’t care about you.” The other participants spoke up reinforcing the viewpoint that other students are affected by negative student behavior.

**Teacher** participants discussed that the time spent on redirecting problem student behavior contributed to a negative tone across the school community. Teacher participants at site “A” felt that responding to problematic behavior was a losing battle. A sixth grade teacher felt that teacher morale was down due to chronic behavior students. She stated: “The teachers need support. It’s discouraging dealing with behaviors from the same kid class after class.” Many teachers additionally felt that their inability to address problem student behavior would reflect on their overall teacher evaluation and performance review. One teacher from site “B” best explained the negative effects of addressing problematic behavior in his classroom. “It’s the time away from teaching that bothers me. If I’m not teaching, I’m not doing my job; and that’s not a good thing.” A common observation that teachers discussed was the concept of
fairness towards the “good” students. Many teachers provided anecdotes when they had to address a problematic student. A sixth grade teacher shared: “You have to say: ‘OK. You need to stop doing this. You need to do that.’” She added: “You know, 75% of the class is not on task because you’re dealing with this problem, this problem, and that problem.” Another teacher remarked: “It’s like playing Whack-A-Mole. One student will set the others off, and as a teacher you are always responding to the behavior.” During each interview teacher participants expressed the willingness to improve relationships and intervention with their students. Their skepticism was directed towards the administrative support at their school community. The validity of a school’s discipline approach, typically outlined in a school policy handbook, was another cause of cynicism for teachers. One teacher commented that the student who is disciplined in one classroom can show up in another classroom after a visit to the office with no consequences. Teachers at all sites wondered if their efforts addressing problem student behaviors is supported by the schools’ administration.

Administrators also stated that the relationship between the classroom teacher and students contributed to the overall tone of the school community. One administrator shared: “It’s as simple as when a student shows up late, and that just gets things off on the wrong foot.” Throughout the focus groups, the subject of responding to negative student behavior was a consistent theme discussed by participants. Administrators expressed a strong favorability towards tolerance of problem student behavior. One administrator emphasized the importance of controlling one’s responses to a problematic behavior. He went on to say: “When the teacher is annoyed and confronts the student, a lot of time the student gets an attitude about that.” He explained that a confrontational classroom environment could “set the whole class off” and “other students would see this, then act out themselves.” Across all three study sites,
school administrators felt that not only is there a need to address problem student behavior with the students; more importantly, the intervention strategies among the teachers need to be evaluated as well. A veteran administrator stated that teachers need to be validated and added: “Teachers want students to behave. I mean, let’s face it. You know a student who is trouble is frustrating for a teacher. It can be difficult for a teacher. Again, we’re adults, we’re professionals; and if you don’t listen to the teacher’s point of view, all hell will break though.”

**Instructional time with the students who is engaging in problem student behavior is compromised as well as their classmates.** When discussing the quality of instructional time in class with the student focus groups, many students did not perceive this as a factor in maintaining relationships within the school community. While all participants agreed that instructional time is disrupted when addressing problem student behavior, students did not equate time away from teaching as a concern, although for many students there was a degree of frustration when observing teachers addressing problem student behavior. A sixth grade female student suggested: “Teachers should give them one chance; and if they can’t hold their tongue, tell them to take a walk. If they can’t, just send them to the office.” At all three sites, student participants were in agreement that disruptive students should be removed from the class in order for the teacher to teach.

A consistent theme that was repeated throughout the different teacher focus groups was the importance of effective classroom routines to maintain instruction. Teacher participants felt that learning classroom routines, taking notes, and basic classroom etiquette were essential to reducing problem student behavior. Participants were concerned that when reinforcing appropriate student behavior, time is reduced from instruction. A classroom teacher at site “C” explained: “. . . basic education and socialization, or the lack of it--a lot of them just don’t
know how to function in a school setting. It’s a constant, constant battle. Basic things—raising their hand, sitting still for 5-10 minutes at a time, all need to be retaught daily.” Each focus group discussion varied on strategies and classroom techniques to insure instructional time is not wasted on classroom management. An English Language Arts teacher shared her philosophy as a teacher. “A teacher has to set clear routines, absolutely. There is a strong, positive correlation. There has to be. I don’t think it’s always like if you could have these great routines and you could be a fantastic teacher. Does that mean every single kid is going to achieve at high levels? No, I don’t think that’s true. But if you are a teacher who has no routines, no structure, no rules, those kids will underperform 100 percent. I think if you’re a fantastic teacher, I think your kids will achieve.” Teachers at site “B” struggled with motivating students to follow routines and engage in the curriculum. One teacher stated: “I feel bad for the kids who come here to learn. We spend so much time correcting behavior and not papers.”

Administrators shared their experiences observing classroom routines but felt that educators spend more classroom time building rapport with students than encouraging them to perform well. When asked how behaviors compromise instruction time, each administrator shared a different perspective, either from a student’s view or from the classroom teachers’.

The first administrator shared:
I see the student who doesn’t engage sit there and, you know, maybe just doesn’t do any work--not sitting upright, putting his head down on the desk, looking out the window. Several prompts from teachers trying to get a student going sometimes works, sometimes doesn’t work. The teacher trying to get the student motivated to get work done would be another potential issue that takes time away from instruction.

The actions in which students engage during class were a common theme with each focus group. They all felt that negative student behavior impacts cooperation and relationships in the classroom. Administrators discussed the need for students to feel good about themselves and school.

The second administrator believed that the classroom teachers had the need to be validated by their students. She explained, “Teachers are much more willing, generally speaking, to help students and to give extra time to students who respect them and whom the teacher sees as being respectful to themselves and towards their peers.” This administrator felt that respect and understanding added to the readiness of students in a classroom. With her years of experience she explained, “Teachers are more willing to give them extra time before school, after school, after classes, during the day, during free times. So, yes, the behavior of a student makes a huge difference with how a teacher perceives that student and is willing to go the extra mile for that student.” Lastly, the administrator at site “C” expanded his thoughts to add how he feels the students view instruction and educational expectations in our classrooms today. “I think that students feel frustrated that either they can’t do the work or they feel like they can’t do the work. And then they’re going to act out because they just kind of want to smoke screen the fact that they don’t feel that they can do what everybody else is doing”.
Whichever point of view participants in this research study utilized, the consensus was that valuable instructional time is lost when addressing problem student behavior.

The social and emotional status of students who engage in problem school behavior needs to be understood by all stakeholders. Student participants described situations where teachers and administrators reacted prematurely to problem student behavior. An eighth grade student suggested: “Teachers should ask them (the students) what’s going on and maybe they’ll tell them what’s going on, and maybe that’s the reason why they’re acting that way.” During a focus group at a different school setting, a student explained: “Teachers should listen first because if you just automatically say ‘He did this or she did that,’ then you might not find who really did it. You have to talk about it.” The student went on to explain that adults may not understand the emotional status of the student. The social and emotional state of students was a genuine concern among student focus groups. Although participants did not utilize clinical terms, they were aware that social and emotional factors contributed to problem student behavior. During a discussion with focus group “B”, a female student describe a hyperactive student in her class as “jittery and he has to move and get up for no reason.” She is describing a student who has been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

Teachers who participated in the study expressed a desire to share their genuine concern for their students. While the social and emotional philosophies discussed with participants indicated the need for more understanding behind treatment, participants also felt that their interaction served as an opportunity for the educator to teach students responsibility and personal relationship skills. This philosophy was framed in the context that the teacher had a desire to provide the students with caring nonacademic interaction. For example, one teacher stated in a focus group:
I have a lot of kids who are hungry first thing in the morning. I think that it affects their mood; and then because they’re hungry, they get a stomach ache, a headache. They don’t want to do their work, so they give me a little bit of an attitude. So I do keep granola bars in my drawer. Instead of sending them to the office and causing this big issue, I give them a granola bar. They never take advantage—you know, they don’t abuse it. Then it may be one or two a week, but it makes a difference in that child because usually they will behave because ‘She cares about me. She gives me a granola bar.’ So, I think with kindness you can break, you can sort of break, the wall between that kid and the teacher.

In addition to personal relationship development, one focus group discussed interventions and treatment of problem student behavior. Teacher participants expressed the need to share information between the guidance staff and the classroom teacher. A sixth grade teacher added, “Medication is a problem too. It just seems like we’re not being told first. We are the last ones to know what the kids are on—like when the kids are moved around (classes). They don’t ask our opinion first; it just happens.” Although confidentiality impacts full disclosure of diagnosis and medical conditions, teacher still wanted to be part of the process. In addition to regular education teachers, one special education teacher shared her impressions of the demographics of her classroom in recent years:

More and more kids are coming in with serious emotional impairments and a lot of diagnoses. And, hand-in-hand, those behaviors are paired with cognitive behaviors. There are also the cognitively impaired and ADHD kids in there, but we have a lot of kids with some pretty serious behaviors. And we are the only consistency that the kids get, and we are the only structure that the kids get.
Throughout the interview process administrators stressed the importance of building a rapport with social and emotional students. Administrators cited many different observations to reinforce this practice. For example, one administrator admitted school staff does not always investigate the cause of problem student behavior or really get to know the student. He continued to explain, “When students are making noise, doing things to just be generally disruptive in the classroom, sometimes I think that the student is looking for attention. Sometimes negative attention is better than no attention at all.” In continuation of this theme, site “A” administrator added his observation:

As soon as the students walk through the door, they know that there’s a purpose for being there. That’s not consistent with all classrooms, and that’s one of the issues. I feel, also, that sometimes teachers’ approach to student behavior varies wildly. Some teachers are not really interested in forming relationships with the students, and I think that’s really a key component to a student’s motivation to do his or her best.

Beyond relationship building, administrators emphasized communicating the individual needs of each student. Many students with social and emotional needs are on Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) which requires school staff to implement various academic and social accommodations. These documents assist school staff to effectively interact and communicate with problematic students. One administrator concluded: “When a teacher is carefully crafting what they say and taking students’ needs individually into account, I think that’s really what needs to be done. It isn’t always done.”

Research Question 3: What strategies, practices, or use of responses could better support students identified as evidencing problem behavior, as perceived by students, teachers, and administrators?
The third research question explores how the emergent themes concerning strategies, practices, or use of responses could better support students identified as evidencing problem behavior. Discussion of three themes will reflect the perceptions of administrators, faculty, and students at three different middle schools are found in Table 4.

Table 4

Themes emerging from the question: What strategies, practices, or use of responses could better support students identified as evidencing problem behavior, as perceived by students, teachers, and administrators?

| Productive parent communication with school staff is essential to address the students’ problem behavior. |
| School-wide initiatives and pro-social programs are the foundation of school interventions to support students identified as evidencing problem behavior offenders. |
| Individual behavioral interventions and counseling support. |

Productive parent communication with school staff is essential to address problem student behavior. Each student focus group describes parental communication from a different perceptive. Participants from site “A” viewed parent communications with school staff from the classroom teacher’s perceptive. Many students discussed communications between their parents and teachers. Students felt that parents took the school’s side of the event and that their opinion was not valid. A seventh grade student added: “If a teacher calls your parents and tells her you were doing this or you were doing that, like (sic) they automatically don’t believe you. They believe the teacher.” During a focus group at a different school setting, the discussion generated from students’ perceptions was that the students felt that they
had an advantage over the teachers. Students described negative encounters between teachers and family members. Two students shared negative incidents relating to older siblings and school administrators. As a result of this realization, the students believed their parents would defend them against disciplinary action. One student shared an example:

Sometimes if I tell, I usually tell my parents, and she knows how that teacher usually is; and when the teacher calls her to tell her something that I did, she’ll just say OK. But she really won’t really listen unless it’s really important.

Overall, many participants felt that productive communication between parents and school staff is beneficial in addressing problem student behavior.

Many teachers expressed frustration when discussing parental communications. Teachers felt that many parents were not invested in their children’s education. Parents were confrontational and not supportive of the school staff. One teacher from site “A” shared, “I think they blame instead. They give you lip service and say: ‘I’ll take care of that, or we’ll talk about it at home.’ Then nothing is ever done.” A science teacher added: “I have a few students who sometimes just don’t want to work. And when you call or bring a parent in or when you talk to them at conferences, you don’t see the education being important at home to back you up. And that’s my biggest concern.” Teachers at site “B” advocated for parents to be involved at their school when they communicated with homes. Teachers felt parents needed to hear positive things about their child as well as negative. One teacher felt:

If you have a strong “PAC” it might make a difference. The parents feel empowered. They would buy into the school and would want to back us. Instead of only hearing from us: ‘How bad your kid is, what he did wrong,’ they could give input on the rules of structure or the kid’s education. Maybe they will back us a little bit in what we do.
Many teachers encouraged their colleagues to communicate with parents when the students are not engaging in problematic behaviors. One teacher who has various levels of students in his class insisted to add in our interview: “I teach in the bi-lingual department, mostly the Cape Verdean population. Their parents are on them, and they want to know if they’re being respectful. And they’re some of the best models for the other kids. ‘Come in and do your work. You’re here for a purpose; you’re here to work.’” Across all three study sites, teachers overwhelmingly believed that supportive families and positive family relationship helped curve problem student behaviors in a productive manner.

Administrators who participated in this study shared their experiences communicating with parents and families. During each interview the administrators gave antidotes of positive and negative conversations. When asked how parents respond to communications concerning problem student behavior, Site “A” administrator explained:

That goes from one end of a spectrum to another. We’ve got parents who don’t help at all. Sometimes when trying to contact a parent about a problematic student make matters worse. Sometimes we find out that the parents can be bigger problems than the students are. Or they give us lip service when we call, ‘Oh, geez, I’ll talk to so-and-so about this. I’ll straighten it out, I’ll do that.’ And you come to find out that they don’t follow up on any of it, or very little of it will actually be addressed. And then we’ve got parents who are phenomenal. They are great to deal with. They are very supportive of the school. They are behind us and want to see their child do well. They are willing to go the extra mile to help out—to come into school for meetings with teachers or with the administration. So it really runs the gamut on that—from one extreme to another as far as parents being a help. We do really make a lot of calls.
When discussing the resources available to school staff that has helped shaped their communication practices, the topic of professional development came to light. Each administrator stressed the importance of informing the families of problem student behavior the first time and not waiting for several incidents to occur. One administrator felt that school staff “get off on the wrong foot” when the conversation overwhelms the family. She added: “Less is better.” Many of the schools have in place *Parent Communication Logs* to document conversations between the school and family. At site “C” the administrator was proud of the school’s system. He explained:

> We have a *Parent Communication Log*. Anytime a teacher communicates with a parent about anything that is happening in the school, they’re (sic) supposed to put it on the H drive where everybody can see it and it’s saved. Parents say: ‘Well how come no one told me? I would like to help, and that means letting me know.’ And, you know, for us, he or she who has the most evidence wins. So, we document all parent communication whether it is by letter, email, phone call, or having them come in to meet with us.”

Within this topic, the administrator recognized how documentation can influence future interactions between the school and parent. At all three sites, administrators encouraged school staff to contact parents when their child has engaged in problem student behavior. One administrator concluded, “We need to let the parents know, even if it is uncomfortable.”

**School-wide initiatives and pro-social programs are the foundation of school interventions to support students identified as evidencing problem behavior offenders.** Throughout the data collection process, it became evident that *students* felt an inconsistency in the delivery of school-wide initiatives and pro-social programs. Students directed discussions to individual teachers’ classroom management styles. A student described one teacher’s
system as a checking system. “And if you are good, you get checks. And at the end of the week you have to get 15, and you get a prize and you can do board games. If you don’t get checks, you have to do work.” Another student described a “strike system.” She stated, “We get three strikes and you’re out.” During one focus group, many participants were in agreement when a female student spoke up: “Well, they usually tell them that they are going to send them to the office if they don’t stop.” This sentiment was shared among all research sites.

In another instance, a student described teachers in the same grade level who implemented different classroom management styles. The student explained that it was difficult to adjust to “different rules for each class.” An eighth grade student at site “A” suggested:

The school can probably talk to the teachers—talk to them, like show them the way to, like, deal with several minor problems, like talking. Some teachers in this school, they probably like, if you talk in a class, they automatically call home. Or, if you, like, come late to your class, they automatically call home. And, if every time the person comes late to class, you don’t know if the person has, like, some medical problem that makes it hard for them to get to class. They just call home. They don’t care. They don’t talk about it first.

Although many students discussed individual teacher’s classroom management style, at each research site students were aware of school-wide behavior initiatives. Second-Steps, PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention and Support), Collaborative Problem Solving, and Skills for Life were discussed during the interviews. Students felt these programs were present, but not always implemented.

Many teachers stressed the importance of consistent school-wide procedures when addressing problem student behaviors. Teachers implemented many different strategies to meet
this goal. Many teachers strongly felt a lack of support from school administration. For example, one teacher admitted that the school as a whole is more active and not proactive addressing problem student behavior. She stated: “I think it creates a lot of problems. And we’re not consistent. And there’s not any reinforcing in the office. The kids say: ‘Send me to the office’ because they have Legos down there, and it’s frustrating.” This same sentiment was expressed during another interview: “You know it’s frustrating because this kid can swear at you or swear at another kid, and the joke is that they wind up with lunch detention. So the big joke around the school was that no matter what the kids did: “Oh, lunch detention.”

Teachers discussed variations in classroom management styles and were vocal that some teachers have a difficult time managing problem student behavior. In this instance, many teachers advocated for professional development and support from building administration. One teacher added: “If we had that training, then everything would be in place. Everything would be consistent, and then everyone would be on the same page.”

Another issue that teachers struggled with was the issue of school-wide initiatives to address problem student behavior. Consistent implementation of a school-wide intervention would change the whole climate of the building. One teacher reflected on this concept:

We’re supposed to use the PBIS, and we are supposed to be proactive setting up things to prevent the problems. We don’t do that. We don’t use the Responsive Classroom or anything that Brockton the system says we use. Our building doesn’t use them. We have just started to.

During discussion in another focus group, a teacher indicated that most pro-social programs are more appropriate for younger children. She explained: “It’s good in sixth grade because by the time they get to eighth grade. . . I don’t know about Second Steps. My kids, I
know, no one wants to volunteer. They just sit there and stare at me.” A veteran teacher replied: “Well, I think it brings attention to things, but I don’t think it is helping.” Throughout the focus groups, teachers stressed either individual classroom management systems or school-wide intervention. They felt that consistent implementation of interventions would change problem student behavior.

Administrators from the three study sites agreed that professional development training assisted in addressing problem student behaviors. Social and emotional topics are discussed with all school staff, and the Guidance Department develops behavior programs for the more difficult problem student behaviors. During one interview, the administrator explained his school’s professional development plan:

We have staff meetings and in-service days where we talk to teachers about different strategies that they can use when they’ve got troublesome students. The teachers often discuss the situations with their fellow teachers. If they know that a teacher does well with a particular student, they’ll tap in. We’ve got some pretty good collegiality, some pretty good communication here at the school, where the teachers will talk and help one another out with strategies.

Administrators felt that the relationship between administration and guidance staff was very productive. The administrator at site “C” explained that he and the adjustment counselor talk every day about the situations and how they can help one another with different students. He added: “Guidance is very involved here at the school.” Another administrator agreed: “Our school adjustment counselor has behavior plans, and we’ve got behavior plans here at the office as well that focus on behavior. They focus on academics or a combination of both of those.”
When discussing school-wide initiatives, each administrator explained his or her main program. At site “C”, Skills-to-Life program is utilized. Students participate in lessons once a week. The goal is to “fill in some of those social gaps, some of those behavioral gaps, that they may not be getting elsewhere,” he explained. Second Step program was discussed with the administrator from site “A”. He felt Second Step is a good program that required students to discuss problematic issues that they face during the school day. In contrast, the administrator at site “B” said that his facility did not have one school-wide program; but the morning announcements reinforced with the students a simple mantra, “Work hard; be nice.” She explained, “You come to school to learn, “Work hard; be nice. Because that’s why you’re here – to learn, work hard”

**Individual behavioral interventions and counseling support.** When asked to describe student behavior plans and supports at each research site, focus groups shared an array of responses. **Student** participants favored positive reinforcement plans in which they could earn extra rewards for positive behavior. One student expressed that he “hated when the teachers call home.” He added: “My mother wants a weekly progress note for my grades.” This practice is common at the middle school level and is used as a behavior intervention plan.

**Teacher** participants stressed the importance of behavior plans for the more severe problematic students. Many teachers acknowledged school adjustment counselors as the driving force behind individual behavior plans. One teacher stated that many of his students are on *Individual Educational Plans* (IEP) and that some of those students have behavior plans as part of their IEP. This type of individual behavior plan is monitored by the school adjustment counselor, and in many cases, classroom teachers assist in the implementation of the plans. Teachers at site “A” discussed the effectiveness of behavior plans at their school. One sixth
grade teacher felt that behavior plans were necessary to document students’ actions in class, and the data gave evidence to support teachers in addressing problem student behavior. Many teachers expressed the need for behavior programs as a vehicle to place problematic students at the alternative school for severe behavioral students. Another teacher spoke against alternative schools and expressed: “That’s not being proactive to stop or limit behaviors. It’s just removing the one problem kid.”

The administrators at the three study sites explained that individual behavior plans are very helpful to support problem student behavior. The administrator at site “B” shared that she utilizes behavior plans “like a contract” to keep students on track. She emphasized the importance of gathering input from the families to insure success of behavior plans. At site “A” behavior plans are developed by the school adjustment counselor, and occasionally the administrator will develop behavior plans to discourage blatant disruptive behaviors or academic needs. He added, “Our SAC (school adjustment counselor) has behavior plans, and we’ve got behavior plans here at the office as well. These plans focus on behavior, they focus on academics, or they focus on a combination of both of those. A common observation that administrators discussed was the consistency of implementation of the behavior plans. One administrator shared his thoughts:

I think behavior plans help teachers to be able to deal with the problematic students and to have tolerance, patience, and the willingness to try different strategies. For example, our school adjustment counselor has put together some behavior plans for students that would be very effective if they were followed and if they were used consistently by the teachers. But sometimes they fall off the cliff; they don’t really get fired up on.
At each site all participant expressed the same sentiment: consistent implementation of behavior plans support students identified as evidencing problem behavior concerns.

**Summary of Findings**

The findings of this study were collected through a case study in which the researcher conducted a total of nine focus group interviews at three middle schools from Brockton, Massachusetts. Also included were group interviews, in conjunction with collected discipline documents, on various individual, classroom, and school-wide behavior interventions.

Student focus groups identified the need for a genuine approach when adults address problem student behavior. Students expressed that they are motivated to engage in academic lessons when classroom teachers care about their overall wellbeing (academic, social or emotional). Students noted incidents where they perceived a false effect from classroom teachers and administrators that resulted in lower student efficacy.

All focus groups identified a need for professional development to insure that effective interventions are developed and implemented to address problem student behavior. Students felt that teachers and administrators lacked skills to communicate with social and emotional students. Teachers expressed that similar areas of professional developments were also lacking. Many teachers felt the school district did not offer adequate training to address problem student behavior. Administrators added that schools encounter a time restraint when it comes to professional development; but attempts are made via common planning, staff meetings, and district professional development opportunities.

Each focus group identified an inconsistency in the delivery of school-wide initiatives and pro-social programs. Students were aware of school-wide initiatives but were more concerned with the inconsistencies with daily classroom management strategies. Students
identified variations between each classroom’s approaches and felt that there was a negative bias towards problematic students. Teachers expressed the need for pro-social initiatives, and many teachers felt they were ineffective due to the culture of their school. Teachers stated that, in their experience, classroom management and individual programs were more effective. Administrators joined with this view and felt that all stakeholders needed to be consistent in the delivery of individual, classroom and school-wide initiatives. They added that parents play a large role in the success of any program.

**Documentary Summary of Findings**

The document findings of this study were collected through an archival analysis process and a historic research strategy to investigate perceptions, interventions, and behavioral outcomes were utilized at each research site. The data analysis included a review of information obtained through focus groups and field observations to gather a rich source of data from multiple sources. Analyses of different documents that reported the types of rule infractions, rates of recidivism, and escalating consequences were conducted at each research site. Each middle school developed individual “Office Referral” forms and progressive disciplinary criteria. At all three sites student and teachers express concerns relating to variations and inconsistent disciplinary policy and procedure implemented at each site. At each site the types of individual, classroom, and school-wide intervention techniques were different. This added insight to focus group discussions and concerns expressed from all stakeholders during the interviews and focus group discussions.

According to Mertens (2005), “Theory-based evaluation is an approach in which the evaluator constructs a model of how the program works using the stakeholders’ theories, available social science theory, or both to guide question formation and data gathering” (p.52).
This process was helpful to this researcher to challenge his hypotheses, ideas, and assumptions and to determine whether the information gathered was influenced or guided by Self-Efficacy Theory and/or The Theory of Planned Behavior. At each site the student, teacher and administrators shared scenarios and antidotes to improve strategies, practices or use of response could better support problematic student behavior.
Chapter V: Discussion of Findings

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

School communities must evaluate the students’, teachers’, and/or administrators’ collective perspectives when addressing problem student behavior. All stakeholders perspectives should be heard and are essential when developing a behavioral intervention model (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012).

It is essential to examine all aspects of why students intend to engage in problem behavior (Ajzen & Cote, 2008). With this in mind, students’ views of their school environment included a sense of belonging, self-validation, and the quality of relationships with both adults and peers within the school (Barile et al., 2012; Davidson & Lang, 1960). Teachers reflected on their teaching style, relationship with students, and curriculum to value their teaching abilities (Poulou & Norwich, 2002). Teachers and administrators engage problem student behavior daily; responses vary in a positive or negative manner (Thompson & Webber, 2010). Self-motivation and efficacy affect the effort they invest in building relationships, implementing behavioral interventions, and teaching in general (Bandura, 2001; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998).

Students’ educational experiences and family lives also contribute to the way they behave in school and may negatively impact their sense of self-efficacy (Bracke, 2012; Hill et al., 2004). The students may present as low academic performing students, and these may have a negative effect on their school experiences and lead them to engage in problematic behaviors (R. W. Greene, 2009).

Teachers and administrators will often be the ones responding to the problem student behavior, and they tend to use their past experiences and perceptions of the student to determine the resultant consequence (Noltemeyer et al., 2012; Thompson & Webber, 2010). Teachers and
administrators need professional development training to heighten their awareness of problem student behaviors and the myriad reasons why students may be engaging in those behaviors (Narvaez et al., 2008; Noltemeyer et al., 2012; S Yoon, 2002). The training of school staff to address problem student behavior and implementation of school-wide positive behavior supports continue to be inadequate to address the students who engage in problem behaviors (Rusby et al., 2011). This study will look at the perceptions of students, teachers, and administrators as it relates to observed problematic behavior, relationships, and intervention to address problem student behavior.

**Review of Methodology**

This qualitative case study explored the grading perspectives of students, teachers, and administrators in relationship to problematic student behavior in order to address the following three research questions:

1. **What contributes to problem student behaviors, as perceived by administrators, faculty, and students?**
2. **How do problem student behaviors impact relationships in a school community, as perceived by administrators, faculty, and students?**
3. **What strategies, practices, or use of responses could better support students identified as evidencing problem behavior, as perceived by students, teachers, and administrators?**

To best explore these research questions, the use of a multi-site focus group format was selected because of the methods ability to hear the perspective students, teachers, and administrators discussed in the areas of self-efficacy, student behavior, school climate, behavioral support interventions, and any other issues relevant to their decision-making process.
Open-ended questions provide primarily qualitative data and are frequently used in exploratory research (Maxwell, 2005). This researcher transcribed discussions of each focus group; then sorted and arranged the data into different categories and themes. Saldana describes this as coding, “a method that enables you to organize and group similarly coded data into categories or families because they share some characteristic – the being of the same pattern” (Saldana, 2012).

In conjunction with information collected during each focus group, documents were utilized to make inferences about the types of infractions that resulted in categorizing problem behavior students--the number of students who were repeatedly assigned to detention and/or suspension.

This chapter is broken down into the following sections: presentation and discussion of the major findings; discussion of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework; discussion of the findings in relation to the literature review; final analysis, and significance of the study and limitations, and recommendations for future research.

**Discussion of Major Findings**

Through an examination of the data collected from focus groups in combination with document analysis of disciplinary forms and behavioral intervention programs, a number of themes discussed in Chapter 4 provided the basis for three major findings.

Regarding problem student behavior based on data collected:

- Student focus groups identified the need for a genuine approach when adults address problem student behavior.
- Students who engaged in problem student behavior damaged relationships in the school community.
- The perception of all focus groups supported the statement: academic performance influenced problem student behavior.
• Teachers perceived that administration was not supportive when addressing problem student behavior:

• More professional development is needed to insure effective interventions for problem student behavior:

• All focus groups indentified an inconsistency in the delivery of school-wide initiatives and pro-social programs.

**Student focus groups indentified the need for a genuine approach when adults address problem student behavior.** Students at all sites stated that they learned more and engaged more in academics when their teachers were caring. Students discussed that they were more confident to ask for assistance and clarification when teachers spoke positively and were genuinely sincere. One student shared, “It’s their expression when they say it. Sometimes you think they really don’t mean it, but sometimes they do” Student participants were concerned with how teachers and adults at their schools never investigated their intentions on “acting out.” Students at times were upset or behaving in a problematic manner due to an array of influences, such as family problems, peer relations, and/or academic concerns, to highlight a few discussed in this study. Students identified strategies and techniques they felt that teachers and administrators should utilize when engaging a problematic student. Teacher participants in all focus groups shared incidents of understanding and caring for the wellbeing of their students. Teachers felt they had a basic or general understanding of the student’s social and family background. Teachers expressed a need to gather more information from the guidance staff and administration to better address problem student behavior. One student offered, “Teachers should ask them (the students) what’s going on and maybe they’ll tell them what’s going on, and maybe that’s the reason why they’re acting that way.” Student participants who described
situations where teachers and administrators reacted prematurely to problem student behavior described negative outcomes. Students felt teachers should listen first rather than automatically make accusations. For example, ‘He did this or she did that,’ responses will not encourage dialog or understanding between the adult and the student. Negative and harsh responses from teachers and/or administrators were perceived as non-caring attitudes from the adult. Students explained that teachers and administrators need to develop a better understanding of the adversities of student life and a willingness to give the students the benefit of the doubt as reasons that influenced their perception of caring adults.

Engaging in problem student behavior will harm relationships in the school community. The ability of students to identify problem student behavior in various school settings sheds light on how educators can improve addressing problematic behavior. Students were quite aware of how other students behaved (positively or negatively) in different settings. During interview session’s students felt “ganged up on” or “targeted as a behavior problem” in classes where the teachers established set routines and expectations for good behavior. A female student perceived, “The teacher’s had it out for me since the first day of school. My math teacher told me, “I’m not like your last year teachers; I will have you kicked out of my class.” The student continued to explain how she felt hopeless and no matter how she behaved, she would not succeed in this classroom. This response was felt by other student participants in this study that their self-efficacy was tarnished and their perception of hope for success was unattainable. Teacher participant shared similar misgivings with their own efficacy and ability to teach problematic students in their classrooms. Teachers struggled with developing strategies to motivate and encourage students who perceive themselves not able to engage in classroom
activities. This sentiment expresses a strain on the ability for the classroom teacher to form constructive relationships with problematic students.

Many student participants described their own behaviors and how the consequences of their actions affected their relationships in and out of the classroom. Students reflected on their peers engaging in problem student behavior. One female student shared: “When one kid is bad, they (the teachers) shouldn’t take away from all the good kids who are doing something good.” This perception resonated throughout each student focus group.

During the focus groups students spoke of their own feeling when they themselves disrupted a classroom. One student explained, “I feel rotten sometimes; I know they (classmates) don’t like me when I get the teacher going.” Throughout each interview session student participants reflected upon how their behavior caused negative consequences to other classmates. The discussion at times moved from self-centered behavior towards a more empathetic mood. For some students, the willingness to intervene when peers are engaging in problem student behavior prompted support from other focus group participants. More importantly, this intention sparked discussion on “appropriate” student behavior. Bandura (1977) introduced the notion of modeling behavior as a form of social learning. For example, another student expressed the notion to yell at peers in the classroom to “shut up” when they were disrupting the instruction. Students across the study sites believed that their cooperative and appropriate behavior encouraged positive relationships among other students. For many though, perceived cooperative and appropriate behavior also encouraged teachers and administrators to build positive relationships with them.

Throughout this study, an underlying discord between the relationship of the teacher and administrator has surfaced when addressing negative student behavior. Teachers shared various
situations in which their opinions and/or views were not validated in the area of student consequences. Teachers’ perceptions of consequences did differ from the actions school administration implemented. This was articulated by one teacher from focus group “A”, she added we’re not consistent. And there’s not any reinforcing in the office. The kids say, ‘Send me to the office’ implying no corrective action will be implemented by the administration. A teacher participant at site “B” also felt that inconsistency between the teachers’ approach to intervention and the office administrations were present at their site as well. Many of the teachers felt that consequences for students who engage in negative student behavior were totally dependent upon the administrators; they were not a collaborative effort with all stakeholders.

The perception of all focus groups supported the statement: academic performance influenced problem student behavior. Student focus groups did acknowledge students will misbehave when the lesson is difficult or when they want to get out of completing the class work. Overall, students who participated in this study did not openly state that their lack of academic performance influenced their negative behavior. During one teacher focus group interview, a seventh grade teacher shared his experience regarding students’ academic levels. Firstly, he explained that in some classes: “They don’t think they’ll ever understand it. I can think of about two, three kids this year who have acted out because they think their history of math has not been good; and they think that they can’t do it. So they’re just going to act out.” Secondly he added: “They’re not going to do anything. They’ll do anything to avoid having to do what they need to do or to try to learn.” He explained that it is difficult to encourage and motivate when the students have a low expectation of their abilities and shut down. Teachers of all experience levels agreed upon this sentiment. Each administrator who participated in this study agreed that accessing the curriculum is a challenge for many of the students and
contribute to problematic student behavior. They each encountered these students for disciplinary action. One administrator felt the emotional state of the students also contribute to the behavior that the students are exhibiting. She added, “I think they’re struggling academically. They might be lost; they might not know what’s going—what the material is—and they act out to save face, to other students, to the teachers. Some are just class clowns. Some just require more attention”. Administrators, teachers and student focus groups expressed disruptive and avoidance student behavior will occur when students feel unable to understand, complete and/or invested in classroom activities.

**Teacher’s perceived administration was not supportive when addressing problem student behavior.** While the inconsistency of addressing problem student behavior discussed with the teacher participants indicated various issues, such as mutable behavior plans, stakeholder’s attitudes towards behavior, and students’ intentions/motivation. Many teachers across the study sites felt that there is a clear disconnection between the administration and the classroom teachers’ perception of behavioral consequences. Although, when administrators were ask a similar question on the topic “supporting teachers”, the administrators believed they supported teachers addressing problem student behaviors. Two out of the three sites perceived inconsistent support from the administration. In this case, teacher participants did not feel their opinions were validated or supported. Many of the teachers felt that consequences were totally dependent upon the administrator; the process was not a collaborative effort with all stakeholders. For many though, support by their fellow teaching staff was available when needed. Lack of feedback and communication from administration was perceived as non-support by many teachers. Teachers felt that administrators should make attempts to share the rationale behind the consequence for the problematic student behavior.
When the topic of negative tone across the school setting was discussed, many teachers additionally felt that their inability to address problem student behavior would reflect on their overall teacher evaluation and performance review. Teachers across the study sites believed that sending problematic behavioral students out of their classroom would reflect poorly on their classroom management skills on their professional performance reviews.

**More professional development is needed to insure effective interventions for problem student behavior.** All focus groups expressed concern for more understanding of student social and emotional impairments. One student explained that adults may not understand the emotional status of the student. The social and emotional state of students was a genuine concern among student focus groups. Although participant did not utilize clinical terms, they were aware that social and emotional factors contributed to problem student behavior. For example, one student describe a hyperactive student in her class as “jittery and he has to move and get up for no reason,” the description of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Many teachers identified an increase of enrolled students with serious emotional impairments and clinical diagnoses. Teachers believed that problem student behaviors are many times paired with cognitive challenges, making their ability to instruct more difficult. Teachers felt eager to participate in training to contend with their inadequacies addressing social and emotional student behaviors. At each site, the administrator reflected upon the students’ emotional state and believed that in many incidents the intentions of problem student behavior are triggered by various social and emotional factors. One administrator expanded, “I think when a student feels frustrated is when either they can’t do the work, or they feel like they can’t do the work.” He added: “And then they’re going to act out because they just kind of want to smoke screen the fact that they don’t feel that they can do what everybody else’s doing”.

While the social and emotional philosophies discussed with participants indicated the need for more understanding behind treatment, teacher participants also felt that their interaction served as an opportunity for the educators to teach students responsibility and personal relationship skills. This philosophy was framed in the context that the teacher had a desire to provide the students with caring nonacademic interaction. Many teachers felt an empathic approach worked best in addressing problem student behavior but expressed that training is needed. Student focus groups also, expressed their willingness to cooperate and engage in classroom activities increased when they perceived teachers and administrators as caring and supportive.

All focus groups indentified an inconsistency in the delivery of school-wide initiatives and pro-social programs. The classroom management styles of many teachers were perceived as inconsistent by many student participants. One student described one teacher’s system as a point system to earn rewards. Other students described a strike system, “We get three strikes and you’re out,” the consequence of which was an office referral. Many students felt confused with the variety of classroom behavioral management programs at their school. Other students described teachers in the same grade level who implemented different classroom management styles. One student explained that it was difficult to adjust to “different rules for each class.” Although many students discussed individual teacher’s classroom management style, at each research site students were aware of school-wide behavior initiatives. Second-Steps, PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention and Support), Collaborative Problem Solving, and Skills for Life were discussed during the student interviews. Students felt these programs were present, but not always implemented. Student and teacher focus groups expressed similar frustration with understanding and implementation of the various trends and varied of school-
wide behavioral programs. One teacher felt school-wide behavior programs seem to recycle every three to five years.

Many teachers stressed the importance of consistent school-wide procedures when addressing problem student behaviors. Teachers implemented many different strategies to meet this goal. Many teachers strongly felt a lack of support from school administration as a reason for the inconsistent implementation of behavioral support programs. For example, one teacher admitted that the school as a whole was more active and not proactive addressing problem student behavior. Many teachers believed consistent implementation of a school-wide intervention would change the whole climate of the building. For example one teacher referenced that the district is supposed to use the PBIS, “We are supposed to be proactive, setting up things to prevent the problems. We don’t do that. We don’t use the Responsive Classroom or anything that Brockton the system says we use. Our building doesn’t use them.” Many teachers felt that initiatives are started but not fully implemented to reap the programs’ potentials. Administrators felt that his or her school-wide behavior support programs were effective and ran consistently. Administrators believed that student benefited from participating in pro-social programs. One administrator felt the goal of these interventions is to “fill in some of those social gaps, some of those behavioral gaps, that they may not be getting elsewhere,” he explained. All focus group participants felt individual, classroom, and/or school-wide behavioral interventions are beneficial and that the consistency and longevity was not present in their school community. Teacher focus groups expressed the most concern to consistently follow behavioral management programs either classroom or school-wide. Teachers felt that students would engage more in classroom activities when there is consistent school-wide initiatives and pro-social programs implemented at their schools.
Summary

Many significant themes emerged from this research. Of note was that students at all sites stated that they learned more and engaged more in academics when their teachers were caring. Students discussed that they were more confident to ask for assistance and clarification when teachers spoke positively and were genuinely sincere. Many students also, reflected on their own behaviors and how the consequences of their actions affected their relationships with peers, teachers and administrators in and out of the classroom. The student discussions at times moved from self-centered behavior towards a more empathetic mood.

Student focus groups did acknowledge students will misbehave when the lesson is difficult or when they want to get out of completing the class work. Overall, students who participated in this study did not openly state that their lack of academic performance influenced their negative behavior. Teachers expressed a degree of frustration and inadequacy when they are unable to engage students in classroom activities. Teachers felt students struggled with academic topics and student social and emotional state contributed to negative student behavior they experienced in the classroom. Each administrator who participated in this study agreed that accessing the curriculum is a challenge for many of the students and contributed to problematic student behavior. They each encountered these students for disciplinary action. Teachers of all experience levels agreed upon this sentiment.

Many teachers across the study sites felt that there is a clear disconnection between the administration and the classroom teachers’ perception of behavioral consequences. Although, when administrators were ask a similar question on the topic “supporting teachers”, the administrators believed they supported teachers addressing problem student behaviors. The lack of perceived communication between the administrator and teachers was shared as a concern in
all teacher focus groups. Teachers expressed the need for feedback from administration after an incident of problematic behavior from a student and a need to validate teachers’ request of consequences for the student.

All focus groups expressed concern for more professional development to assist in their understanding of student social and emotional impairments. Many teachers identified an increase of enrolled students with serious emotional impairments and clinical diagnoses. Many teachers felt an empathic approach worked best in addressing problem student behavior but expressed that training is needed.

The classroom management styles of many teachers were perceived as inconsistent by many student participants. Many teachers strongly felt a lack of support from school administration as a reason for the inconsistent implementation of behavioral support programs. Many teachers believed consistent implementation of a school-wide intervention would change the whole climate of the building. All participants felt individual, classroom, and/or school-wide behavioral interventions are beneficial and that the consistency and longevity was not present in their school community.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

This study was constructed through the theoretical lens of self-efficacy and theory of planned behavior. These two lenses were selected because of the connections between individuals’ level of motivation and behavioral intent as it relates to their experience as students, teachers, and administrators and efficacy development towards problem student behavior. This linkage is discussed below beginning with self-efficacy, followed by an analysis of theory of planned behaviors as they relate to the results gathered in this study.
Self-efficacy. The self-efficacy theory developed by Albert Bandura (1977), defines self-efficacy as “one’s self judgments of personal capabilities to initiate and successfully perform specified tasks at designated levels, expend greater effort, and persevere in the face of adversity” (p. 71). The findings in this study indicate that students, teachers, and administrators address problem student behavior more effectively when they possess a high level of self-efficacy. Students expressed that they are motivated to engage in academic lessons when classroom teachers care about their overall wellbeing (academic, social or emotional). Students noted incidents where they perceived a false affectation from classroom teachers and administrators, which resulted in lower student efficacy.

Albert Bandura’s theory focuses on how children and adults operate cognitively on their social experiences and how these interactions influenced behavior and development. Student efficacy was demonstrated by explaining how student’s expectations for success or failure are grounded in the belief that they can produce the desired results. Problem student behavior elicited both a positive and a negative efficacy outcome. This was highlighted by one student’s response, “I feel rotten sometimes; I know they (classmates) don’t like me when I get the teacher going.” Throughout this study, student participants reflected upon how their behavior caused negative consequences to other classmates, teachers and administrators. When applied to a classroom setting, student efficacy concerned how effectively students believe they can successfully engage in a task. Student efficacy provided a theoretical foundation that indicated that an individual will avoid tasks that they cannot successfully execute and instead will engage in tasks that they deem capable of execution. One teacher reflected on students’ efficacy, “They don’t think they’ll ever understand it. I can think of about two, three kids this year who have acted out because they think their history of math has not been good; and they think that they
can’t do it. So they’re just going to act out.” Secondly he added: “They’re not going to do anything. They’ll do anything to avoid having to do what they need to do or to try to learn.” He explained that it is difficult to encourage and motivate when the students have a low expectation of their abilities and shut down. Student efficacy provides a theoretical foundation that indicates that an individual will avoid tasks that they cannot successfully execute and instead engage in tasks that they deem capable of completing. Bandura (2001) offers, “People judge the correctness to their perceived and operative thinking against the outcomes of their actions, the effects that other people’s actions produce, what others believe, deductions from established knowledge and what necessarily follows it” (p.10).

Another noteworthy finding regarding teacher efficacy and the results of this study is how teachers perceived the need for professional development in the area of social and emotional student needs to prevent the challenges and confrontation with problematic behavioral students at their school. The entire participating teachers and administrators demonstrated high levels of efficacy in implementing various types of initiatives in order to address problem student behavior. This feeling of efficacy was witnessed during a teacher focus group when one teacher discussed the need to implement school-wide positive behavior programs: “We are supposed to be proactive setting up things to prevent the problems. We don’t do that. Our building doesn’t use them. We have just started to.” This finding articulates teachers’ efficacy to improve their vocation. Teachers and administrators throughout this study demonstrated the willingness to improve the efficacy for the benefit of their students and families.

**Theory of planned behavior.** One of the more prominent concerns of all educators, and the public in general, is the lack of student ownership and behavior control. Icek Ajzen’s work investigates individuals’ intentions to perform given behaviors. One of the findings in this study
indicated that students utilize avoidance behavior in order to not complete assignments in class. Students, teachers, and administrators conferred problematic students intended to display negative behavior to avoided engaging in the classroom lesson. Intentions are assumed to capture the motivational factors that influence behavior. They are indications of how hard people are willing to try, of how much of an effort they are planning to exert, in order to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). One student explained that the types of behavior students engage in is to “get out of work.” He added, “When the teacher is talking, they’re just laughing.” Teachers experienced students throwing objects, talking back, and refusing to complete.

One administrator admitted that school staff does not always investigate the causes of problem students’ behavior or really get to know the students. This finding supports that a clear understanding of the intent or motivation behind problem student behavior can assist in developing effective behavioral interventions. He continued to explain, “When students are making noise, doing things to just be generally disruptive in the classroom, sometimes I think that the student is looking for attention. Sometimes negative attention is better than no attention at all.” Students, teachers and administrators develop existing favorable intentions as well or favorable intentions produced by an intervention. The intentions are likely to be enacted to the extent that the behavior is under volitional control (Ajzen, 2015). Findings throughout this study demonstrated examples of the importance of gathering voided information prior to responding to problem student behavior.

Subjective norms look at a given behavior to a certain outcome or to some other attribute, such as the cost incurred in performing the behavior. The attitude towards the behavior is determined by the strength of these associations and by the beliefs that are salient at the time (McGregor, 2015). This study found the emotional state of the students also contributed to an
increase of problem student behavior. One administrator explained, “I think when a student feels frustrated is that either they can’t do the work, or they feel like they can’t do the work.” He added: “And then they’re going to act out because they just kind of want to smoke screen the fact that they don’t feel that they can do what everybody else’s doing.” Attitude toward the behavior refers to the extent to which a person positively or negatively evaluates his or her performing a behavior. This study determined that all participants perceived positive attitudes built productive relationships and motivated individuals to work in partnership.

Theory of planned behavior also looks through the lens of perceived behavioral control. Perceived behavioral control refers to the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior and the acknowledgement of obstacles and constraints. The theory of planned behavior recognized the possibility that many behaviors are not subject to volitional control and can vary along the continuum from absolute possession to absolute lack of control (Poulou & Norwich, 2002). Many teachers provided anecdotes when they had to address a problematic student. Another finding demonstrated the difficulty that classroom teachers experience when addressing multiple problem student behaviors at once. One teacher shared: “You have to say: ‘OK. You need to stop doing this. You need to do that.’” She added: “You know 75% of the class is not on task because you’re dealing with this problem, this problem, and that problem.” Another teacher remarked: “It’s like playing Whack-A-Mole. One student will set the others off, and as a teacher you are always responding to the behavior.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature Review**

A review of associated literature, presented in the second chapter, presented a thorough investigation of perceptions of problem student behavior by students, teachers and administrators. The following discussion examines the results of this study against the topics
reviewed in the second chapter. The sections are broken down into contributing factors to problem student behavior, impact on relationships, and supports to address problem student behaviors.

**Factors to problem student behavior.** Problem student behavior was demonstrated in numerous forms throughout this study. Researchers note that students who engage in problem behaviors lack optimism and a positive mood which will affect their motivation and self-efficacy (Privitera & Campbell, 2009). Students, therefore, believe that they cannot live up to the expectations set by the school and parents. This was evident throughout the study. Students will often look around the classroom and see their peers “getting it” and come up with the feeling that they are incompetent or inadequate. This attitude of poor self-image by the students will send them down in a problem spiral. As a defense mechanism, the students will act out typically by “blaming, denial, procrastination, irresponsibility, laziness, and acting out” (L. J. Greene, 1998).

This study exposed that many teacher and administrator participants felt that there was a direct correlation between the students’ understanding of academic material presented and their behavioral outburst. This finding did acknowledge students will misbehave when the lesson is difficult or when they want to get out of completing the class work. Overall, students who participated in this study did not openly state that their lack of academic performance influenced their negative behavior. In one focus group a student felt other students disrupted the classroom due to their lack of ability to access the curriculum. She explained, “They don’t want anybody to know that they don’t understand, so they’re going to be a fool.” Furthermore, one student's disruptive problem behavior often impedes other students' ability to learn by distracting the teacher from a focus on the academic progress of the whole classroom (Thompson & Webber, 2010).
**Impact on relationships.** Assisting students with adapting to school rules, understanding the consequences of inappropriate behavior, and helping students understand the impact of their behavior on the classroom environment are all critical components in developing effective interventions when dealing with students who engage in problem behaviors (Elswick & Casey, 2012). The results of this study suggest that cooperation and support contribute to building positive and long lasting relationships in a school community. Students expressed a genuine caring approach from adults future positive interactions in and out of the classroom setting. Enhancing one’s mood toward the positive could greatly increase his or her sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993). Students perceived negative or confrontational interactions to be counter productive in addressing problem student behavior. One student explained, “The teacher’s had it out for me since the first day of school. My math teacher told me I’m not like your last year teachers; I will have you kicked out of my class.” She continued to explain how she felt hopeless, and no matter how she behaved, she would not succeed in this classroom. Literature previously discussed indicates that novice teachers may be more reactive in response to discipline issues. In contrast, experienced teachers may be less reactive, more patient, and potentially expend less energy in addressing discipline issues (Noltemeyer et al., 2012). The results of this study suggest that more experienced teachers were less reactive to problem student behavior but felt more frustrated addressing the repetitiveness of the same problematic students over time.

Bandura (1977) introduced the notion of modeling behavior as a form of social learning. For example, another student expressed the notion to yell at peers in the classroom to “shut up” when they were disrupting the instruction. Students across the study sites believed that their cooperative and appropriate behavior encouraged positive relationships among other students.
For many though, perceived cooperative and appropriate behavior also encouraged teachers and administrators to build positive relationships with them.

One administrator believed that the classroom teachers had the need to be validated by their students. She explained, “Teachers are much more willing, generally speaking, to help students and to give extra time to students who respect them and whom the teacher sees as being respectful to themselves and towards their peers.” This administrator felt that respect and understanding added to the readiness of students in a classroom. With her years of experience she explained, “Teachers are more willing to give them extra time before school, after school, after classes, during the day, during free times. So, yes, the behavior of a student makes a huge difference with how a teacher perceives that student and is willing to go the extra mile for that student.”

**Supports to address problem student behaviors.** Teachers can encourage more positive behaviors in their students by making preventive techniques part of their everyday classroom management strategies (Charney, 2002). This approach was evident throughout the study. Many teachers and administrators suggested that well-prepared classrooms with an array of interactive materials are beneficial in engaging students in the classroom. Other research results supported effective behavioral support methods, such as school-wide models, benefited students’ academic outcomes and that effective practices benefited social behavior (George Sugai et al., 2008; Warren et al., 2006). This study produced examples of ineffective school-wide inactivates. All participates did acknowledge that their school did participate in pro-social school-wide activities; however only the administrators felt that they produced positive results addressing problem student behaviors. Students and teachers felt classroom management and individual behavior support programs combated problem student behavior more effectively.
Students who engage in problem behaviors need more support to adjust and be productive students. “Students who display chronic problem behaviors need behavior intervention and support plans that are high intensity, scientifically based, individualized, and proactive” (George Sugai et al., 2008). Individual behavioral support plans are implemented when school-wide prevention program proved ineffective. Individual behavioral programs address and identify the intent of the problem student behavior (Godin & Kok, 1996; Poulou & Norwich, 2002). Results also suggest that students will intentionally engage in problem student behavior. Even when students are struggling academically, established teachers are instructing classes and behavior support plans are implemented. School administrators, classroom teachers, and families need to recognize the intention of problem student behavior when developing such behavioral interventions and support plans (MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013).

Summary

This study was constructed through the theoretical lens of self-efficacy and theory of planned behavior. Albert Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy focuses on how children and adults operate cognitively on their social experiences and how these interactions influenced behavior and development. Student efficacy was demonstrated by explaining how student’s expectations for success or failure are grounded in the belief that they can produce the desired results. The findings in this study indicate that students, teachers, and administrators address problem student behavior more effectively when they possess a high level of self-efficacy. Students expressed that they are motivated to engage in academic lessons when classroom teachers care about their overall well-being (academic, social or emotional).

Icek Ajzen’s theory of planned behavior investigates individuals’ intentions to perform given behaviors. One of the findings in this study indicated that students utilize avoidance
behavior in order to not complete assignments in class. Students, teachers, and administrators conferred problematic students intended to display negative behavior to avoided engaging in the classroom lesson. Intentions are assumed to capture the motivational factors that influence behavior. They are indications of how hard people are willing to try, of how much of an effort they are planning to exert, in order to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Students, teachers and administrators reflected on their overall attitude toward the behavior and the extent to which a person positively or negatively evaluates his or her performing a behavior. This study determined that all participants perceived positive attitudes built productive relationships and motivated individuals to work in partnership.

**Conclusion and Implications for Practice**

The goal of this study was to investigate observations and perspectives of students, teachers and administrators in relationship to problematic student behavior in an urban middle school setting. This was analyzed through a qualitative multi-site case study research design that sought to answer the following three questions:

1. What contributes to problem student behaviors, as perceived by administrators, faculty, and students?

2. How does problem student behavior impact relationships in a school community, as perceived by administrators, faculty, and students?

3. What strategies, practices, or use of responses could better support students identified as evidencing problem behavior, as perceived by students, teachers, and administrators?

In answering these questions, data was gathered through both focus groups conducted at three public middle school sites and document analysis of office referral documents and
individual/classroom/school-wide behavior support plans. The entirety of the data was coded for thematic analysis.

The results of this study show that family dynamics, academic ability, and school community relationships contribute to problem student behavior. The need for professional development to address social and emotional components of problem student behavior and the need for consistent implementation of behavior support plans.

**Significance of the Study**

Educational institutions must value the perceptions of their students, teachers, and administrators before utilizing behavioral interventions within their school community. More school districts are developing pro-social positive school-wide behavior programs to address problem student behavior. Many of these programs approach the entire school environment when developing a pliable intervention plan. Behavioral expectations are developed and identified. Validation of all stakeholders’ perceptions of the program must be reviewed to insure effective implementation. Classroom management strategies and individual behavioral support plans need to be looked at in this same light. Selecting the “best practices” or the most effective intervention can be difficult and will take all stakeholders “buying in” to the behavioral intervention. Stakeholders must assess and understand the intentions or antecedents that a student may choose to act in a certain manner to develop an effective intervention. Assessment and forethought are crucial prior to selecting interventions to combat problem student behavior.

Students’ perceptions and self-awareness of problem school behavior require investigation and validation as teachers and administrators react to problematic behavioral incidents. Students, teachers, and administrators address problem student behavior more effectively when they possess a high level of self-efficacy. Students’ perceived positive
relationships can be formed when individuals perceive each other as caring and supportive. Students perceived negative or confrontational interactions to be counter productive in addressing problem student behavior. Students across the study sites believed that their cooperative and appropriate behavior encouraged positive relationships among other students. For many though, perceived cooperative and appropriate behavior also encouraged teachers and administrators to build positive relationships with them. Assisting students with academic challenges, understanding the consequences of inappropriate behavior, and helping students understand the impact of their behavior on the classroom environment are all critical components in developing long-lasting relationships in a school community.

Teachers perceived the need for professional development in the area of social and emotional student needs to prevent the challenges and confrontation with problematic behavioral students at their school. Administrators and teachers need professional development training to heighten their awareness of problem student behaviors and the myriad of intentions students may choose to engage in problematic behaviors. The training of school staff and implementation of school-wide/classroom/individual positive behavior supports continue to be inadequate to address the students who engage in problem student behaviors. Training is the areas of classroom expectations, consistent implementation of consequences, and the development of problem solving techniques are necessary to combat the growing emergence of social and emotional problem student behavior.

Limitations

The findings of this study are informative and worthy of continued discussion and exploration. Yet this study was limited to three urban middle schools in Brockton, Massachusetts. The information collected consisted of discipline records and transcripts from
nine focus groups represented by three students, three teachers, and three administrators. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to all middle schools in the Brockton Public School district. A larger sample size would have helped for the results of this study to be more of a representative of the diverse population and would have limited the influence of outliers in the data. Further larger studies may be beneficial to confirm these results. The perceptions of parents were discussed by the student, teacher, and administrators throughout this study, adding a parent/family focus group would shed insight on the family dynamics. This study has uncovered many different perceptions of problem student behavior and key factors that influence and contribute to their perception(s) of problem student behaviors. While the focus group format provided the best method to answer the research questions, gathering three groups of students, teachers, and administrators together at three sites was challenging and time consuming. The academic schedule for district and state mandated testing limited available dates and times to conduct focus group interviews.

Validity

Issues of validity previously discussed included maintaining researcher objectivity although employed as a School Adjustment Counselor in the Brockton Public Schools. This holds true to response bias throughout the data collection process as well. Due to the nature of the study in which students, teachers, and/or administrators could possibly disclose incriminating traits regarding their perceptions of problem student behavior in front of their peer group, participants were left prone to response bias. To combat response bias, the researcher presented the purpose of the research project and explained why participants needed to truthfully explain experiences, interactions, and personal approach through a scripted introduction at the beginning of each focus group. The second threat to validity was researcher objectivity, as the researcher
was not only a School Adjustment Counselor but had worked with many of the participants in this study. While this rapport helped establish a trusting relationship between the researcher and participants, therefore helping limit response bias, it presented a threat to validity. To combat this, the researcher used the same protocol for each focus group session. Additionally, each study site selected the time and date of each session, thus randomizing the students, teachers, and administrators from each school who could participate in the study based on scheduling.

**Future Research**

Findings from this research study present future basis to advance the body of knowledge regarding perceptions of problem student behavior from the viewpoint of students, teachers, and administrators. This study represents key factors that influence and contribute to their perceptions of problem student behaviors. Therefore, there is potential to broaden the scope and scale of this study by expanding the number of students, teachers, and administrators as well as schools that participated in this study. Adding a parent/family focus group at each research site would shed insight on the family dynamics and the relationship between the school and family.

Students, teachers, and administrators across the three study sites reflected upon their individual roles within the school and noted their objective perception that positive approaches to address problem student behavior help to develop cooperative relationship within their individual school communities. Future studies should seek to examine the practices to encourage collegiality between adults and students at the middle school level.

Likewise, the beneficial effects of professional development as it relates to social and emotional disorders exist. To broaden the scope and understanding of social and emotional impairments affect their relationship with teachers. Further, the findings of this study indicate the inconsistency of implementation of behavior support plans. Studies should seek to determine
the significance between school-wide behavioral support programs and the teacher’s classroom management approach.

**Personal Comments and Recommendations**

Throughout my educational career, I have observed a relatively small student population within a school building is always involved in a majority of disciplinary issues. Often these same students are repeat offenders who are committing the same infraction time and time again; I refer to them as “frequent flyers.” I felt that many of these students repeat the same offenses with little behavioral support to correct the behavior. I knew I wanted to investigate how problem student behavior affects the personal relationships in a school community.

As a school adjustment counselor, one of my roles is to investigate the intention or motivation behind the problem student behavior. School staff implements different strategies and practices when addressing problem student behavior and each stakeholder has an invested interest on the outcome. I listened to their success stories and their worries too. I felt I needed to know more about problem student behavior and the impact it was having on the student, teacher and administrators relationships within the school setting. I wanted to investigate the different view points or perspectives from school stakeholders in the area of problem student behavior. I felt many times the relationships and personalities are at the core of the conflict and that all stakeholders needed a say in the development of the resolution. I felt it was important to research not only from the adults’ perspective, but the students as well.

At times the students come to school with personal issues, “baggage,” and have no outlet to express their emotions. This holds true for teachers, administrators, and other school staff who are charged with serving the wellbeing of our students. I felt that it was important to investigate
and to see how students and staff perceived problem student behavior, in order to make improvements.

It is my goal to share the results of this study with the district to improve strategies, practices, or use of responses more effectively to better support students. As a school adjustment counselor, this study afforded me the opportunity to listen to students and professional staff. To investigate how they perceive problem student behavior, which in turn provides me with opportunities to improve relationships in my school community and district. Inconsistency was talked about in all focus groups. I strongly recommend that the district review current practices and responses to problem student behavior. The involvement of students, teachers and administrators in prioritizing and participating in the improvement process of addressing problematic students at middle school across the district is pivotal to bring the best out of all stakeholders. They work in the trenches and their insights can provide functional solutions to the concerns raised in this study.

The findings of this study shows the strengths and weakness of common practices addressing problem student behavior through the perspective of the student, teacher and administrator, they do not provide the specific details of how to carry out these recommendations. This study does, however, outline the concerns and stressors problem student behavior has on relationship building in our school community. The study also provides areas of growth that could benefit positive relationships, professional development, and student achievement. More understanding of social and emotional issues our student population encounters and effective practices to address the needs of our students will build a positive school environment. While this process was overwhelming and difficult at times, it was ultimately a rewarding and long experience. Not only can the research and findings presented in
this study assist others in the educational field, I came away from this project a better researcher, writer, and educator.
References


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Appendix A

Assistant Principal Interview Questions

**Assistant Principal Questions:**

What behavior problems occur in the classrooms?

Why do you think those particular behaviors exist in those classrooms?

Do you think that they happen in particular classrooms more often than other classrooms (no names)? What kinds of problems? And why? (Is it the student, teachers, topic, teaching environment?)

What are teachers doing now to prevent or address student behavior concerns?

- Do you feel that some teachers are much better at that than other teachers? What do you mean? Why?

What is the school doing to try and prevent those problems in the classroom?

- Has there been specific training for all teachers regarding how to better address these problems?
- Has there been specific guidance or support with particular teachers? (No names). What? How did you decide to work with THOSE teachers?

Could the school be doing anything differently to better address these problems?

What is your role in helping to address these problems (1) in the school as a whole, and (2) with teachers in the classroom?

How do you work with these students to address their problem behavior in the classroom?

This is a big question, and a very important one for me … How do you think students’ behavior changes the relationship between others? Can you give me some examples? (no names)

How much of a role do parents play in either addressing or not addressing students’ problem behavior? Examples? (No names please)

What are your major concerns regarding the management of student behavior in this school?

Finally, to what degree do you believe students’ problem behavior impacts their success in school?
Appendix B

Teacher Focus Group Questions

Teacher Questions:

What behavior problems do you observe in your classrooms?

What do you do to try and prevent or address these problems?

- Can you give me some examples?

What concerns do you have about being able to manage such problems, either on the part of the student or your own ability to manage such problems?

In general, why do you think or believe students misbehave in the classroom setting or in school in general?

- Can you give me some examples? You don’t have to name students, but it would be great to have some specific examples of that.

Is the school right now doing anything in particular in an attempt to address these issues?

- Have you had any training regarding how to address these issues/challenges?
- Do you see the training as being useful for the school?
- Do you think it made an impact?
- Do you see the training as having been useful for you?
- How so?

What do you think the school could be doing differently to better address these problems?

What do you think you, or any teacher for that matter, could be doing differently to better address these problems?

What role do you think parents should play with managing your students’ behaviors?

This is a big question, and a very important one for me … How do you think students’ behaviors in the classroom impacts the relationships of others?

- Can you give me some examples?

In general, what do you typically do to develop and maintain positive and supportive relationships with your students?
To what extent do you believe your relationship with students affect their learning and academic engagement in your classroom?

Finally, do you see a relationship between a teacher's classroom discipline and students' academic achievement? What is that relationship?
Appendix C

Student Focus Group Questions

Student Questions:

**Introduction:** As you know, I would like everyone to identify and describe, as perceived by a students point of view, key factors that influence problem student behaviors. My goal is that our discussion will lead to identifying how relationships are developed, identification of specific actions, strategies, and use of resources currently utilized at your school to ameliorate and/or address problematic student behavior. This research may provide some insight to how perceptions might influence addressing problematic student behavior in other urban school districts, as well as, your own school.

I’d like to remind you that your participation is voluntary. Even if your parents consented for you, you do not have to participate. I will leave the room for a couple minutes and if you’d like to opt-out, please leave.

What behavior problems do you observe in classrooms?

Can you give me some examples?

Why do you think that happens?

What do teachers do when a student is acting out or causing trouble in a classroom?

- Can you give me an example (no names!)?
- What happened? And why did that happen?

What kinds of things do you think teachers do now to try and prevent or address these problems?

This is a big question, and a very important one for me … How do you think their or your behavior changes the relationship with others?

- Have you seen this?
- Can you give me some examples?

What happens when students are acting out or being problematic OUTSIDE the classroom, in the rest of the school?

- Can you give me an example (no names please!)?
- What happened? And why did that happen?

What kinds of things do you think teachers or the school could do now to try and prevent or address these problems?
What role do you believe parents play with managing classroom behaviors?

- How about your parents with you?

Do you feel motivated when your teacher cares about you and your success in learning?

How much can you do to get teachers to believe you can do well in schoolwork?

Do you see a relationship between a teachers classroom discipline and students academic achievement?

To what extent do your relationships with your teachers affect learning and academic engagement in your classroom?