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School Leadership, Culture, and Teacher Stress: Implications for Problem Students

A Different Lens on Secondary
Student (Mis)behaviour

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CHAPTER ONE

Research Aims And Overview

Three stone cutters were asked about their jobs. The first said he was paid to cut stones. The second replied that he used special techniques to shape stones in an exceptional way, and proceeded to demonstrate his skills. The third stone cutter just smiled and said: "I build cathedrals."

1.0 The Research Problem

The program of research presented in this dissertation is an investigation of contextual issues related to the number of students referred for behaviour problems in schools. It will attempt to capture some of the relational dynamics that contribute to behaviour problems in an environment where achievement often transcends humanity as a measure of individual worth. Such a position is not stated lightly. The education literature is replete with studies about instructional efficacy, curriculum design, and the rhetoric of process improvement. Yet, in almost every case, the things that make a difference happen at the level of people relating to people. Emergent themes in the education literature bear this out when they refer to management of diversity and development of the whole person.

In contrast, children with behavioural issues are not considered for their diversity; their type of 'difference' persists as a problem to be remedied. In response to this observation, the research reported here is an investigation of the school variables that may be associated with the behaviour of this sub-population of students. Specifically, the combined effects of school leadership, organisational culture, and teacher stress, are examined as variables associated with the frequency of referral rates for students deemed to be 'misbehaving'. Following from this, the principal focus pertains to the notion of directionality. That is, while student misbehaviour is most often viewed as a 'producer' of teacher stress and school level problems, it may also be perceived as a 'product' (Hart, Wearing & Conn, 1995). The main thesis therefore, offers an alternative perspective on a widely researched area of education administration, and, in particular, aims to quantify the directional effects of the variables under investigation.

In first considering the issue of leadership, it was hypothesised that a collegial and consultative style would be associated with a positive school culture and low levels of teacher stress, especially because it relates to teachers' perceptions of a supportive and satisfying work environment (Hipp, 1996, 1997; Peters, 1997). Leadership is viewed as important because of its propensity to compound teacher stress and a negative school culture, and to indirectly influence the frequency of student referrals for behaviour problems. While no direct association between this combination of factors has been reported, existing research supports the conclusion that such a pathway may exist (Koh, Steers & Terborg, 1995; Punch & Tuetteman, 1996; Wiley, 1998). Justification for this position comes from the substantial body of research into the differential effects of leadership style on a range of school variables, including school culture, teachers' job satisfaction, teacher stress, change adaptation, and student achievement.

Turning now to the question of organisational culture, it was hypothesised that a supportive and satisfying school culture would be an important determinant of teachers' self-reported levels of stress and burnout, as well as being associated with student referral rates for misbehaviour. Justification for this position comes from critical evaluation of the literature pertaining to organisational culture in schools (Mills, 1991; Mok & Flynn, 1998). While many studies explore particular aspects of school activities as they bear on teachers' subjective experience, and on student achievement, supportive cultures consistently emerge as critical to ameliorating the negative influence of stress on performance and satisfaction for both groups (Adami & Norton, 1996; Enomoto, 1994; Hipp, 1996, 1997; Jackson & Bynym, 1997; Lantieri, 1999; Mok & Flynn, 1998; Punch & Tuetteman, 1996). The link arises because teachers frequently report difficulties within the interpersonal domain, including expectations regarding their behaviour, socialisation to the school environment, and relations with school leaders, colleagues, and students (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Cochran-Smith & Little, 1992; Hart et al., 1995; Hipp, 1996, 1997; Koh et al., 1995; Kowalski, 2000). Studies have identified a range of factors, such as student behaviour, lack of recognition and support from school administrators, the absence of collegiality, and work duties that encroach on leisure time and family. More recently, studies confirm that students sometimes share similar perceptions of difficult relations within their school environment (Cowen, Hightower, Pedro-Carroll, Work, Wyman & Haffey, 1996; Leonard, Bourke & Schofield, 2000; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1991). Given that the vast majority of teachers are genuine in their concern for students and for effective teaching, Noguera (1995) asked what is it about the structure and culture of schools that propagates destructive interpersonal dynamics.

Extrapolating from the above, it was also predicted that the combination of positive leadership, supportive organisational culture, and low levels of teacher stress, would be reflected in lower referral rates for student misbehaviour. That is, where the leadership style at a school promotes a supportive workplace culture, teachers' subjective levels of stress may be reduced, and consequently, so may be teachers' negative reactivity to students' problem behaviour (Friedman, 1991; Mills, 1991; Smith & Bourke, 1991). Following this line of reasoning, it was hypothesised that a reduction in teachers' negative reactivity would be associated with a concomitant reduction in the referral rates for student misbehaviour. Such a position may offer an alternative perspective on entry points for management of student behaviour, compared to existing strategies that focus only on students as the primary problem.

To examine why referral rates may diverge across schools, additional analyses investigated whether the perceptions of teachers and their school administrators differed. This avenue of enquiry was pursued because, although the whole-of-school environment includes teachers, students and administrators, any assumption of shared perceptions may under-estimate the effects of school level factors, such as leadership and culture. Questions have already been posed in relation to perceived differences between rhetoric and reality in school processes (Wilkinson, 1993). Yet, little has been done to clarify any discrepancy between school leaders and teaching staff, and indeed, to test whether any discrepancy exists. The inter-relatedness of school and teacher level variables does not necessarily translate to similar perceptions between school administrators and teachers; thus, it was further hypothesised that differences in perceptions between each group may go some way to explaining variance in referral rates for student behaviour problems.

1.1 Methodology

In the first instance, behaviour management staff were approached to participate in an exploratory study. This action was taken because the nature of their work combines proximity to student issues with operational distance from their respective schools. Focus group interviews obtained qualitative information regarding observations of possible links between leadership, organisational culture, and teacher stress, as they might bear on student behaviour issues. The resulting data were content-analysed within relevant theoretical frameworks, and emergent themes located to inform the next stages of the research program.

Following from this, teaching staff and school administrators were surveyed to capture school level differences regarding leadership, culture, and teacher stress. Quantitative measures for the study were chosen according to the clarity with which they captured the variables under investigation, their psychometric reliability, and specifically, to address measurement deficiencies in prior research. To reduce potential reporting bias, student behavioural event data were obtained directly from school records, and recorded as frequencies per student, according to gender, grade level, and event type. Discriminant function analysis was employed to identify differences between schools on the school and teacher variables, and to establish any association with referral rates for problem student behaviour.

To further explore within school factors, the perceptions of teaching staff and school administrators regarding leadership style and school culture were also investigated. While school administrators and teaching staff are co-located, they do not share the same proximal relationship to student behaviour issues by virtue of their position in school hierarchies. In addition, the roles of each group diverge in fundamental ways. Thus, it was reasonable to presuppose school administrators may hold different viewpoints about school environment factors, including leadership style and culture. It was presumed that status differences between teachers and school administrators could influence perceptions about the mechanisms of social control, as they pertain to teaching staff, and, by implication, as they apply to students. In the context of school culture, the mechanisms of social control arise from the nuances of in-school cultural phenomena, such as norms and values, which constrain teacher behaviour. Such differences may go some way to explaining any relationship between organisational level variables and referral rates for problem behaviour in students, especially where teaching staff report lower satisfaction with leadership and school culture.

1.2 Outline Of The Research

The dissertation begins with an overview of student behaviour issues, as reported in the literature, and particularly the education literature. This is followed by chapters concerning models of leadership, organisational culture, and stress, and includes a review of the literature as each aspect pertains to schools. For clarity, definitions of key concepts are presented in the relevant chapters. In addition, when examining models of leadership and organisational culture, schools are not treated as microcosms that exist in isolation from other workplaces; instead, they are examined using applied models from the organisational psychology literature. A summary chapter will draw together the over-arching theme of 'environment' within which referral rates for student behaviour problems can be examined. These chapters will form the springboard from which the program of research will unfold.

Study 1 is a qualitative investigation of the perceptions of behaviour management staff regarding school leadership, organisational culture, and teacher stress, as each relates to student behaviour issues. Study 2 is a cross-sectional survey of teachers and school administrators, which examines the association between the frequency of referrals for behavioural problems and quantitative measures of school leadership style, organisational culture, and teachers' subjective levels of stress. The third and final study explores differences between teachers and school administrators in relation to their perceptions of the school environment variables, leadership style and organisational culture. The dissertation concludes with a summary discussion of the results, and presents conclusions about the direction of effect of school environment variables on referral rates for problem student behaviour.

1.3 Delimitations Of Scope And Key Assumptions

The central focus of this dissertation pertains to secondary students referred for intervention arising from infringements of *published* school behaviour policy. It does not attempt to address more serious behavioural issues associated with mental illness or disability, which are beyond the scope of this research. Nonetheless, some overlap is likely because the collection of behavioural event data necessarily includes infractions that occur in the context of such conditions. Moreover, behaviour, for the most part, is presented simply as behaviour, unless the need to specify it as misbehaviour or problem behaviour serves to clarify the attendant argument. This action is taken as a deliberate acknowledgement of children's behaviour as the best choice s/he could make about a situation given the resources and constraints of the moment; that is, any label of *misbehaviour* is ascribed by external others, and generally by teachers in the school setting. Thus, the data concerning student behaviour presumes that the infraction have already been viewed as a breach of published school policy. In addition, while teachers and school administrators are key to this investigation, their contribution is limited to provision of survey information about school environment variables, while student data were secured from other sources. That is, the outcome of this research is intended to advance theory and practice concerning management of student behaviour, and only refers to teaching staff as data sources and potential instruments of change. Except where indicated, research cited pertains to middle grade or secondary students, to maintain consistency with the population investigated for the research presented here.

1.4 Summary

In conclusion, the research presented here argues that student misbehaviour may be as much a product of influences operating within the school environment, as it is a contributor to perceptions of problem behaviour. That is, system level variables such as school leadership and school culture, combined with teachers' experience of both, may coalesce to influence how student behaviour is perceived within school systems. In Chapter 2 the literature pertaining to student behaviour is summarised, with particular reference to how it is interpreted and understood within the education context. For the most part, *misbehaviour* is pathologised, almost by degree, according to how far it deviates from prescriptions for acceptable behaviour. The chapter begins with a discussion of definitions and categories of student misbehaviour, which have emerged in recent decades of significant social upheaval.