Discipline, Learning and Interaction in US Bilingual Classroom Contexts

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ABSTRACT: This article presents the results derived from the implementation of a new discipline program at Fischer Middle School, San Jose, California, a bilingual school (English / Spanish) located in an area of predominantly low income Hispanic student population. In order to tackle the interference with academic achievement arising from discipline problems, new strategies in the treatment of behavior and discipline issues were adopted: development of responsibility, meaningful rules and consequences, preventive strategies and alternatives to punishment for minor and more severe problems. The findings were both contradictory and encouraging: the survey showed a bigger interest in learning and academic achievement in most children; on the other hand, GPAs did not get better in the year of the intervention and the overall number of referrals increased slightly, although there was a significant month to month reduction pattern in the second year.

Keywords: discipline, learning achievements, self-esteem, teacher training, dialogue.

RESUMEN: Este articulo presenta los resultados obtenidos tras la implementación y evaluación de un nuevo programa de disciplina en la *Middle School* Fischer, San Jose, California, una escuela bilingüe (inglés / español), en un área con una población estudiantil de origen hispano y renta baja. Para afrontar la incidencia de los problemas disciplinarios en los rendimientos académicos, se adoptaron de forma experimental una serie de medidas: desarrollo de la responsabilidad personal, normas y consecuencias de su ruptura coherentes entre sí, estrategias preventivas de la violencia y alternativas al castigo en respuesta a los problemas de diversa naturaleza. Los resultados pueden considerarse alentadores y contradictorios: los alumnos mostraron un mayor interés por el aprendizaje, aunque su rendimiento académico no mejoró sustancialmente y el número de partes de incidencia por mala conducta aumentó moderadamente. Sin embargo, la tendencia fue a la baja en el segundo año de implementación.

Palabras clave: disciplina, rendimiento académico, autoestima, formación del profesorado, diálogo.

1. Contextual Background for Fischer Middle School

This study presents the findings of a research action carried out in Fischer Middle School, San Jose, California, where, after detecting that violence and discipline related issues interfered with academic achievement, it was considered necessary to address the situation by adopting measures that could provide effective alternatives to the traditional approaches which had been the standard procedure up to the time of the implementation of this experimental program.

Alum Rock School District is situated on the East Side of San Jose. It serves a total of 16,154 students from Kindergarten to eighth grade, most of which are of Latino origin. It is composed of a total of 25 schools. Nineteen of these are Elementary Schools, grades K-5 and the other six are Middle Schools for grades 6-8. For the academic year 2002/03, the largest ethnicity group in this district was the Latino. Seventy two per cent of students belonged to this group. For the remaining thirty per cent, there was 12% Asian, 7% Filipino, 5% White, 2% African American, 1% Native American, 1% Pacific Islander and less than 1% mixed race or no response.

Clyde L. Fischer Middle School is one of the six middle schools in the district. For the year of this study, it served a total of 883 students from the southernmost part of the district. Its ethnical composition clearly resembled the district's distribution. However, the percentage of Latino students was even larger in this particular school. There was 82% of Latino students, compared to 6% Asian, 4% Filipino, 4% Pacific Islander, 2% African American and 2% White. There was a total of 37 teachers: 60 of them were fully credentialed, 20 were pre-intern or intern and the remaining 20 had emergency credentials or waivers. The Special Education Department was formed by three SDC (Special Day Class) teachers and two RSP (Resource Service Specialist) teachers.

Parent education level was extremely low in this school, with 44 parents who never graduated from High School and only a total of 13 College Graduates. A total of 79 students received free or reduced lunch, which can be seen as a reflection of the low socio-economic background of most of the students attending this site.

Whereas API (Academic Performance Index) scores had consistently gone up during the last three years across the district, that consistency did not show in Fischer School's scores. Actually, API score went down from 507 in 1999, to 479 in 2000. It recovered slightly the following year, going to 507 again for 2001. Growth target for 2002/03 was 15 points. The API score for Latino children followed a similar pattern, going from 486 points in 1999, to 455 in 2000, and to 484 in 2001.

The number of sixth grade students scoring above 50 in Reading in SAT (Stanford Achievement Test) testing was only 11 in 2001 (compared to 27 in the

district and 47 in the State). Seventh graders did a little better, with 24 scoring above 50 (27 in the district and 48 in the State). For the academic year 2002/03, the school stood at level 1 (in a scale of 1 to 10, being 1 the lowest and 10 the highest) according to statewide rank, and at level 3 when compared to similar schools in California.

According to official data from October CBEDS (California Basic Education Demographic Source) data collection, there was only 24 English Language Learners at Fischer in 2001. However, with the arrival of the new CELDT (California English Language Development Test), a big effort was made in 2001/02 throughout the school in order to get the real number of ELLs (English Language Learners), since anybody could easily notice that this 24 did not accurately reflect the school reality. After this long research, a total of 601 students were tested for CELDT and considered as ELLS. This number represented, roughly, 2/3 of the total enrolment at Fischer.

Serious discipline problems had been part of Fischer Middle School for many years. The school is considered as one of the most difficult in Alum Rock for teachers and administrators. But it was never one of the main focuses of the school or district to address this problem in a consistent way. Traditional disciplinary strategies continued to be used throughout the school, although these did not seem to be too effective. Besides, discipline data was never used in a systematic way to study and address the situation. There was a first attempt to do so the year before this study, but due to time and personnel limitations, there was no consistency in the data collection process and only part of the referrals and offences were registered. According to different administrators and employees at the school, at least 25 of the referrals were not registered (although some of the people interviewed raise this number to 50). However, the analysis of this data between the months of September and February shows a clear tendency towards an increase in the number of discipline problems throughout the year.

	Se	Oct	Nov	De	Jan	Fe
■ Serie 1	21	79	76	83	74	114
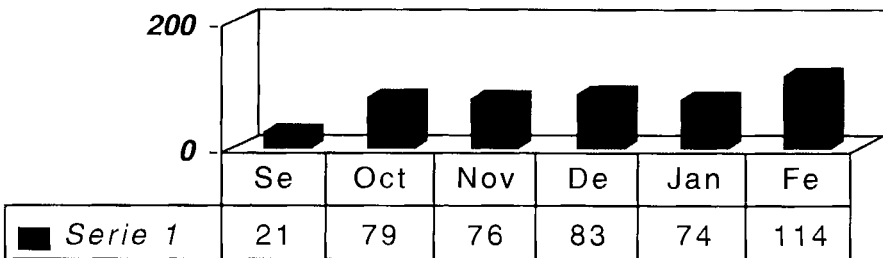
Discipline trouble recorded for academic year 2001/2002

This was the main cause for a number of teacher and parent complaints and a general sense of insecurity (at least four attacks against teachers' and administrators' cars were registered) in the school community. There was general agreement that this was one of the most important reasons why test scores did not go up in 2002/03, even though the new administrative team had made an important effort to give the school a new focus on academic achievement and academic results.

2. Approaches to Discipline in Classroom Situations

Walker and Golly (1999) provide an exhaustive list of the factors that may be the cause for antisocial behavior in school children: family, neighborhood, school and larger society. Factors at home include weak supervision of children's activities, lack of discipline or use of harsh or punitive discipline, unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence and child abuse. Neighborhood factors include high rate of crime, unsafe neighborhoods, lack of social cohesion and few after school recreation-leisure activities. Among school-based risks, they mention bullying and sexual harassment, failure to learn to read well, and inability to achieve the social rewards and recognition offered to some children. Finally, some of the social factors are media violence, growing incivility and social fragmentation and alienation. For these authors, really effective interventions can only take place during the first years of school life. While a number of these factors cannot be dealt with appropriately or at all in the educational context of the classroom, they should be taken into consideration as the possible scenarios whose outcomes surface in the form of violence in the school. Realistically, interventions must be implemented at the level of school factors in the hope that such strategies may permeate to the other contexts of the students' lives.

Similarly, Lopez (2002) identifies the three variables that make a high-risk student different from any other: anger, lack of academic success and family conditions. The solutions advanced include the establishment of a common language, encouraging students to take responsibility for their behavior and creating logical consequences, like time out in another classroom or Saturday School. A rewards program for good behavior is to be established, including a more specific program for the students with the most severe behavior problems. However, there is always a «satiation» element in rewards and punishments systems that make them lose effectiveness with time. The causes the author notices for high risk are comparable and mostly transferable to the context in Fischer Middle School, so that the diagnosis of the situation appears to coincide. In fact, it was a very interesting process to realise that many schools around the country are facing challenges similar to Fischer's, when very often there is a tendency to

believe that each site's situation is exceptional. The idea that the whole staff needs to be involved in the decision making process regarding discipline problems is essential for this study, although proposed solutions, on the other hand, will be different from those in Lopez (2002).

Traynor (2002) established the model for this study with the claim that any disciplinary action adopted should encourage student responsibility as well as preventive disciplinary actions. In order to confirm the pedagogical soundness of classroom order strategies, he identifies five different ones: (1) coercive, (2) laissez-faire, (3) task oriented, (4) authoritative and (5) intrinsic. Only two of them are pedagogically appropriate for Traynor, the authoritative and the intrinsic, since they will allow the teacher to provide the necessary educational challenge for the students while not being harmful for the students' physical or emotional well-being. Traynor's approach conditioned the choice of aspects from traditional and non-traditional discipline approaches that would be useful for the specific intervention here proposed.

Pastor (2002) calls for meaningful rules and disciplinary methods in the implementation of discipline programs, which should include students in the decision making process for consequences, and should be settled using the principles of respect, responsibility, caring, honesty, fairness and citizenship. Individualized attention to discipline problems must be considered seriously on the grounds that, if we believe in individualizing in terms of academic achievement, we should also believe in it when dealing with discipline problems (see also Curwin and Mendler, 1999).

Despite a dramatic increase in the use of *zero tolerance* procedures and policies, there is little evidence demonstrating that these procedures have improved school safety or student behavior. Thus, Skiba (2000) states the importance of conflict resolution strategies, preventive discipline and engaging instruction as basic factors for the improvement of the school climate. Adopting Skiba's framework of analysis, the following variables to address school violence were systematically explored in this piece of research: conflict resolution programs; positive reinforcement strategies; parent involvement; early warning signs screening; effective school data systems; crisis and security planning; school wide discipline and behavior planning; functional assessment and individual behavior plans.

The work by Curwin and Mendler (1999) constituted the core component in providing staff development and teacher training for Fischer Middle School staff. These authors conclude that Zero Tolerance policies provide simple solutions to complex problems, and are basically ineffective: any intervention that treats dissimilar problems with similar behavioral outcomes is unfair and destined to fail. Their proposed alternative, called «As Tough as Necessary», tries to find a balance between being strong and being fair, based on setting clear and firm limits

known by staff and students alike. The need for a personalized and consistent discipline program that promotes responsibility instead of obedience was explored thoroughly in this research action.

Mendler and Curwin's contention that one-size-fits-all policies are not only unfair, but also unpractical, developed in the books *As Tough as Necessary* (1997) and *Discipline with Dignity for Challenging Youth* (1999), influenced decisively the school's approaches to disciplinary and behavior issues, so that a number of actions were deployed experimentally: in the sphere of students, to promote responsibility, to provide students with viable choices to help them solve their discipline and personal problems; in the area of teachers, to make them aware of the importance of keeping control of themselves at all times, to have positive attitudes towards students, to use an engaging, stimulating curriculum and no humiliation techniques in the case discipline problems occurred. See also Metger (2000) for what she calls simple principles of survival in the classroom, which include: defusing of conflicts, letting students save face, trying to keep sanity, getting help and letting students do more independent work, following the same strategic lines as Mendler and Curwin (1997, 1999). Additionally, Nelson, Crabtree, Marchand-Martella and Martella (1998) propose the implementation of socializing strategies, founded on a lively and engaging curriculum: ecological arrangements, behavioral guidelines and supervision, allowing students time to reflect on their behavior and thus eliminating power struggles.

For its part, *As Tough as Necessary* advances alternative, non-traditional solutions to reduce discipline problems. These include the creation of nurturing community networks, the use of core values as a guide for the teachers' practice, sharing decisions and principles with students, focusing on academics and on positive elements. Democratic systems are encouraged, as well as anger management techniques and an individualized approach to discipline that promotes reflection and students' responsibility. Similarly, Lepstein (2002) proposes a gradual democratization of ideas that acknowledges the notion of power relations in the classroom.

Kuck (2000) became the source for the administrators' patterns of action. Kuch stresses the fact that principals need to teach students that being a part of a school family means living by an agreement, the spirit of which is that each member of the school family is expected to act responsibly. He also points out the contradictions arising from adopting affective discipline, which may sometimes be in conflict with fairness or consistency. Pelton (2003), in the same line, focuses on the involvement of the school community as a key component that is often forgotten or is not addressed conveniently, as well as on teaching the staff the basics of violence prevention, and instituting a prosocial violence prevention curriculum.

The program devised by Wise (1998), «Meaningful Work», catered for the fact that some students may need to develop a sense of responsibility and

purposefulness that, for a variety of reasons, they have not acquired in their lives, thus helping create a culture that promotes responsibility and citizenship. Walker (1999), in turn, addresses the issue of student non-compliance, since it is one of the most frustrating, intractable and time-consuming behavior problems with which teachers must struggle daily, which may lead eventually to social rejection. He recommends several strategies to reduce this problem, including a responsive, cooperative classroom environment, and focusing on initiation commands rather than on termination commands. Porch (2002), similarly, suggests that the lack of compliance with established rules should be dealt with in the framework of non-threatening resolution strategies and special strategies for crisis interventions.

3. Methodology

For this discipline program, it was decided that, as well as using ideas from Fischer staff, a professional staff-development training would be launched to serve as the guideline and unifying factor for this effort. After a selection process, the leadership team chose the «Discipline with Dignity» program, developed more than ten years ago by Mendler and Curwin and, since then, successfully implemented all over the world in hundreds of Elementary, Middle and High Schools. Curwin conducted a series of six workshops for our school staff.

In the first workshop some of the basic principles of our discipline program for the year were set:

- Promoting responsibility instead of promoting obedience.
- Students should be given options (choices) instead of threats.
- Rules must make sense, should be negotiated with and explained to students, be based on values and be specific, avoiding the use of «big words» open to different interpretations.
- Students should be encouraged to reflect upon their bad choices and explain why they did not do the right thing.
- Dialogue should be the base of any discipline approach.
- Rewards and punishments are never the ideal solution.

Following this first workshop, a group of teachers, approximately half of the staff, voluntarily designed a system of rules and values to be used in their classrooms. The administrative team agreed to implementing or encouraging as many of these principles as possible in their relationship with teachers and students.

The second workshop was used as a test of how many teachers really felt involved with the «Discipline with Dignity» idea. More than twenty teachers attended that second presentation, and they reviewed specific strategies to solve

or avoid discipline problems at the classroom level, thereby reducing the number of children that were sent to the main office regularly. Teachers were trained to «work their own deals» with students, and understand that students may respond positively to an administrator, which does not necessarily mean that the problem will be solved in the classroom. Moreover, the students may think that teachers are not capable of handling their problems, and lose some respect for the teachers. Teachers were also asked to express their concerns with this new discipline approach before the meeting, and these were discussed, including the ineffectiveness of past practices like harsh punishment and zero tolerance. Specific situations were role played during this meeting. An important agreement was to try and reduce the number of suspensions while increasing opportunities for student cooperation in different school tasks. *As Tough as Necessary* and *Discipline with Dignity for Challenging Youth* were adopted as the reference books for the implementation of the program.

In order to reinforce some of the ideas from these meetings, three different after-school programs for students with discipline or absenteeism problems were started. In addition, a cross age tutoring program, the Coca-Cola Valued Youth, was implemented, sending twenty of the most challenging eighth grades to Hubbard Elementary (one of the feeder schools) from Fischer to tutor K-3 students. The last addition to this strategy was a lunchtime sports program, providing students with an opportunity to participate in teacher-monitored games of basketball, soccer, football and volleyball during their lunch break. It was clear that many fights and disciplinary problems originated during that time and that some suspensions and conflictive situations could be avoided by having these activities.

The third workshop was almost entirely dedicated to student motivation techniques to be used in the classroom as a way to prevent disruptive behavior. Finally, the last workshops were used for classroom observations and revision of specific discipline problems with small groups of teachers during their preparation periods.

For the assessment of this program, three sets of data were used: samples of discipline referrals and discipline data; GPA data; and the School Climate Survey (see appendix). First, parents and students were surveyed on their perceptions of school discipline and safety and their relationship with teachers and administrators. For this purpose, the parents attending the February School Site Council meeting and about two hundred randomly selected students (fifty per grade level, plus thirty six from Special Day Classes) were asked to answer some questions on these topics. The second form of assessment was discipline data entered in our computer system, which was compared with the previous year's data. Finally, it

was explored how this attempt to reform Fischer's discipline system had in any way affected academic achievement.

The present study covers the period from August 2002 to March 2003, so the researcher used 2nd quarter's report cards, distributed at the beginning of February, and Grade Point Averages (GPAs) from them.

Although it was the researcher's intention to continue this study for at least the following two years, as it is generally acknowledged that it takes at least that time to create real change in school climate, the results for the 2002/03 school year should be able to provide guidelines about the directions to follow in the immediate future; and could also be used as baseline data for future research.

4. Findings

There was general agreement among teachers, administrators, parents and students that discipline problems had historically been an obstacle for academic achievement at Fischer. In order to analyze the reality of that perception, and see if the change in our discipline model resulted in an improvement in academic aspects, we compared academic achievement in the 2001/02 school year with that of 2002/03, when this intervention took place. The original plan was to use standardized test scores for measurement purposes; but, due to the timing of this study (State test results were not available until September), it was decided to use GPA (Grade Point Average) instead. From the four grading periods in the school year at this school, it was the GPAs for the second quarter, corresponding to the month of February, that were considered in this study. According to the initial hypothesis, a reduction in the number of discipline problems should result in a raise in academic results. GPAs over 2.000 were considered acceptable, whereas GPAs under 2.000 were considered unsatisfactory. The following graphs show GPA results for the second quarter in school years 2001/02 and 2002/03.

This comparison does not show a significant difference in student achievement between the two school years. Moreover, GPAs were slightly higher in 2001/02 than in 2002/03. For a total enrolment of 868 in 2001/02, 564 students had a GPA of 2.0 or higher, while in 2002/03, with a total enrolment of 818, only 516 students achieved over that 2.0 point. Percentages also seem to be consistent throughout grade levels.
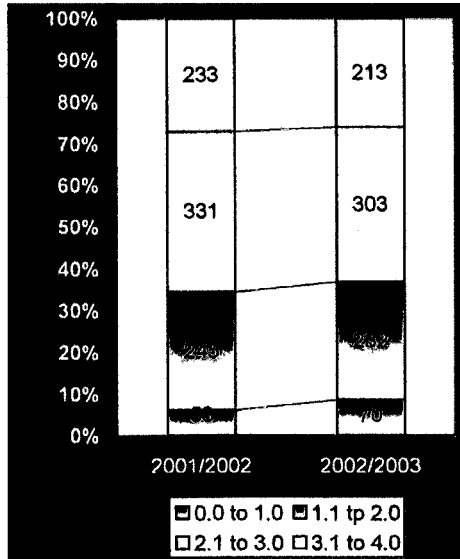
Total GPA 2nd quarter (Feb) for Fischer Middle School

The other instrument used to relate the link of our new discipline approach with academic achievement was a student and parent survey. Fifty randomly selected students per grade level, plus all the students (34) in Special Day Classes, and a group of 20 parents were questioned for the survey. The question asked to students was «Are you more interested in your grades than in previous years?». For the parents, this question was rephrased as «Is your child more interested in his grades than in previous years?». The responses were very consistent and encouraging throughout all grade levels. 38 students in 6th grade, 34 in 7th and 33 in 8th confirmed that they were more interested than in the past. Twenty-seven SDC students gave that same answer. The following chart shows the results of the students' responses.
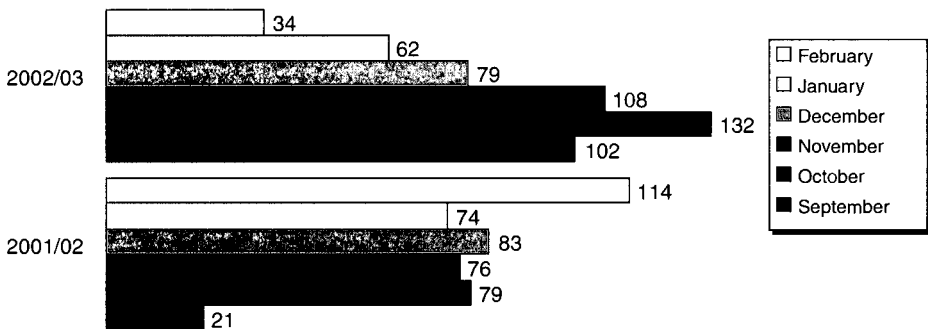
Comparison of discipline trouble for academic years 2001/2002 and 2002/2003

Figures for 2001/02 did not show a consistent pattern in the number of referrals. They went from 21 in September to more or less regular figures for October (79), November (76), December (83) and January (74). However, there was a significant increase in February (114).

For 2002/03, on the other hand, the pattern showed a quite consistent reduction in the number of discipline problems during the year. Even though there was an increase from the first to the second month, 102 for September and 132 for October, then the numbers went down regularly until February: 108 for November, 79 for December, 62 for January and 34 for February. February figures were especially relevant in this comparison, 114 for 2001/02 to 34 for 2002/03, although the total number of registered referrals was altogether higher in the intervention year.
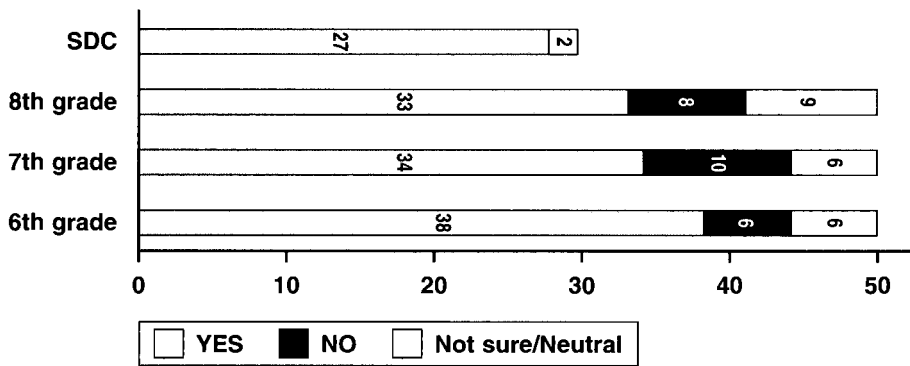
Responses to disciple survey «I am more interested in my grades than in previous years»

Parents' answers went in the same direction: 17 of them said that their children were more interested, and only 3 said that they were not sure. None of them gave a negative answer. The last of the research questions was related to the success of our program in terms of discipline problems. Although, as it has been explained before, 2001/2002 could not be considered accurate data, as a high percentage of referrals were not registered in SASIxp, the main data source for our study, it is still valuable to compare the tendencies in terms of increase or decrease of disciplinary problems throughout the school year. The total number of referrals for each month from September to February (both included) was compared and the results were particularly relevant.

In order to complete the research, other questions in the survey on students' and parents' perceptions of school climate regarding discipline and school safety were used. These were the answers to some of the questions:
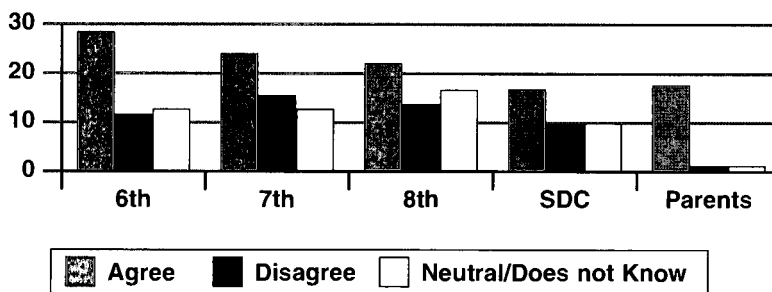
«At Fischer, discipline is administered with justice»

Most of the students agreed that the disciple system at Fischer was just. Out of fifty students per grade level, 27 sixth graders, 23 seventh graders and 21 eighth graders said so, as opposed to 11 sixth graders, 15 seventh graders and 13 eighth graders that disagreed. A total of 54 students chose the Neutral / Do not know answer. For SDC students, results were similar, 16, 9 and 9. Among parents, 18 agreed, only 1 disagreed and 1 chose the neutral option.

The other question analyzed had to do with the perception of change. This time, they were asked if they had seen any improvement in discipline in year 2002/03. The students seemed to be deeply divided in their answers. Sixteen for sixth grade, 19 for seventh, 13 for eighth and 13 for SDC did notice improvement, whereas 15, 18, 16 and 9 for the same groups did not. On the other hand, parents seemed to be much more enthusiastic. Nineteen out of 20 thought discipline had improved and only 1 was not sure.
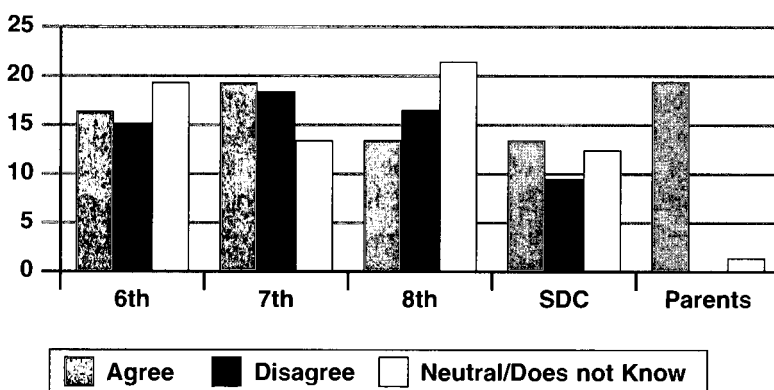
Students' perception about improvement in discipline conditions «Discipline is better this year»

5. Conclusions

It will be extremely difficult for a school like Fischer to develop a new conscience and attitude in the treatment of discipline issues, but the results in this first year gave some reasons for optimism. Even though it was clear that a program like this would take at least two to three years to show significant results, there has been some spectacular progress in certain fields. During the time of this intervention, there was a progressive reduction in the number of referrals. The total number of referrals was still slightly higher for the first year of this new program, but there was general agreement that the previous year's data was incomplete and inconsistent. The drop from 114 referrals in February 2002 to 34 in February 2003, together with the perceptions shown, especially by parents and, to some extent, students, in their answers, resulted in an obvious improvement of the school climate, the extent of which will only be proved after the following year, when data for future times is analyzed and compared.

The relationship with academic achievement was the part that was more difficult to prove and, to some point, the results were contradictory. The analysis of GPAs was quite discouraging; but after conducting interviews with different teachers and administrators, they all agreed that academic expectations and standards for the 2002/03 school year were much higher than the year before. Students were asked to produce a better quality of work than in the past in order to obtain good GPAs. And that is reflected in the GPA comparison. The perception among students and parents is similar and consistent with these interviews. The results from the student and parent survey showed that there was a greater interest in academic achievement at all grade levels. The only possible explanation for this contradiction was the improvement in the quality of instruction and more rigorous instructional practices. The inclusion in this project of State test scores at the end of the school year will allow for a much better perspective of this project's accomplishments.

The link to academic achievement was also difficult to prove, as teacher standards and academic expectations were much higher in the year of the intervention, and the new administrative team clearly emphasized the need for more rigorous student assessment and grade level adequate instruction. At least, one of the main goals was achieved, that is, to obtain clear and consistent information to be used as baseline data for a more scientific analysis of discipline problems.

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Appendix

School Climate Student Survey for Fischer Middle School

1- Discipline at Fischer is fair

Strongly agree
Agree
Neutral/Not sure
Disagree
Strongly disagree

2- Discipline is better this year than in previous years

Strongly agree
Agree
Neutral/Not sure
Disagree
Strongly disagree

3- I feel safe at school

Strongly agree
Agree
Neutral/Not sure
Disagree
Strongly disagree

4- I feel safer at school this year than in previous years

Strongly agree
Agree
Neutral/Not sure
Disagree
Strongly disagree

5-   My teachers are too strict

    Strongly agree
    Agree
    Neutral/Not sure
    Disagree
    Strongly disagree

6-   At Fischer, discipline is administered with justice. There is no discrimination for racial, sexual or religious reasons

    Strongly agree
    Agree
    Neutral/Not sure
    Disagree
    Strongly disagree

7-   I am more interested in my grades than in previous years

    Strongly agree
    Agree
    Neutral/Not sure
    Disagree
    Strongly disagree

8-   I feel I am respected in the classroom at Fischer

    Strongly agree
    Agree
    Neutral/Not sure
    Disagree
    Strongly disagree

9-   I feel I am respected when I go to the school office

    Strongly agree
    Agree

Neutral/Not sure
Disagree
Strongly disagree

10- I know the way my teachers expect me to behave

Strongly agree
Agree
Neutral/Not sure
Disagree
Strongly disagree

11- My suggestions to improve school climate are...

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