

TEACHER SENSEMAKING OF STUDENT DISCIPLINE  
PRACTICES IN A SMALL TOWN TEXAS MIDDLE SCHOOL

A Record of Study

by

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined teacher decision making regarding issuing student referrals using qualitative case study methodology. A single middle school was used for the case study to locate all data under a single institutional culture. A purposeful sample of six teachers was chosen, and each teacher was interviewed. These interview data sets were analyzed using Weick's sensemaking theory regarding how individuals decide to resume flow of activities in a process once the flow has been disrupted. This theory was applied to the specific situation of how teachers resolved misbehavior within a classroom.

Research participants were asked to describe the factors influencing teachers' decisions to write a referral for misbehavior, the benefits students receive from receiving a referral, and faculty responses to escalating misbehavior in their classrooms. This study attempted to give voice to teachers' reflections of attending to common classroom misbehavior and to find differences among teachers with different rates of student referrals.

Participating faculty were generally satisfied with their referral rate and were effective in resuming the flow of classroom instruction after student disruptions. Although faculty members reported similar procedures for attending misbehavior, each instructor used these procedures in strikingly different ways.

## DEDICATION

My wonderful wife Leah Lennon Russell excels in everything she does. I admire her intelligence, her wit, her charm, and the fact that she tirelessly encourages and advises me. I adore her and am grateful to her for being the wife, mother, grandmother, Christian, and scholar I and so many others respect. I dedicate this work to her.

I know Leah loves me.

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My Cohort, Cohort one, knows I am Mississippi. Thanks for not kicking me out of the Union.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Every day, teachers make literally hundreds of decisions (Kauchak & Eggen, 2005). A significant number of those daily decisions involve deciphering which student behaviors to ignore, which behaviors to address, and which behaviors to discipline. School board policy often fails to elaborate on its definitions of improving behavior, maintaining order, or protecting other students, school employees, and property. With a policy directive to discipline and no policy guidance for deciding when, how, or to what extent the directive to discipline is to be followed, teachers are given great discretion in conducting classroom discipline. Thus teachers spent their classroom time trying to make sense of discipline policy.

Unless socio-demographic variables are considered, it is difficult to interpret correlations relating to discipline and achievement (Cohen, 1981; Flay, Allred, & Ordway, 2001; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Socio-demographic factors may contribute to both increased misbehavior resulting in suspension and lower academic achievement (Rausch & Skiba, 2004). Further, data on this topic have revealed inconsistencies in consequential outcomes for students of color and students with disabilities (Fabelo et al., 2011). Therefore, in order “to maintain safe and effective learning environments for all students, and to improve outcomes for students with educational disabilities, in particular students with emotional disturbances, state and local government officials need assistance across systems” (Fabelo et al., 2011, p. 53).



Analysis of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) in the context of student discipline may help teachers assess and analyze their beliefs, assumptions, processes, and procedures (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) in order to act deliberately rather than reactively (Landrum & Kauffman, 2006). Situational factors can affect teachers' subjective decisions regarding student discipline, which frequently occurs during stressful situations, which influences student outcomes (Ehrenberg, Goldhaber, & Brewer 1995; Shavelson & Stern 1981). This qualitative study addressed these factors and addressed a void in current research.

Teachers commonly follow a standard disciplinary process: a) awareness of student misbehavior, b) response to student misbehavior, and c) pursuit of consequences for student misbehavior (Piwowar, Thiel, & Ophardt, 2013). The intent of this study was to examine the process teachers used to make sense of discipline. For the purpose of this study, three middle school teachers who rarely wrote discipline referrals and three teachers who frequently wrote discipline referrals were purposefully selected as subjects.

School discipline has long been the subject of much debate by both academics and practitioners. Additionally, school discipline has received a great deal of media attention in the wake of well-publicized events involving school safety (Osher, Dwyer, & Jimerson, 2005). As much as the topic has been discussed and researched, it remains as much a problem as ever (Irby, 2012). Commercial programs marketed with the promise of reducing discipline infractions in classrooms frequently yield mixed results when assessed for effectiveness (Benshoff, Poidevant, & Cashwell, 1994). Even with the copious amount of attention classroom discipline receives, it continues to plague schools

(Irby, 2012; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). The issue is exacerbated when analyzed at the student demographic level where students of color are often disciplined more frequently than their White counterparts in the same classrooms (McCarthy & Hodge, 1987; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Further, some teachers in the same schools and with the same students discipline students more frequently than their colleagues do (Fabelo et al., 2011).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Although researchers have studied school discipline extensively, there is little research addressing teachers' processes for making sense of discipline referrals. Weick (1995) described a sensemaking process as social, ongoing, plausible if not necessarily accurate, reliant on self-image and experiences, and promoting behavioral changes. Sensemaking has been studied in a number of situations (Terry & Hogg, 2001; Weick, 1995) but not in the context of teachers making the decision whether or not to issue a discipline referral to a student.

As a way to understand sensemaking, this study examined how disciplinary referrals affected teachers' processing which ultimately impacted student learning, which in turn affected overall school accountability (Fabelo, et al., 2011; Gettinger & Stoiber, 1999; Greenwood, 1991; Greenwood, Horton, & Utley, 2002). Common consequences often include one or more of the following: a) in school suspension (ISS), b) at home suspension, c) or disciplinary alternative educational placement (DAEP) (Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Fabelo, et al., 2011). Students do not learn instructional content while they are either in the office for due process or receiving a disciplinary consequence. This in turn decreases mastery of class content and failure to meet

objectives on both ordinary instruction and standardized tests as well. Referrals and their consequences contribute to declines in academic progress and negatively impact school accountability.

Teachers make sense of how to manage students differently from one another (Stronge, 2007). Some teachers turn a blind eye to misbehavior, some address the slightest of infractions with office referrals, and others successfully redirect students to participate in acceptable school behaviors without changing the pace or progress of the lesson.

### **Purpose of the Study**

While significant quantitative research has been conducted on educators and decision-making (Rios 1996, Skiba & Peterson, 2000), no studies exist which examine teachers' sensemaking within classroom contexts. The purpose of this study was to investigate what classroom behaviors teachers perceived to affect the generation of discretionary disciplinary referrals. This study has contributed to the existing literature by examining how experienced teachers made sense of their decisions (Piwowar et al., 2013). This study compared and contrasted teachers who had high and low discipline rates and their sensemaking relative to whether or not they should issue a referral for student misbehavior during class activity. Analysis of the participating school's discipline referral records revealed that the number of discretionary referrals issued by individual teachers remained constant from year to year. The teachers who issued few referrals one year also issued few referrals in subsequent years, and teachers who issued a large number of referrals in one year also issued large numbers of referrals in

subsequent years. Disruptive behavior from students may contribute to issues of teacher turnover and leaving the profession (Burke, Greenglass & Schwarzer, 1996). Burnout, in turn, may decrease teacher commitment to addressing the less serious misbehaviors in their classrooms (Bowditch, 1993; Burke et al., 1996; Byrne, 1991; Friedman, 1996; Hock, 1988; Lamude, Scudder & Furno-Lamude, 1992). This decreased commitment to addressing certain levels of misbehavior is tantamount to ignoring the misbehavior (Friedman, 1996). Without favorable conciliation from the teacher, disruptions due to student misbehavior frequently lead to official disciplinary action and increase levels of stress for teachers and students alike (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012).

The results from this study demonstrated that teachers lacked an effective systematic plan for implementing their own behaviors aimed toward the reduction of office referrals. Discipline data from the 2009-2010, 2010-2011, and 2011-2012 academic years revealed a high proportion of the disciplinary referrals were discretionary, not mandatory.

Data also revealed that the number office referrals varied by teacher. Some teachers issued a high quantity of office referrals year after year while other teachers in the same school (even among the same students) consistently issued a low number of referrals. Intergroup differences are commonplace within educational settings, particularly where racial and other demographic differences exist (Mabokela & Madsen, 2003; Madsen & Mabokela, 2002). Efficient and effective sensemaking can strengthen relationships between members of different social and ethnic groups (Weick et al.,

2005). Further, the organizational culture in demographically diverse schools creates administrative difficulties (Madsen & Mabokela, 2005).

Document analysis of district Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) data showed student demographics in the subject school changed over time. The campus and district saw Hispanic enrollment increase while White and African American student enrollment declined. During the period between 2008 and 2012, Hispanic enrollment increased from 36.7 to 44.2 percent, White enrollment decreased from 36.2 to 31.2 percent, and African American enrollment decreased from 26.3 to 23.8 percent. During these years, teacher demographics remained predominately White, although the percentage of White teachers decreased from 95.7 percent White in 2008 to 86.3 percent White in 2012.

### **Significance of the Study**

It was important to discover teachers' thought processes when they encountered student misbehavior in their classrooms, and analyze these processes under Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory to better understand them. Sensemaking informs participants how to proceed with activity when the activity encounters disruption (Weick, 1995). In this study, teachers were the participants, and they were studied regarding when and how severely to address student classroom misbehavior. This study also explored teachers' perceived roles in enforcing the school's Code of Conduct.

Case study is different from other research approaches because the focus is limited to a single entity (Merriam, 1998). Teacher decision-making was studied within

the context of a single school that has its own procedures, policies, and cultural norms affecting how discipline is conducted.

This study examined factors contributing to disciplinary referrals from teachers' perspectives at Kylie Joy Riley Middle School (a pseudonym). Since discipline issues discourage both students and teachers (Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven, & Dochy, 2010) the results of this study may be foundational in constructing a classroom procedure and management plan for the subject campus.

This study contributes to existing school discipline research by reporting teachers' sensemaking related to deciding whether to write a disciplinary referral. Sensemaking theory was well suited for this study because it addressed critical questions pertaining to why individuals make decisions. The research was a qualitative case study of purposefully selected teachers. The criteria for choosing the teachers included similarities in subject taught, years of experience in education and at the same school, natural leadership among colleagues, and, most importantly, the amount of discipline referrals written.

### **Operational Definitions**

Case study: A method of qualitative research that is bounded and limited to a single unit of study that is “pluralistic, descriptive, and heuristic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 26).

Discipline: Student behavior officially documented and resulting in an outside of class student conference with campus administrator.

Emergent design: A design strategy used in qualitative research which enables the researcher to be influenced by new insights gained from the study while the study is in progress (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Purposeful sampling: Participants are selected not as random participants, but as a section of the population with specific experiences with regard to the research topic or questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Sense making: Sense making is an individual's ongoing and conceptual structuring of a particular event within a shifting world for the purpose of deciding on the individual's immediate future behavior..

Sensemaking theory: A learning theory developed by Karl Weick wherein an individual's circumstances are comprehended explicitly in words that serves as a springboard for activity (Weick et al., 2005)

Teacher: An educator meeting No Child Left Behind "Highly Qualified" requirements, with proficient or higher in all domains of Professional Development and Appraisal System standards for the three years data was collected.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **Introduction**

Teachers, even in the same school, differ from one another regarding the types of discipline they issue (Stronge, 2007), the amounts of discipline they issue (Fabelo et al., 2011), and which behaviors they choose to discipline (Rausch & Skiba, 2004). This is not surprising in light of research which has indicated that teachers make an average of one interactive decision every two to six minutes (Clark & Peterson, 1986). Kauchak and Eggen (2005) stated “teachers make somewhere between 800 and 1,500 decisions every day” (p. 55). The present study was based on sensemaking theory, which examines individuals’ decision-making for the purpose of maintaining continuity or progress of the flow of any interpersonal activity (Weick et al., 2005). Although not a theory on classroom discipline or teaching, these activities were studied through the lens of sensemaking for help to determine differences in teacher behavior.

Sensemaking is critical in today’s world. All arenas of global change, whether political, economical, climate, or global resource reallocation involves the micro-analyses necessary for individuals to confidently proceed into the future (Ancona, 2012). Within the business community, sensemaking enables leaders determine why a customer base is shrinking, why teams underperform, and why operations processes fail to meet expectations. Ancona (2012) asserted, “We teach sensemaking to undergraduates, MBAs, mid-level executives, and top management teams since the ability to understand a changing context is needed at every level (2012, p. 5-6).



When the normal flow of activity in a classroom was disrupted by misbehavior, an opportunity was provided for teachers to employ sensemaking in their decision-making processes (Weick et al., 2005). Once sense was made within a student misbehavior context, the teacher was able to implement a rational and consistent decision regarding the proper course of disciplinary action. This decision then informed the teacher's behaviors in the resumption of classroom activity and affected either the continuation of or cessation of the student-created disruption of the teaching and learning processes (Coburn, 2001; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002).

Teachers who employ strategies for attending to disruptive behavior can prevent major classroom or school crises by planning and adequately preparing for the eventuality of classroom misbehavior (Kern & Clemens, 2007; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Following a predetermined strategy decreases teachers' chances of contributing to escalation of minor disruptions unintentionally (Kern & Clemens, 2007; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Classroom strategies for tempering disruptive behavior can also prevent major classroom issues and have a strong positive effect on reducing school suspension and dropout rates (Kern & Clemens, 2007; Waters et al., 2003).

The subjects in this study were White teachers working with a student body of color, and teachers and students experience cultural differences as well. Young and Laible (2000) reported that White educators fail to understand the consequences of racism and its manifestations in the context of school administration. This lack of understanding highlights the need for the sensemaking process to restore order and give

meaning to diversity rather than ignore it. Spillane, et al. (2002) and Coburn (2001) described the importance of the interaction between individual world views with external contexts and cues, which together shape information in meaningful ways. An individual with experience in only one particular cultural ideology experiences more social limitations than does a better-rounded individual (Spillane et al., 2002). Analysis of teachers' sensemaking techniques may enable educators to design and implement more effective classroom management strategies.

### **Overview**

This chapter addresses scholarly literature of topics relevant to this study. Teachers and school administrators frequently misuse school discipline and these mistakes are detrimental to student morale and achievement (Fabelo et al., 2011; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). According to Muscott, Mann, and LeBrun (2008), discipline is a school climate and culture issue. Klimstra, Hale, Raaijmakers, Branje, and Meeus (2009) found that adolescent students function more favorably when schools offer a predictable, uniform, and structured environment. Discipline is a significant contributor to student achievement and success (Skiba & Sprague, 2008). Sensemaking in any environment contributes to order, control, and engagement of the sensemakers and other involved parties (Weick et al., 2005). Teachers and students have different, sometimes opposing needs and agendas (Munby, 1984), and sensemaking facilitates the flow of routines in the events of disruptions that may occur within any process (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005).

Teachers need to make sense of the disciplinary climate of their school. Discipline policy is sufficiently broad and flexible for teachers to act in a variety of ways when responding to a given student behavior and remain within the confines of policy. For example, one teacher may make sense of policy in such a way that she feels a mandate to write a discipline referral and remove the student from the classroom. Another teacher may use sensemaking to determine the same policy requires her to redirect the same misbehavior and resume teaching.

### **Disciplinary Climates of Schools**

At times the disciplinary climate of schools is stringent and punitive, which creates at least two difficulties for schools and schoolchildren. According to Skiba and Peterson (2000), “Like most approaches to behavior change that rely solely on punishment, it has not been effective” (p. 340). The second difficulty with punitive discipline techniques is the fact that it discourages efforts at improving outcomes (Guy, 2005). An improvement in the disciplinary climate in schools is likely to increase academic gains for students (Muscott, Mann, & LeBrun, 2008) and decrease frustrations for students and teachers alike (Guy, 2005).

One main purpose of exclusionary discipline procedures in schools is to protect the learning environment by removing troublemakers from the classroom so students remaining in the class may receive uninterrupted instruction (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Another suggested purpose of removal of misbehaving students is to deter remaining students from participating in misconduct (Barton, Coley, & Wenglinsky, 1998). Teachers choosing this response use sensemaking to streamline their class management

responsibilities. Little published research supports the concept of positive school-wide academic outcomes related to severe punishment for offenses (Barton Barton, Coley, & Wenglinsky, 1998).

Stiffer consequences will not break the cycle of school violence and poor achievement (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). No one solution will address all problems schools encounter, so a multi-layered approach should be designed and implemented (Fairbanks, Simonsen, & Sugai, 2008). Skiba and Peterson (2000) suggested a tri-level model containing “comprehensive and long-term planning, an array of effective strategies, and a partnership of school, family, and community” (p. 341). The present study examined teachers’ thought processes in disciplinary situations in order to speak to the “comprehensive and long-term planning” and the “array of effective strategies” prongs of this tri-level model.

### **Adolescence and the Middle School Student**

Students experience the adolescent stage of human development where physical and psychosocial changes transition the individual from childhood to adulthood at the time they are middle school age, and commonly begin to decline both socially and academically during this time (Klimstra et al., 2009). Adolescence is the period of human development where a downward spiral begins for some individuals (Eccles et al., 1993). Simmons and Blythe (1987) reported that this stage coincides with a marked decline in some students’ grades as they enter junior high school, and found correlations between this decline and subsequent school failure and dropping out of school. Further, developmental declines are documented in the areas of: interest in school (Epstein &

McPartland, 1976), intrinsic motivation (Harter, 1981), self concepts and self perceptions (Eccles, Midgley, & Adler, 1984), and confidence in their own intellectual abilities (Parsons & Ruble, 1977). For most individuals, these developmental changes are not extreme, yet sufficient evidence exists in indicators of adolescents' academic motivation (attention in class, school attendance, and self perception) to warrant investigation (Eccles et al., 1993). Ryan and Patrick (2001) asserted that the social environment in school classrooms is important to students of all ages, yet especially critical for young adolescent students in middle schools.

Eccles et al. (1993) reported that field studies of successful middle and junior high schools had more positive classrooms and the schools provided developmentally appropriate learning environments. Research in the field of developmentally appropriate middle schools is pertinent because the data from the present study revealed that some teachers considered so-called misbehavior as typical adolescent behavior, while other instructors expected adult behaviors at all times from their students. Classrooms and schools with higher teacher efficacy, greater opportunities for meaningful student participation in both school and classroom decision-making, and more positive student-teacher relationships experience lower rates of discipline referrals (Eccles et.al, 1993). Early adolescents in these successful schools do not demonstrate the same declines in intrinsic motivation and school attachment stereotypically associated with students in other junior high schools, nor do they engage in the same amount of school misconduct as students in more traditional junior high schools (Eccles et al., 1993). However, many

junior high schools fail to provide such a developmentally appropriate and successful environment for their students (Eccles & Midgley, 1989).

### **Issues Concerning School Discipline**

When teachers choose to ignore certain student misbehaviors but choose to address certain others, the teacher's credibility diminishes and student misbehavior is likely to increase (Stronge, 2007). The teachers in this study who frequently wrote referrals chose to react with punity and strictness in order to maintain their credibility. The teachers who rarely wrote referrals, however, chose to maintain their credibility by interrupting student attempts at disruptions and continue with the teaching and learning process. When teachers choose to ignore behavior which threatens to disrupt the flow of teaching and learning, the opportunity for sensemaking is lost. According to Weick (1995), the deeper cause of disruption must have been identified in order for the flow of activities to either resume as originally intended, or to have been replaced by a completely different activity. Verbal nomination then, in these cases, permits the sense maker to attempt to resolve the disrupted activity flow.

Even when accounting for demographic variables, rates of discipline vary from school to school (Skiba & Sprague, 2008). Fabelo, et al. (2011) conducted an eight year study (six years of analysis and two years as control) where they discovered more than half (59.6 percent) of Texas' students received at least one suspension due to disciplinary action between their seventh and twelfth grade years. The lengths of these suspensions ranged from one class period to several consecutive days. These figures are consistent with the discipline data from the present study's participating campus and

district. This understanding brings current policies and procedures regarding discipline in schools under question. Students subject to disciplinary removal are at greater risk of academic decline, repeating a grade, and dropping out of school (Fabelo, et al., 2011). Current disciplinary practices are counterproductive in regard to student success as they presently function (Rausch & Skiba, 2004). Disciplinary efforts and school practices “should include strategies to change student behaviors that can reduce the use of suspensions and expulsions” (Fabelo, et al., 2011, p. 85). According to Spillane et al. (2002), school teachers and administrators can control some of their own behaviors to improve outcomes and practices by aptly applying sensemaking techniques, without waiting for local, state or federal policy changes.

The majority of these school suspensions, almost seventy percent, resulted in in-school suspension (Fabelo et al., 2011). Out-of-school suspension with durations of up to three days accounted for 22 percent of the cases, and 8 percent resulted in removal to DAEP or expulsion to either a Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program (JJAEP) or the street if no JJAEP was available, and “these removals were nearly always discretionary actions for violations of the school’s local code of conduct” (Fabelo et al., 2011, p. 39). This data implies recourse other than suspension for student misbehavior may be sought and implemented. Furthermore, suspension or expulsion is an indicator of academic failure, because “a student disciplined and removed from a classroom for a suspension or expulsion was more likely to be held back that year or to drop out than was a student who had not been similarly disciplined” (Fabelo et al., 2011, p. 59). This finding appears to highlight an opportunity schools may capitalize on to reduce drop-out

rates as well as increase graduation rates. Given how many students experience suspension or expulsion, often repeatedly, between seventh and twelfth grade, “schools that are successful in addressing those student behaviors that result in disciplinary action could potentially improve academic outcomes” (Fabelo et al., 2011, p. 60). In order to minimize the possibility of academic failure and/or student dropout possibilities, practitioners must devise an alternative solution to the disciplinary practice of withdrawing classroom instruction for students who misbehave at school (Fabelo, et al., 2011). Half of the teachers who participated in this study rarely or never withdrew classroom opportunities for students who misbehaved, while the other half did so by issuing office referrals.

**Discipline and academic outcomes.** Thus schools differ from one another significantly in regard to numbers of disciplinary referrals, even when considering risk factors (Skiba et al., 2008). Because this study took place in one school, the differences in referral rates were among individual teachers, not schools or campuses. Some schools have unexpectedly lower rates of discipline than others, and some with fewer risk factors have unexpectedly high rates of discipline (Fabelo et al., 2011). Schools may either be tolerant of misbehavior or they may be effective in managing and changing student behavior, and the available data do not indicate the reasons for these differences among schools. However, it is clear that students can be successful in avoiding the need for disciplinary action regardless of their risk factors (Fabelo et al., 2011). This study focused on teacher-level variations in discipline situations to find out if teachers made the aforementioned difference.



Rausch and Skiba (2004) designed a study to provide data on possible relationships between disciplinary removal and school achievement. They specifically sought to examine if learning environments improved because of student removal for disciplinary purposes. It was thought that suspension or expulsion improved a school's learning environment by removing troublemakers or deterring future misbehavior. A second focus examined if student removal for disciplinary purposes through suspension or expulsion would have a negative academic effect through reducing student opportunity to learn. Rausch and Skiba (2004) found no evidence of improved learning through disciplinary removal by either removing troublemaking students or deterring future misbehavior, but instead revealed a negative relationship between exclusionary disciplinary action and positive school outcomes. These results are pertinent to this study because it was thought the removal of specific students would elevate the achievement of the group overall, and this was not the case in the subject school.

**Teachers' discipline processes.** Circumstances and behavioral incidences not specifically addressed in the education code or school policy were most frequently left to the teachers' discretion (Rausch & Skiba, 2004). The teacher, often with little training in discipline management, must decide on his or her own, which misbehaviors must be addressed, when to address the misbehaviors, and how severely to address the behaviors (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Therefore, no novice teachers were selected as participants in this study; all teachers interviewed had at least three years of experience with classroom discipline techniques.

Sensemaking techniques (Weick et al., 2005) were valuable for helping teachers seamlessly conduct a class of students through potentially disruptive behaviors without losing order, control, or engagement in the lesson at hand. Although education codes addressed certain specific misconducts, they did not prescribe school responses for every scenario (Emmer & Stough, 2001). Student behaviors required mandatory classroom removals, those that clearly met criteria specified in local codes of conduct or Texas Education Code Chapter 37, which specifically delineates when the student must be removed from the general student population for a specific amount of time, or within the parameters of certain spans of time (Fabelo, et al., 2011). Consequences for many other student misbehaviors are implemented at the discretion of school personnel, thus the teachers were obligated to make sense of circumstances and policy. These consequences do not correlate with mandatory consequences and were known as discretionary referrals (McIntosh, Frank, & Spaulding, 2010). Thus, even within uniformity of a code, determining what behaviors constitute classroom disruption and which of the possible consequences should be meted out varies from school to school, from administrator to administrator, and even from student to student (Madsen & Mabokela, 2005; McIntosh, Frank, & Spaulding, 2010). The interpretation and enforcement of codes fluctuates greatly (Fabelo et al., 2011). Cooke et al. (2007) suggested that school officials could take preemptive measures to build positive pro-social behavior inside the student body, rather than merely punish students who demonstrated inappropriate school behavior. For intervention to be effective, a wide spectrum of options beyond class exclusion must be employed (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2012). Negative consequences for student behavior do

not teach new social skills and students suffer serious side-effects from punishment-based disciplinary approaches (Skiba et al., 2008). In response to punitive discipline, students actually habituate to stiffer consequences (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Negative consequences may be used judiciously to teach students about consequences for inappropriate behaviors in a law-abiding society, yet consequences alone have proven to be insufficient in rectifying habitual misbehavior (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003; *Gun Free Schools Act of 1994*; Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

### **Differences among Teachers' Processes and Thinking**

With the complexities and demands of teaching in mind, Leinhardt (1991) declared a key feature of good teachers is that they had mechanisms for quick processing of information and in turn, rapidly making decisions. "Teachers' thinking serves as an 'attention selection' device as well as a mechanism for chunking information for later recall and use" (Rios, 1996, p. 3). Teachers develop routines and habits based on their thinking, particularly the activities, events, or behaviors they noticed, became attentive to, and remembered (Calderhead, 1989; Leinhardt, 1991).

Teachers' thoughts and actions were not always congruent with one another (Rios 1996). When critical beliefs were in harmony with their own actions and experiences, more consistency emerged between a given teacher's thoughts and actions (Munby, 1984). Teacher cognition is multidimensional, comprised of both knowledge and beliefs (Calderhead, 1989; Leinhardt, 1991; Rios, 1996). Anderson-Levitt (1984) described teacher cognition as dynamic and fluid rather than static. Opportunities and constraints continually affect it (Clark & Peterson, 1986). Teachers work within an

information feedback loop provided by colleagues and students, and valuable feedback affects current and future teaching (Rios, 1996). Recognizing the socializing power in the teaching culture is critical because teachers' beliefs become norms of action through sharing the teaching culture with other teachers (Zeichner & Gore, 1990).

The teaching culture is complex and shapes individual teachers' thinking (Rios 1996). Lortie (1975) highlighted how teachers were influenced by the thousands of hours they spent as students, watching their own teachers. This "apprenticeship of observation" served as a blueprint for teachers' expectations of their own classroom management techniques (Lortie, 1975).

In addition, teacher-student relationships tend to replicate parent-child relationships including all implications of authority and submission (Wright & Tuska, 1968).

The psychosocial stream (the process of thinking)—how teachers plan, make decisions, and develop theories—has been the subject of much research (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Solas, 1992). This present study revealed the differences among teachers who focused their efforts to diffuse and redirect misbehaving students and teachers who wrote many discipline referrals because they thought students benefited from punitive consequences.

### **Differences between Teacher and Student Backgrounds**

Despite schools becoming increasingly multicultural, the proportion of non-White teachers has remained low (Mabokela & Madsen, 2003; Madsen & Mabokela, 2002). Research has shown that students of color receive different treatment in schools than their White classmates, which is frequently due to differences in cultural

backgrounds between students and teachers. Sadker, Sadker and Klein (1991) found teachers were most likely to interact positively with students from middle-class homes and reprimand males of color more frequently. Morine-Dersheimer (1985) reported students of color received less attention in classrooms than their White classmates.

Rios (1996), addressing the cultural social differences between students and their teachers, articulated a fear that:

Euro-American teachers will not reflectively and critically question the social, political, historical, or cultural tradition of their own education experience and will thereby replay the “hidden” curriculum taught to them, which might serve to “colonize the mind” of these students of color. (p.2)

If this practice continues unchecked, it was unlikely to increase opportunities or promote cultural and educational advancement among students of color.

Teachers whose backgrounds differ substantially from those of their students lack an understanding of their students’ processes and cultural norms (Madsen & Mabokela, 2002). The teachers in the subject school fit this typical pattern, with almost all of the teachers being White, while over 65 percent of the students were children of color. In addition, teachers in suburban schools may have experienced cultural differences from their teaching colleagues or students as well (Mabokela & Madsen, 2003; Madsen & Mabokela, 2005, Madsen & Hollins, 2000). With the demographic and cultural differences between students and teachers unlikely to change significantly in the

near future, it is important for academics and practitioners alike to understand teachers' cognitive processes (Rios, 1996). Examining teacher decision-making through sensemaking addresses these social and cultural issues.

### **Classroom Management and Teachers**

This study showed that sensemaking theory helped classroom teachers manage their classrooms by facilitating continuity between desired student behavior and the classroom culture. Specifically, the theory of sensemaking was used to examine the thinking processes used by the teachers in behavior management cases. Teachers with well-managed classrooms wove three social components into their everyday interactions with students: rules and consequences, stated expectations and outcomes, and reinforcing targeted behaviors while attempting to extinguish misbehaviors (Emmer, Evertson, & Anderson, 1980; Emmer & Stough, 2001; Sprick & Nolet, 1991). Teachers with low incidences of misbehavior consistently verbally taught and re-taught rules and consequences, clarified their expectations of the students, and extinguished misbehavior without referring students to campus administration. These teachers used written classroom and school rules to reinforce functional explicit outlines for student behavioral expectations (Emmer & Stough, 2001). And each day, teachers in this category continually responded to students by verbally reinforcing positive behaviors while discouraging misbehaviors (Sprick & Nolet, 1991). Through hundreds of interactions each school day, teachers implemented and strengthened healthy school behaviors and diminished unhealthy ones (Emmer & Stough, 2001).

Students and teachers in poorly-managed classrooms experienced inconsistency among expectations, rules, and consequences. This “provides less opportunity for learning the implicit expectations of the social curriculum and may even give students conflicting messages about the appropriate way to behave in a given classroom or school situation” (Skiba & Peterson, 2003, p. 67). Authoritarian, demeaning, or inconsistent expectations for student classroom conduct contradicts efforts to promote an engaging school environment (Skiba & Peterson, 2003). Students intuitively learn and respond to hidden rules by observing which behaviors the teacher sanctions by his or her actions (Myles & Simpson, 2001).

All students may have benefitted from instruction in social interactions particularly those who have already developed, through their family lives or prior school experiences, personal, albeit unhealthy, responses to interactions with others in social situations (Myles & Simpson, 2001; Sugai & Horner, 2008). Skiba and Peterson (2003) stated, “the experiences of students at risk for behavior problems leave them with social perceptions that are a poor fit with the standard expectations of most school environments” (p.68). The actions the teachers took in monitoring their own conduct taught, through modeling, how students were to conduct themselves responsibly. Students could learn to conduct themselves responsibly in classrooms through the actions teachers employed (Sugai & Horner, 2008).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Sensemaking enables individuals to respond to different cultures in positive manners (Osland & Bird, 2000). Teachers could apply sensemaking when the flow

classroom activity was disrupted by student misbehavior, by rapidly deciding whether to address misbehavior, and if they addressed it, how to do so (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

After that, they responded to the misbehavior in concert with perceived expectations from administration, colleagues, campus culture, and school policy (Kauchak & Eggen, 2005).

This study examined teachers' decision-making processes concerning student disruptions utilizing the lens of sensemaking. Sensemaking happens when organizational circumstances morphed from flow of activity to word wherein it was embodied in words or texts (Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking then shapes conduct through the crucial actions of writing, reading and conversing (Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994). Unless the current state of an event differs from its expected state, and thereby interrupting activity, sensemaking cannot occur (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Rather, sensemaking happens when order is disrupted and reasons for the current state of events must be addressed in order to resume flow (Weick, 1995). Weick et al. (2005) asserted that "these 'reasons' are pulled from frameworks such as institutional constraints, organizational premises, plans, expectations, acceptable justifications, and traditions inherited from predecessors" (p. 409). Sensemaking was used for this study precisely because teachers operate under such frameworks.

Furthermore, "if resumption of the project is problematic, sensemaking is biased either toward identifying substitute action or toward further deliberation" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). Sensemaking and organization are mutually dependent aspects of creating order from disorder and interactions between sensemaking and organization shape



particular meanings and rules (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Organization emerges through sensemaking in a way that neither precedes nor follows the other (Weick et al., 2005).

Sensemaking, like other phenomena is not so much a process or sequence, but rather a conglomeration of many factors (Weick, 1995). Thus, for this study sensemaking provided a lens into how teachers made sense of school discipline.

Sensemaking begins with chaos and one develops awareness of potentially disruptive happenings or abnormal events (Weick, 1995). In this study, incidences of student misbehavior provided the disruptive context needed for investigating sensemaking. In sensemaking, the sense maker brackets and categorizes events upon closer attention (Magala, 1997). These bracketed events were compared or contrasted with mental models gained through work experiences, life experiences, and training. The experience was streamlined and stabilized through teacher labeling (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

This categorization allowed considerable plasticity, was socially defined, and could contain peripheral instances (Weick, 1995). As implied, sensemaking was dependent on past experiences, perceptions, and conceptions because it was retrospective, comparing *now* to *then*. “*Now* represents the more exact science of hindsight, *then* the unknown future of coming into being” (Paget 1988, p. 48). In order to connect the abstract with the concrete, sensemaking started with immediate actions, concrete cues, and then local contexts (Magala, 1997). Simultaneously with all of these above factors, more complete or more perfect information unfolded to affect the system (Weick, 1995).

One central component of sensemaking was communication (Taylor & Van Every, 1999). The teachers in this study communicated to either diffuse misbehavior or communicated to remove the misbehaving student. Until communication was engaged with others capable of influencing the situation at hand, “individual sensemaking has little influence on organizing” (Weick et al., 2005). Particularly in education research, participants were found to interpret and frame the many contexts and multiple messages students and teachers encountered and were necessarily assimilated in some way in order to devise and proceed with behaviors and actions. (Coburn, 2001; Spillane et al., 2002)

Sensemaking was relevant to this study because teachers encountered sensemaking opportunities multiple times each instructional day and the ways they made sense of activities determined the type and severity of interventions they initiated. Evans (2007) wrote, “[S]chool leaders negotiate multiple contexts and stakeholders often with competing overlapping interests” (Evans, 2007, p. 159). Each overlapping interest required a decision to be made, and sensemaking informed sound decision-making (Magala, 1997). As any sense maker, a school leader receives many messages, often mixed, from his or her social contexts and environments and must have derive meaning through decision-making, actions and words (Giroux, 1992; Leithwood & Hallinger, 1993; Spillane et al., 2002).

Wigfield, Lutz, and Wagner (2005) found that junior high and middle school teachers were pivotal in helping their students grow socially and mature into individuals. Therefore, this study examined middle school classroom teachers’ decision-making regarding discipline through the lens of sensemaking in order to provide insight into the

phenomenon. As Courtenay, Merriam, and Baumgartner (2003) highlighted, studying practitioners in their communities may give insight in the “interrelationship of participation, practice, learning, and identity” (p. 187). Consistent with Weick’s themes in sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005) , it was important to discover and know what information teachers utilize in their decision-making with regard to their perception of creating order after disruptions.

When classroom misbehavior occurred, teachers felt an obligation to respond in some way to abide with policy, procedures, precedents, the school culture itself, and even the flow of the planned classroom learning activities. This study helped researchers and practitioners understand one of the most elusive questions in the field of education: “What are teachers thinking when they decide to write a disciplinary referral?” Sensemaking informed the decisions teachers made regarding to classroom management and discipline.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses the methodology used in this study, the intent of which was to examine the processes teachers used to make sense of discipline. It was important to understand this phenomenon because teachers, even on the same campus, handled student discipline differently from one another (McCallum, 1993). This likely affected educational outcomes (Fabelo, et al., 2011; Skiba & Rausch, 2006) because students who receive referrals miss instructional time (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Conversely, student time on task has been found to correlate with positive academic outcomes (Aronson, Zimmerman, & Carlos, 1999; Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama, 1990).

The participants in this study all worked with the same student groups on the same campus, yet the teachers employed strikingly different student management techniques. This examination of teacher sensemaking in classroom discipline contexts added to extant research about discipline processes in schools (Fabelo et al., 2011; Skiba & Peterson; 2000; Skiba & Rausch 2006). This chapter includes a description of, and rationale for, the qualitative design it employed. This chapter also addresses the data sources, data collection, and data analysis used in this study.

#### **Methods**

**Qualitative case study.** Using a qualitative case study methodology (Merriam, 1998), this study intended to examine sensemaking among classroom teachers who wrote various amounts of disciplinary referrals. In qualitative inquiry, researchers select

their approach to inquiry framed by a guiding paradigm in order to inform their investigation. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) defined the qualitative research paradigm as “multimethod in its focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This meant that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them” (p. 2). This definition was comprehensive and inclusive enough to include the present study.

The qualitative research paradigm was selected as the approach because of interpretive and constructivist epistemology as well as how it aided understanding of the realm in which the researcher has worked as a practitioner (Merriam, 1998). The subjects in this study represented a bounded system, which refers to the ability to focus on individuals who fit specific parameters or boundaries (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002). This case study was bounded by time and context. The time frame was three academic years (2009-2010, 2010-2011, and 2011-2012) within which the baseline data of discretionary and non-discretionary discipline referrals were written and executed. The single context was a sixth through eighth grade middle school in Texas.

This study involved in-depth interviews with six teachers, each subject purposefully selected because they all fit specific boundaries or parameters (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002). The interviews all followed specific protocol- including a uniform structure and privacy. The subjects were selected in such a manner as to pair each group as closely as possible with a) similar subjects taught, b) similar number of years of teaching experience, and c) similar annual evaluations. The noticeable

difference of the two groups of teachers was the number of discipline referrals they issued.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Teacher	<i>White</i>	<i>Blue</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Green</i>	<i>Pink</i>	<i>Brown</i>
Gender	<i>Female</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Female</i>
Race	White	White	White	White	White	White
Years Experience in						
Education	20+	5	6	20+	7	4
Teaching Area	Core	Core	Fine	Fine	Core	Core
Referrals 2009-2010	Academic	Academic	Arts	Arts	Academic	Academic
Referrals 2010-2011	1	1	0	35	11	23
Referrals 2011-2012	2	0	2	39	8	29
Referrals 2012-2013	1	1	0	34	8	26

Note: Each participant was assigned a color-based pseudonym for transcription purposes.

By using the case study approach, the researcher attempted to understand the episodes of dealing with student misbehaviors in classrooms from the teachers' points of view. This was done in an effort to determine if teacher decision-making resolved or escalated student misbehavior as measured by a quantity of referrals issued. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) described the hallmarks of case study as having the potential for providing thick, rich descriptions of participants' experiences. The objective of this study was to examine teacher sensemaking in the context of student discipline by studying qualitative interactions rather than statistical data.

The qualitative research paradigm contributed to the field of education because it was well-suited to reflection, action, and collaboration, which define the type of knowledge produced by this paradigm's research (Merriam, 1998). The present research using the qualitative paradigm produced findings which answered questions related to social structure, freedom and oppression, power, and control. Further, this study examined experienced teachers' decision-making in disciplinary contexts during the event of sensemaking. Merriam (1998) reported case studies to be most valuable when asking "how" and "why" in regard to experiences. Yin (2003) stated that case studies allowed the researcher to explore cause-effect relationships in social environments. This research was intended to examine connections between sensemaking and the decisions experienced teachers made during classroom discipline dealings.

Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) argued that the case study design, consistent with qualitative research in general, is determined by the researcher conducting the study and is specific to the phenomenon being studied. Case study design is therefore an emerging

process, not an event. With this flexibility in mind, the research followed the five steps of conducting a case study identified by Creswell (2007) along with Stake (1995):

Determine if a case study approach is appropriate to the research problem

Identify the specific case

Select extensive data collection by drawing from multiple sources

Decide the type of data analysis to be used (holistic or embedded)

Interpret the data and report the meaning of the case

As described by Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007), case study is an in-depth examination of one or more instances of a real-life phenomenon in its unique context reflecting the participants' particular perspectives. In this study, the case was an illustration of a specific phenomenon, namely, how six Kylie Joy Riley Middle School teachers handled student misbehavior in the classroom.

### **Participants**

The flexibility in sampling of qualitative research is one of its most beneficial characteristics. Typically, the sample size is small as Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) suggested the goal in purposeful sampling is to select cases which are likely to produce the thick quality of information, germane to the study's stated purpose. The intent of the interviews and focus groups conducted in this study was to search for accurate, practitioner-friendly information and suggestions, rather than an accurate representation of a defined population.

The units of analysis in this study were six teachers from Kylie Joy Riley Middle School. The subjects were purposefully selected for this study based on the following



criteria: a) they were respected and considered to be good teachers by their teaching peers and administrators, b) all were proficient or better in each of the eight domains of their annual evaluations, and further, c) all subjects were purposefully selected in a way that achieved similarity in the years of experience, ages, ethnicity, and types of subject taught. See Table 1 for participant demographic data. These criteria were employed in order to keep each group in the subject pool as similar as possible with the one difference being the number of discipline referrals they wrote during the prior three years. The teachers in the study violated neither accepted procedure nor board policy in their discipline management procedures. Every referral the teachers issued within the three years of data collection was justified in policy, and no student misbehaviors were ignored within the same time frame. For purposes of this study, differences of referral rates were not evaluated as either good or bad, but recognized as simply differences of procedures. The teachers who issued few referrals were alike in their sensemaking and procedures. The teachers with high referral rates were also alike in their sensemaking and procedures. The differences in the teachers' behaviors at the time of student misbehavior were subtle, but significantly impacted student referral rates. In each of the past three school years, one half of the participants issued fewer than seven referrals, and half the participants issued more than seven discipline referrals.

Creswell (2007) acknowledged that researchers must make decisions about who or what should be sampled, the form of sampling adopted, and the sample size. Creswell (2007) also suggested not using more than four or five informants in a single study, noting that this number of informants should provide ample opportunity to identify

themes of the cases in order to conduct cross-case analysis. He further suggested selecting informants in order to achieve maximum variation as a sampling strategy to represent diverse viewpoints and to be able to describe multiple perspectives about the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2007). The school and teachers were purposefully selected for this study because they met the following requirements:

The campus was a middle school with adolescent students

The campus employed teachers who met the purposeful selection criteria

The campus had attempted to improve discipline for the past three years with little positive results

The campus administration had not changed over the three years of data collection

The district granted permission for the researcher to study the case

For this study, certain parallels in experience among the samples were desired. Therefore, the teachers were purposefully selected for this study because they met the following criteria:

The subjects taught at the campus for a minimum of three years

The subjects taught a full day's schedule of classroom instruction each year of data collection (this eliminated athletic coaches and physical education teachers from the subject pool)

The subjects issued fewer than seven discipline referrals or issued more than seven referrals each year for the three year data collection period

The teachers received proficient or above in each domain on their annual appraisal for each year of data collection. The target rating in each domain was proficiency, therefore all of the teachers were good teachers according to all professional evaluation standards

One of the major differences between the groups was that teachers who informed a misbehaving student that a referral was a possible consequence often carried through with writing the referral. This may have been in part because this type of statement backed the teacher into a verbal corner. These teachers felt they had to follow through with their own statements. In their sensemaking, they would lose credibility with the students if they failed to follow through with their threats. Not surprisingly, these teachers were in the high referral rate group. Teachers who did not refer to negative consequences did not issue or seldom issued negative consequences. Their sensemaking did not obligate them to honor their own negative statements and they successfully employed other means of resolution. The teachers in this group did not ignore any of the same behaviors addressed by the high referral group. These teachers simply de-escalated misbehavior sooner and resumed class activities more seamlessly than the others.

The referrals from teachers who wrote fewer than seven discipline referrals per year were always mandatory in policy (such as fighting in the hallway or skipping class). None of their referrals arose from student misbehavior in the classroom. These teachers successfully defused potentially volatile situations and resumed learning activities without either issuing negative consequences or relegating their authority to school administration.

The teachers who wrote more than seven discipline referrals per year over the preceding three years wrote many more than seven referrals per year. The referrals from these teachers were rarely mandatory in policy, and the majority of their referrals arose from student misbehavior in the classroom.

The district in this study was classified as an Independent Town school by Texas Education Agency (TEA). Further, the district and campus both received a rating of unacceptable by TEA for the first time ever the last year of data collection. For this campus, Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) scores in Math and Writing were troublingly low. Demographically, more than 75 percent of the students at this campus were students of color, while less than 25 percent of the faculty were teachers of color. Socioeconomically, 77 percent of students came from impoverished homes.

Creswell (2007) declared that the most fundamental aspect of qualitative research is the extensive collection of data from multiple sources. In qualitative inquiry, data sources may be artifacts, documents and records, interviews, or observations (Creswell, 2007). The main source of data in this study were two sets of one-on-one interviews with each individual participant, and one focus discussion with each of the two triads of informants. Each triad consisted of three teachers whom had issued either a large amount or small amount of disciplinary referrals each of the prior three academic years. Interview data was collected in the fall semester following the third year of observation.

***Informed consent.*** The researcher obtained permission from the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to attempting to select informants.

The researcher also secured consent from the district superintendent in which Kylie Joy Riley Middle School is located.

**Data collection.** Data was collected through two rounds of one-on-one interviews followed by one focus discussion with each group of teachers. All interviews and focus discussions were audio recorded. The teachers were willing to participate and showed no reservations. They all contributed rich data to the study.

**Interviews.** The interviews consisted of a series of intensive open-ended questions directed to the informants. Seidman (2005) said that the initial interview helps to place subjects' experiences in context, and the subsequent interviews allow the researcher to validate key concepts and reach a deeper understanding of the participants' processes. Seidman (2005) further contended that subsequent interviews formalize details of subjects' experiences based on themes derived from initial interviews. All interviews in this study were semi-structured in order to probe for responses, and lasted between ten and twenty-two minutes. The pre-established questions centered on teachers' experiences, decision-making, and perceptions. The researcher used interviews, which Merriam (2002) described as one of the most important information sources in case study, as the preferred method of data collection. The two questions for the first round of semi-structured interviews were:

Describe the factors influencing teachers' decisions to write disciplinary referrals on students.

Describe benefits teachers believe students receive through discretionary referrals.

The two questions for the second round of semi-structured interviews were:

Describe the typical behaviors students exhibit prior to, and leading up to the issuance of a discipline referral.

Describe your typical responses while student behavior is escalating to the point of the need to write a discipline referral.

***Focus groups.*** The focus group discussions were conducted using the same semi-structured questioning format as the interviews. During the focus group discussions, the participants were encouraged to interact with the other participants' statements, and the teachers responded to the other group members' statements throughout the discussions. This activity produced thicker data than would have been obtained with only one-on-one interviews. Both focus group discussions lasted forty minutes. One focus group consisted of the three participants who wrote fewer than seven discipline referrals each year. The other focus group consisted of the three teachers who wrote more than seven discipline referrals each year.

The two questions for the focus-group discussions were:

Discuss what classroom protocols should be implemented in all classes for the purpose of reducing student misbehavior and, in turn, increasing on-task behavior and student academic success.

Discuss how administrative procedures may be implemented to ensure the fidelity of the proposed classroom protocols to reduce student misbehavior.

***Data analysis.*** Data from the audio recordings of the interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed. Each participant was assigned a color-based pseudonym

(White, Blue, Black, Green, Pink, Brown) for transcription purposes. The transcriptions were then coded using an adaptation of Creswell's (2007) method and employed the following format:

A list of codes or categories was extracted from the data

Codes or themes were not counted in order to permit categories and themes to emerge throughout the analysis process

Information one would expect to discover as a result of this study as well as some unexpected information populated the codes in the study

Thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) was the process used to encode data in qualitative analysis. This took form as patterns of themes emerged from the collected data which served to describe and provide thematic structure from possible observations and interpretations of specific phenomena. The researcher began by coding the transcribed data until themes emerged. An inductive data driven framework was utilized to assist with the analysis (Boyatzis, 1998).

The interpretational analysis was based on Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative approach to data analysis. This method was used to generate categories or properties about a general problem or situation. Some of these properties were causes, conditions, or consequences. Interpretational analysis required saturation of data, rather than all available data in order to draw reasonable conclusions on the phenomena. The process involved a) comparing incidents applicable to each category within sensemaking theory, b) integrating categories and their properties, c) delimiting the theory of sensemaking, and d) writing the theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967).

***Reliability and trustworthiness.*** The researcher spent a significant amount of time preparing for and conducting interviews. This contributed to trustworthiness and reliability for this study. Also, the researcher used member checking, peer checking, and relied on his experience as a teacher and administrator to ensure further reliability and trustworthiness of the data and conclusions, as recommended by Merriam (1998). The researcher used member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation to ensure the accuracy and credibility in this educational research project.

All subjects were offered the option of participating in the member checking process wherein they could read the transcripts of their interviews for accuracy. The researcher solicited participants' views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations by means of member checking (Creswell, 2007). After the interviews took place, the researcher transcribed the audio-recorded interviews and made the typed transcripts available to the participants for the purpose of member checking. None of the participants exercised the option to review their interview transcripts, so member checking privileges were not exercised by the participants.

Peer debriefing serves to keep the researcher honest and accurate, asks hard questions about methodologies, meanings, and interpretations in order to ensure thoroughness and accuracy (Creswell, 2007). The researcher secured another doctoral candidate to review the data and verify emerging themes during the data analysis process. This person was selected to participate in peer debriefing because of her understanding of qualitative research and its methodology. This colleague served as a reviewer for the purpose of ensuring contextual and procedural accuracy.



Triangulation involved corroborating evidence from multiple perspectives and sources to illuminate a theme or perspective (Creswell, 2007). The researcher spent many years as a classroom teacher where he experienced students whom were reluctant learners and has dealt with a variety of classroom discipline situations. This extensive experience qualified him to understand and relate to the participating teachers' statements and points of view.

***Role of the researcher.*** The researcher was the primary data gathering instrument in this qualitative case study and had the liberty of responding to each interview and focus group situation to maximize opportunities for gathering useful and meaningful information. According to Taylor (2005), the more acutely aware researchers are of their verbal and nonverbal behaviors, the more effectively they can monitor and control their behavior and its effects. The researcher in this study actively listened to the participants, and used effective communication skills to establish productive rapport. The role of the researcher in the qualitative research paradigm is much different from the researcher's role in the quantitative paradigm. Beyond numerical and statistical data, the qualitative researcher is expected to examine more subjective data. Krauss (2005) said that qualitative researchers believe in understanding a phenomenon by examining its context and by becoming fluent in the culture or organization of interest since no single unitary of objective reality exists.

Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) noted that researchers play the role of the primary "measuring instrument" in data collection by carrying out the actual data collection and also by personal involvement with the phenomenon being studied and analyzed. It is

expected, in the qualitative paradigm, for the researcher to have rapport with and to interact with participants, and to use empathy and other psychological processes to grasp the meaning of the phenomenon under investigation as the individuals and groups within the setting experience it (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The role of the researcher in a case study is one of direct involvement in the research by designing the study, collecting data, transcribing, analyzing, and reporting all while adhering to the qualitative tradition. Creswell (2007) recommended the qualitative research paradigm when it is necessary to minimize power relationships existing between a researcher and study participants. In the present study, the researcher was a central office-level school administrator and the participants were selected from among the teachers who had been under his supervision while he was principal of Kylie Joy Riley Middle School during the prior three academic years.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### **Introduction**

The intent of this study was to examine the process teachers used to make sense of discipline. In doing so, teachers who issued more than seven discipline referrals each year and teachers who issued fewer than seven referrals each year were studied to see how they made decisions regarding classroom misbehavior. Teachers fall into patterns of behavior and respond to student discipline according to established routines (Gregory & Mosley, 2004). The researcher chose to divide high rates and low rates of referrals at seven per year because campus data showed individual teachers either consistently issued more than or fewer than seven referrals annually. This study found teachers in each group used sensemaking in distinctively different ways, yet these different ways were consistent within each group of teachers.

Both groups reported that they followed structured processes when they attended to misbehavior, began with warnings, and culminated with referrals. A multi-year data study revealed each group consistently issued similar quantities of referrals.

The low referral group held that students received no benefit from referrals and these teachers effectively used other means to de-escalate misbehavior. Their efforts to shift misbehaving students' behavior were successful before they reached that step (referral) in their discipline management plan.

The teachers who issued more referrals, on the other hand, maintained that students benefitted from referrals. These teachers were likely to progress through all

steps in their discipline plan and in fact assign a referral when students misbehaved. The teachers would warn (usually more than once) of consequences for continued misbehavior, speak privately to the student, and send the student to the office with a referral when the behavior continued.

The teachers in both groups reported they employed similar procedures regarding student misbehavior. These reported procedures followed a basic format: a) warning and redirection; b) reminder of the rules; c) private conference; d) contact parents; and e) issue a referral. With ordinary referrals, the student was sent immediately to the assistant principal's office and another student followed a few minutes later with the written referral. Frequently, the assistant principal would not be immediately available to process the referral. In these cases, the student would sit outside the assistant's office until the assistant is available to process the referral. Often, a student would spend the majority of a school day waiting for the referral to be processed. All of this referral processing occurred prior to the assignment of consequence for the initial behavior.

The findings of this study revealed that the differences in the use of sensemaking significantly shaped how the teachers chose to respond student misbehavior. It influenced the ways teachers approached students during attempts to de-escalate the students' misbehaviors. Following de-escalation attempts, the teachers may or may not have removed unruly students in the process of resuming teaching and learning.

The data indicated that teachers employed themes found in prior research: 1) students disrupted the expected flow of classroom routines (Weick, 1995) and the teachers followed discipline policy and procedures; 2) the teachers' awareness of

emotions (either their own or the students') influenced the type of verbal activity they employed when attending to disruption (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obsfeld, 2005); 3) the teachers either upheld the honor of the student's individual culture or their teacher-created classroom culture when attending to student disruption (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obsfeld, 2005); and 4) teachers demonstrated their authority by either finding resolution to misbehavior on their own, or they used their authority to relinquish control to campus administrators (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obsfeld,., 2005).

A comparison between the two subject groups of teachers showed distinct differences in how the teachers made sense of their discipline practices. For example, factors such as classroom management procedures, emotional states, cultural awareness/cultural superiority, and authority all contributed to the number of office referrals issued by any given teacher. All teachers in each group, however, were considered proficient in each of the eight domains of their annual appraisals each of the prior three years.

Data from the interviews indicated that the teachers with low referral rates followed policy, but paid more attention to their own emotions than students' emotions and also responded to students in ways that honored the students' cultures. These teachers believed that they fortified their authority by resolving the root causes of disruption. This allowed them to proceed with classroom teaching before student misbehavior was escalated to unacceptable levels.

The data revealed that the teachers who issued a high number of referrals also followed policy, but reacted quickly to student emotions rather than controlling their

own. Furthermore, these teachers maintained that school culture was the “real world,” meaning that students were expected follow school culture and not their home culture. These teachers believed it was more important they fortified their authority by referring students to the office and by writing an administrative referral because the situation seemed to be more about the teacher’s authority and control. However, in some ways these teachers actually diminished their authority as they no longer had input to the situation after the referral was issued.

### **Themes**

**Flow of activities disrupted.** When students disrupt class by speaking out of turn, arguing with other students or with the teacher, or by being off-task, the flow of the class is disrupted. This was applied to Weick’s (1995) sensemaking theory, although the theory addressed flow of general activity and Weick did not conduct discipline research, discipline was the activity selected for this study. The theme of flow of class activity consisted of: a) explanation of content and objective, b) teacher modeling the objective, and c) guided student practice of objective, followed by independent student practice and then student assessment. When class flow was disrupted, individual teachers responded to student misbehavior in different ways, ultimately resulting in different disciplinary outcomes for students. For this study, the disruption of flow was when a student engaged in disruptive behavior during class time.

The teachers in both the high referral rate and low referral rate groups reported a basic behavior pattern: a) all teachers warned and redirected the student; b) all teachers reminded the student of the rules; c) all teachers engaged the student in a private

conference; d) all teachers contacted the student's parents; and e) all teachers issued a discipline referral. Although the groups reported similar methods, the approaches the teachers actually took were different between groups. Teachers reported this format was conducive to class activity flow, yet the groups did not follow this format in the same ways.

Upon further questioning, teachers with high rates of referral revealed that they seldom defused disruptive situations involving students without needing to contact parents or write a referral. Whether or not the teachers in this group contacted parents, the outcome was likely a discipline referral. They used parent contacts more to justify the referral than as a tool to improve student behavior without a referral. Conversely, teachers who wrote fewer referrals completely resolved the misbehavior before they reached the fourth and fifth steps (call to parents and written referral) in the processes (see Table 2).

Table 2

Discipline Management Procedures

	<i>Low Referral Group</i>		<i>High Referral Group</i>			
	White	Blue	Black	Green	Pink	Brown
Redirect Student to the Task	Yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Remind Student of Rules and Consequences	No	no	no	yes	yes	yes
Ask Student to Resume Classwork	Yes	yes	yes	no	no	no
Conference with Student (15 seconds-2 minutes)	Yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Call Parent	No	yes	no	yes	yes	yes
Write Referral	yes*	yes*	yes*	yes	yes	yes

\*Teacher reported as a procedure but seldom used

***High referral rate teachers.*** The teachers in this group employed their established procedures to control the flow of classroom activity. The immediate goal of these teachers was to continue the lesson as planned. Their sensemaking was used to remove the disruptive student by writing and issuing an office referral. This was done as quickly as possible and in manner that allowed rapid resumption of planned classroom activities without the threat of further interruption. If it was the most expedient way to resume the flow of their class, these teachers removed the offending student to the



office. Instructor Miss Pink said, “If it’s causing a disruption then and there, you need to remove the kid so you can continue on with class.”

The teachers in this group reported the same processes or maintaining discipline as did teachers in the low referral rate group. The difference was that they unwaveringly followed every step in the process and emphasized following established procedures within the student management process. When student behavior did not improve after they talked to the students one-on-one, they found it necessary to contact parents to report the misbehavior and then write a referral.

The teachers had the privilege of writing referrals for misbehavior if they made parental contact first. It was revealed in the interviews that the teachers wrote more referrals if the students were warned that their behavior would result in a referral. These teachers considered it a point of honor to uphold the classroom management plan. Thus, if they threatened a referral, they felt bound to deliver a referral. This was consistent with Weick (1995) in that the current state of events must be identified for flow to resume. Once the teachers identified the misbehavior, it was destined to become a referral. Instructor Mrs. Green explained:

When you go through your classroom management plan with your students and referral is the next step, then that is what has to be done. Umm, you’ve told your students that’s what you’re going to do and to not have an empty threat, you have to follow through with what you told them you were going to do.

These teachers warned students after the first sign of misbehavior and then conferenced briefly with them when misbehavior continued during class. Their warnings carried a

more directive tenor than warnings from a teacher who wrote few referrals. The high referral rate teachers provided a list of potential consequences which included a referral to the principal's office if behavior the teacher deemed disruptive continued. One teacher said:

I would make sure the student knows what was expected and tell them they weren't doing that, then contact a parent. If that didn't work, then I felt something needed to be done. And that's when I would send them to the office with a referral.

These teachers felt obligated to remove students if they disrupted class, and they believed that they followed administrative rules when removing students from the classroom. If anything, these teachers were purposefully more thorough in following management procedures, and they followed them more extensively than the low referral rate group. In order to maintain their classroom, they removed the offensive student instead of addressing the behavior in other ways.

By adhering to the procedures, the teachers were able to report to parents and administrators that they had tried all available options (redirection attempted, warned the student, spoke to the student alone, called parent) to remedy the misbehavior. They maintained that they had no options left other than issue a referral to campus administration.

***Low referral rate teachers.*** Data revealed that these teachers effectively defused disruptive situations by involving students, and once the issue was resolved, there was no need to contact parents or write a referral. This group of teachers saw the purpose of

disciplinary action to minimize disruptive behaviors on both the students' and their parts. Participants in both high and low referral rate groups had varying levels of teaching experience. Instructor Mr. Black was very brief and straightforward when reciting his behavior management procedures:

My typical response would be to review my three rules and most of the time that shuts it down. From the very beginning [of the school year] I establish these three rules and make sure they are an integral part of our classroom society... I believe you handle your discipline in-house and, uh, take care of the problems you need to... [S]imple breakdown in behavior? When it comes to talking incessantly we handle that in-house.

This is not a gender-biased viewpoint, as the female subjects who had low numbers of referrals revealed similar data. For example, Mrs. Blue stated:

There was one point...when I was "Like, why am I even here [in the profession]?" because my classroom management sucked quite honestly, plain and simple. Managing kids in the classroom is my job, not somebody else's.

When a student misbehaved, these teachers asked the students to remind them of the rules and expectations, and did not emphasize a consequence of any type. The teachers made no mention of school administration, ISS, or referrals when re-directing misbehavior. Involving the students in their own re-direction process was a sub-theme in this study. This technique proved to be effective.

These teachers asked questions, rather than issue directives, to maintain flow in the classroom. This exemplified a difference in the verbal techniques, by causing the

students to be more reflective rather than defensive in their thinking. Mrs. White, Mr. Black and Mrs. Blue all reported they asked students, “What is going on today that I might help with?” Regardless of how a student answered that question, they asked a follow-up question similar to, “Will you help me by controlling your behavior in the classroom?” and other questions which allowed the student to empathize with the teacher.

Low referral rate teachers considered student misbehavior as temporary. These teachers asked the students to behave in an acceptable manner, and gave the students the dignity of choosing to do what was expected of them; they did not recite consequences for continued misbehavior to the students. Normal classroom teaching activities were resumed and the misbehaviors decreased. These teachers’ sensemaking involved enabling the students to redirect themselves. Hence, the teachers successfully redirected the student’s behavior, thereby preventing a disruption. This strengthened their authority and control of activity without invoking any other threat or higher authority.

When a student disrupted class, the teachers had a brief conference with the student away from other students so they would not be embarrassed. These conferences interrupted the student’s misbehavior before the actions crossed a subjective threshold of rule-breaking. These teachers directed the conversation and activity back to teaching and learning. After the misbehavior subsided, the teacher resumed teaching. Both Mrs. White and Mrs. Blue spoke about having brief, private conferences with students at the onset of misbehavior. Mrs. White said:

I'd try to just conference with them and I'd, "You know, what's going on today?" and just try to get their [opinion]. Just get some feedback from them one on one, without an audience because, you know. It's better when you talk to them without the audience and I like to tell them, "I want you in my classroom, but I can't let this continue while we are in there. You know, can you think of reasons why?" and that sort of thing. And, umm so that's it, and then I try to get them into the classroom as quickly as possible.

The duration of teacher/student conferences was always brief, only long enough to disrupt the misbehavior and return the focus to teaching and learning.

These teachers empowered students by soliciting the students' opinions as to why they were acting out. Additionally, they spoke of the importance of removing the students from the audience (the remainder of the class). This procedure accomplished several things by allowing the student to make choices. First, the students were not rewarded with negative attention. The temptation for the student to sensationalize and escalate the situation was minimized because the teachers purposefully chose not to embarrass the students before their peers. These private conferences also did not distract other students from their learning activities. The teachers in this group listed parent conferences and written referrals in their discipline management plans. They did not have occasion to use those steps, however, because the misbehaviors were always successfully resolved before the steps were needed.

These teachers never threatened negative consequences or sent students to the office. They considered it their responsibility to take care of misbehavior and keep the

students in the classroom and on task. The most important issue to these teachers was to return to the normal flow of routine as quickly as possible. They considered writing referrals and sending students to the office as further disruptions of the normal flow of routine. Mrs. White said she would speak with students in the hallway and out of the other students' sight or hearing and then, "I try to get them (back) into the classroom as quickly as possible." Similarly, Mr. Black said, "Nothing formal for me, a second to review one-on-one, 'What's our rules?' then back to work. They know the rules so I don't need to tell them again." These teachers did not feel compelled to teach the students how to behave. Instead, they communicated that the students already knew how to behave and focused on the student as an individual instead of the misbehavior.

Once the teachers from this group spoke with the student in a private conference and ushered him or her back into the classroom, he or she would return immediately and rapidly back to normal classroom activities and not revisit the situation. Once the situation had been addressed, this group of teachers proceeded with class and the situation did not require further attention.

The teachers with a low referral rate did not give any further attention to the matter after the brief, private conferences. These teachers acted on the assumption that the behavior situation would be extinguished and not recur. They did not hold a grudge against the misbehaving student; once the matter had been addressed, the teacher moved on and this proved to be a sufficient solution to the disruption. The students moved on, as well. Following the brief conference, the students always followed the teachers' directions with class activity without further discussion, warning, negotiation, or threats.

***Verbal activity in controlling teachers' emotions.*** A second theme identified in this study was that circumstances morphed from the flow of activity to verbal activity (Gioia et al., 1994). Teachers in both high and low referral rate groups purposefully selected their words, both spoken and written, thereby controlling the flow of their responses to disruption of the overall teaching activity.

***High referral rate teachers.*** The teachers who wrote many referrals recognized their own emotional states when attending to misbehavior. The perhaps biggest difference between them and the first group was the teachers in the first group recognized and checked their emotions, then paused until they were no longer angry with the student or the event. Not until these teachers knew they were emotionally competent to address the event without overreacting, did they continue on to verbal activity.

This emotional component of self-monitoring the teacher's anger or frustration was not listed as a part of the discipline process by any teacher in this study. Data from the interviews, however, revealed that it is in fact a significant consideration before the teacher speaks or writes in response to misbehavior. The teachers cited they needed to control their emotions if angry, and did so. Mrs. Brown said:

*[S]ome of the factors (influencing teachers' decisions to write a referral) would be, well the student's behavior in class or what happened, but also with the teacher's attitude maybe, that day; how they're feeling that day.*

The differences in how teachers addressed their own emotional state contributed to the quality of verbal responses and subsequently, the numbers of referrals written. The

teachers who issue many referrals emphasize student emotions and the teachers who do not write many referrals are keenly aware of their own emotions and measure their actions based on their emotions *rather* than students' emotions. The first group takes the position that if they are not in control of their own emotions; they are not in control of their interactions with students. The latter group felt an obligation to "fix the child's problem" by somehow disciplining them out of the emotional state.

It is important to note that both groups of teachers recognized the fact that students were sometimes already emotionally charged by the time they arrived to class. An event may have happened in the student's previous classroom, with another student in the hallway before class, or even a situation from the student's home life that caused students to be upset in any given class. Both groups reported these outside events affected the students' class participation and behavior.

***High referral rate teachers.*** These teachers, like their low referral counterparts, also recognized that students sometimes entered the classroom with their emotions charged from events happening before class even starts. These teachers reported that the students could be angry at another teacher, or another student in the hallway, or even something that might have happened at home. With these considerations, the high referral teachers did not seek to help the student through the anger. They would instead become angry toward the student themselves. When teachers became angry with, and verbally engaged students, the tension increased as did the likelihood of a referral. Instead of the teacher defusing an emotionally charged student as attempted, the student would frequently misbehave in a way to incite the teacher's anger. Mrs. Green said:



The misconduct is not necessarily something that happened in the classroom. It may be something that's happened in another classroom, but it's going to escalate until they are able to do something to resolve their problem. Generally, the students who have had behavior problems in my classroom are those who are dealing with something that's coming from outside the classroom.

This group could accurately predict an escalation of misbehavior in these cases. Another instructor said, "I felt like something else was going on... um if um the uh, if needed we would call parents, if it still continued, but some students that I had needed to go out in the hall."

The teachers who wrote many referrals viewed students as moody. This group permitted the students to focus on the misbehavior and its emotional entanglements rather than progressing back to teaching and learning. In fact, the teachers focused on the misbehavior as well, thereby inadvertently contributing to time off task.

This is an example of how the high referral teachers attempted to control flow. If a student was upset after phoning the parents (from the classroom and during class time) the teacher decided the student needed to go to the hall. This is one of the ways student anger would culminate in a removal from class.

In addition to recognizing student emotions, the teachers who wrote many referrals discussed the contribution of teachers' emotions to assigning referrals. Teachers reacted differently when they were angry. The high referral group indicated a teacher was more likely to write a referral if they felt bad (angry). Miss Pink said, "I think some of the factors [contributing to writing the referral] would be the student's behavior in

class or what happened that day- but also the teacher's attitude that day. How they're feeling that day." Another teacher expressed similar sentiments, saying, "Sometimes the teachers just get frustrated and they don't know what else to do. So they just want to let the kid be somewhere else."

As an administrator on the campus where the teachers worked, the researcher in this study observed a number of cases where the teacher was angry with the student at the time a referral was issued. When teachers lost control of their emotions, their response was to write a referral. It took a few seconds to document the student's behavior on a form and the student left the room. The teacher got a break from the student and resumed whatever activity the teacher chose. In these cases, either the teacher does not notice their own anger and frustration escalating or preemptively sends the student to the office before they became angry. These teachers did not report anything about managing their own emotions. These teachers frequently follow a predetermined course of verbal activity in resolving misbehavior which includes writing the referral.

These teachers often would remind the students of the rules and list consequences if misbehavior continued:

Usually what I would do is identify that there is a problem, that their behavior was not what we expect it to be. Usually I would remind them again, usually we would go out into the hall so other kids couldn't see it, and we would discuss it, and make sure the student knew what was expected and they weren't doing that.

High referral group teachers talked to students, but did not ask questions. Mrs. Green discussed teacher-talking and reminding students of rules:

If talking to them, reminding them, then talking to them away from others, and then contacting a parent, and if that didn't work, then um I felt something else needed to be done. And that's when I would send them to the office with a referral.

In these cases, the teachers did the talking, usually repeating things the students already knew, and then would proceed toward the referral. Mrs. Brown felt the need to explain poor behavior to students:

And if that doesn't work then I have a conversation with the kid in the hallway or somewhere other students can't hear what I'm saying to talk to them and explain to them why I feel their behavior is inappropriate or find out what they have to say about it and if that doesn't work we call parents, and the last resort would be a discipline referral for them.

The data showed it was very common for these teachers to issue a referral shortly after telling the students what the rules were. It is not a conclusive fact that a reminder is equivalent to a referral, but based on the interviews there seemed to be a connection between the two.

***Low referral rate teachers.*** The teachers who wrote few referrals monitored their own emotions, which aided them in choosing their words. Further, they also monitored the students' states of emotion before taking any action or speaking. In other words, they

factored whether they or the students were upset about something or in a bad mood before they took any action of verbal nature.

Low referral rate teachers were aware of the student's mood, but emphasized proper behavior in the classroom over problems in the student's life. They most frequently chose to ask the students to tell them what the student should be doing in class, thereby retaining focus on teaching and learning.

These teachers were able to make sense of their own behavior as a means to control student behavior. Instead of attempting to control students' actions or thoughts, the low referral teachers purposefully selected their verbal approaches when attempting to resume flow of class. Instead of telling the student to sit down and be quiet, these teachers asked the student if he would like to take his seat at this time. These teachers viewed upset students as people who had a problem. They did not view the students as being a problem for their classroom. Mrs. White explained:

We need to do everything in our power umm to not push that kid's buttons and to help de-escalate the situation in the tone... how loud you speak to them, where you speak to them, I mean I'm not saying that a teacher can't ... teachers get frustrated, and when I felt myself getting to that point, I would, "Can you please step outside for a moment, can you please step outside for a moment?" And rather than say anything else it was just repeat, "Could you please step outside for a moment?" and generally within the next minute or two I'd be outside in the hall with that student and have a private conversation with that kid um, that would last probably...twenty seconds.

This teacher self-monitored her emotions and determined to control the volume, tone, and content of her verbal response to student misbehavior. These teachers monitored their own emotions in order to not become angry at the student. This helped the teacher make a purposeful decision to interact with students in helpful ways.

The teachers understood it was normal for students to arrive to class with emotional baggage. Another instructor said:

What ends up happening is kids walk into our classrooms with so many other things on their minds. I don't- a lot of times I don't think it has anything to do with the teacher. It could be family. It could be friends.

This group noticed that the students were upset at the time of misbehavior and measured their own responses accordingly. They understood that their own behavior may ignite student misbehavior, and provoke rather than calm the student. Mrs. White was cautious to not "push that kid's buttons."

Teachers with low referral rates did not recite the rules or warn of a pending referral. Instead, they would ask the student to talk privately outside the presence of the other students in the classroom. Mrs. White recognized the fact that students can be expected to exhibit immature behaviors, acknowledging, "We're the adults in the room and they're the kids. I mean a kid's a child." With this in mind, she then consciously and purposefully avoided exacerbating the incident by verbal engagement. Instead, she intervened to solve the problem and not simply make the student stop exhibiting inappropriate behavior. For Mrs. White, it was important to recognize her responsibility to remain mature and in control of the way she responded to a student's misbehavior.

She intervened in an immediate and introspective manner, calming herself before initiating discussion or responded to student verbal outbursts. This composed reaction process also helped her remain in control at all times and thwarted any temptation she may have had to verbally overreact. It is important to note that she never sent a student out of the room alone, but instead moved to the door first and invited the student to conference with her in the hallway for a limited period of time. This is another example of how the teachers with low referral rates ask students for specific behaviors rather than telling them what the consequence will be if they continue misbehaving.

The low referral teachers purposed to not write referrals when they were angry. Mr. Black described how teachers leave themselves vulnerable to overreacting to a situation if they do not self-monitor, saying, “Misbehavior starts as a minor disruption and the teacher’s button gets pushed after a while and the teacher feels the need to take action and remove the student.” Mrs. Blue added:

Teachers need to get away from writing referrals when they are angry. A lot of times I need to take a deep breath and walk away. If I look into a kid’s file and find we’ve never had a talk before, I’m not going to automatically go to a referral. But I think some teachers get angry and I know it is easy to get angry.

Mr. Black concurred:

That comes with experience too. I know when I started teaching, a kid pops off at me and I would want to pop back. That’s a battle an individual has to face in their own personal experience. I know, you’re right, don’t write it mad.

Mrs. Blue also discussed how she had been what she termed as “passive/aggressive” earlier in her teaching career. She described how she became upset with students and wrote referrals after class, when the student had left for the next class. She said she would place the completed referral in the principal’s campus mailbox and not even mention it to anyone. She would not discuss the matter with the student at all. Instead of engaging the student in dialogue, she created written documents and expected the campus administration to change the student’s behavior. This was a use of verbal activity, but it did not contribute to healthy flow of the class. She explained that doing this never changed student behavior for the better. She said, “It just made them mad and they would want to get back at you.”

The low referral rate teachers recognized the difficulties of maintaining the environment and deescalating misbehavior when a student becomes angry with a teacher. Once Mrs. Blue and Mr. Black had matured as teachers and began monitoring their own emotions, they changed the way they addressed classroom misbehaviors. They would not verbally redirect a student until they were no longer angry themselves. These teachers asked for cooperation rather than telling the students what would happen if the student did not stop acting inappropriately. Not only did they write fewer referrals, but the incidences of misbehavior in their classrooms all but disappeared. On rare instances when misbehavior does occur in these teachers’ classrooms, the methods and techniques they employed to resolve the problem were successful.

One of the teachers in this group described how teachers contribute to escalation of misbehavior, saying, “It’s like a Coke bottle. The teacher shakes it and shakes it.

Shake it, shake it, shake it and all of a sudden it explodes and that is when the discipline referral happens.” These teachers not only knew when to not exacerbate the situation, but their own conduct and self-monitoring prohibited students doing so as well. Thus, problems arose less frequently and were less severe on the rare occasions when they did occur in the classrooms of low referral teachers.

Speaking to the students with a neutral, interrogative rather than declarative or directive verbal construct was another sub-theme. Notice Mrs. White’s above response when she felt herself becoming frustrated, “Can you step out into the hall a moment?” These teachers would ask non-threatening questions to the students in order to allow the students to self-monitor by asking questions during the individual conversations with the students at the onset of misbehavior. One teacher commonly asked the students what was happening in their lives. Another would ask the students if they thought she was working hard as a teacher, and followed that with a request for them to put in effort as well. Speaking to the students with these techniques was less threatening or intimidating than other approaches.

*Wrj qif lpi 'kpwkwkpcrtj qprt 't'pf 'ij g'kpfkxf wcrj qprt 'qhlwvf gpvu.* The third theme identified in this sensemaking study was that organizational or individual honor was either threatened or upheld (Gioia et al., 1994).

***High referral rate teachers.*** For these teachers, the honor of the culture they established and expected in their classrooms took precedence versus recognizing students’ cultures. Students navigated different sets of rules in different contexts. For example, students may be allowed to use certain language at home or in their parents’



presence, but the same language is considered offensive at school (Delpit, 2006). At home they may cast their eyes toward the floor in shame while being chastised yet the teachers at school demand they maintain eye contact while being scolded (see Table 3).

Table 3

Student Home Culture or Classroom Culture

Teacher	White	Blue	Black	Green	Pink	Brown
Views Student Culture as						
Superior	yes	yes	Yes	no	no	no
Views Classroom Culture as						
Superior	no	no	No	yes	yes	yes

The teachers who wrote many referrals recognized the inner conflicts students faced in these circumstances, but unswervingly upheld their classroom culture, often at the expense of student culture (Delpit, 2006). The teachers who wrote many referrals were convinced that students should follow school culture when at school because that is the “real world” culture. Thus, they acknowledged cultural differences between home and school yet reported a preference of developing personal relationships with students above understanding culture from the students’ points of view. The researcher asked the

focus group about the value they placed on cultural sensitivity, and Mrs. Green replied, “You have to bond with them. That gets you a lot farther than anything else.” She added:

    Their future bosses have expectations and they [the students] are going to have to learn how to for lack of a better word act, learn what the business culture is like.

    And I’m not sure we have to learn about all the parents’ ways.

Miss Pink contributed:

    And once you bond with them, once you are disciplining they you know how to approach them. I mean, “Do I need to be very stern with them?” or “Do I just have a conversation with them? [You understand how to use] your tone of voice with them.

This stance permitted the teachers to set and enforce the culture they set for their classrooms regardless of student culture and norms, by nominally replacing cultural sensitivity with strength of relationships. This position sought to justify teachers’ disregard for students’ cultures by referring to school culture as “real world”. The teachers maintained that students needed to learn to navigate these other rules in order to be successful as adults.

    High referral rate teachers specifically discounted the impact of cultural sensitivity. When asked about considering differences in cultural norms when managing a diverse classroom of students, one of the teachers in this group said, “Having a relationship with the kid is going to have a bigger impact than knowing where they’re coming from. If you know their individualities, you know where they are coming from.” Another teacher wholeheartedly agreed with this, saying, “If you bond with them and

have that relationship with them they're going to do more for you than if you just know their culture.”

These teachers assumed that classroom behavior was a product of the student's relationship with the teacher regardless of cultural influences. As Delpit (2006) noted, it is important to understand student culture. In contrast, the high referral rate teachers believed that getting to know a student better enabled the teacher to control the student better. They did not address the issues related to how writing a referral negatively impacts the teacher-student relationship.

Mrs. Brown's personal values emerged when discussing cultural considerations and differences between home and school. She related how she insisted students maintain eye-contact when she was discussing their misbehavior.

A lot of our African American students say they don't want to look us in the eyes because that is a sign of disrespect and they are supposed to look at the ground. A lot of my sixth graders are saying they don't look their parents in the eyes because it is disrespectful.

Maintaining eye-contact during reprimand is a cultural norm for the young White teacher whereas the same behavior is a violation of her African American sixth-grade students' cultural norms. Without regard for what the students told her about their attempts to show her the same respect they show their parents, she says, “I always tell them, ‘You are not showing your respect unless you are looking me in the eyes.’” Her insistence on students' eye-contact likely weakened the strength of her relationships with her students, because she insisted they violate the rules of their home culture.

Mrs. Green insisted that it was beneficial for students to conform to the school rules without the school being considerate of their indigenous family culture:

They have to learn that in the real world they're going to have to follow the boss' rules. They are going to how to, for lack of a better word, act. I'm not sure we have to learn about all the parents.

These teachers expected the students to conform to their rules and abandon their parents' norms and rules from their home cultures. Furthermore, these teachers maintained that students benefitted from learning to do what those in authority say regardless of social norms.

The teachers who wrote many referrals honored the institutional tradition of sending students to the office. For them, sensemaking included bearing the standard for the institution and not the student. They justified their actions by declaring them to be good for the student; through the referral, the student learned negative consequences for misbehavior and how to conform to institutional rules, even if they were at variance with cultural norms.

*Low referral rate teachers.* The teachers who wrote fewer referrals were considerate of the students' home cultures and norms when engaging them with dialogue. One of the considerations the low referral group mentioned during interviews was honoring the difference between student home cultures and school culture when responding to misbehavior. These teachers focused on students, not classroom norms. They considered the classroom to be part of the students' territory. The students were the reason the classroom existed in the first place. Overall, however, the classroom norms

retained most, if not all of their integrity by validating student cultural norms. The students reciprocated respect with respect.

Teachers in this group spoke of the students' home cultures and norms whereas the teachers who write many referrals require students to conform to school norms at all times. A low referral teacher said, "Some teachers have a hard time finding that balance in the classroom where it's supposed to look 'this way' and children who come from homes that look 'that way.'"

The recognition of the fact that students engage in two distinctly different cultures between home and school informed their sensemaking. This group encouraged classroom cooperation simply by requesting the misbehaving students to recognize the differences in home rules and school rules. This proved to be successful in redirecting student behavior.

Sensemaking for these teachers involved acknowledging the differences in the ways students behaved at home and how they are expected to behave at school. Cultural sensitivity was an important factor in the way these teachers interacted with their students (Delpit, 2006). It also informed teacher expectations without degrading the student. Mr. Black said, "I know my kids are energetic when they are at home and enjoy making some noise, it seems so simple for me to let them make some when I'm trying to get them to tell me some answers."

These teachers did not expect less of their students, but respected the values and norms the students experienced in their homes. They recognized and validated the students' demonstrations of respect on the students' terms, not their own. Mrs. Blue

confirmed, “When I’m out in the hall with a kid, they usually feel bad about what they’ve done and can’t stand to look me in the eyes.”

Whether Mrs. Blue understood the cultural significance and importance of this particular posture was not the important issue to her. She cared about whether the student was engaged in learning. Without diminishing the authority of school rules, these teachers understood that certain behaviors are acceptable in the students’ home cultures. Of teachers in general, one teacher said:

I think sometimes teachers misunderstand student behaviors and some are very particular about how their classroom runs. I’ve come to realize that at students’ homes it is not a quiet, relaxed environment. Oftentimes it’s louder and sometimes [they] don’t have a lot of things.

She elaborated that teachers had difficulty reconciling conduct that was accepted as normal at the students’ homes and expectations set at school. Students may not be quiet and relaxed when they are at home, exhibiting verve and exuberance instead. This teacher went on to describe how many teachers experienced problems with student behavior when they insisted that students always remain quiet and still. She recognized the value of accommodating student norms within her classroom culture by choosing to not reprimand students for talking or moving about in the classroom.

Instead of demanding the students remain still and quiet in the classroom, all teachers in the low referral group recognized vivacious activity as a cultural norm. A student may have risen from the desk to stretch or tossed a pencil to a student sitting nearby and the teachers did not feel the need to reprimand the student. They designed

their class activities so students could speak and move about. Mrs. Blue asked, “Who wouldn’t want a kid to be excited about learning in the classroom?”

They also spoke of understanding how personality and character were valued by impoverished students in much the same way as in valued in middle-class culture. This understanding impacted the teachers’ viewpoints of classroom management, causing them to be more collaborative than authoritative. Instead of addressing the behavior as misbehavior, the teachers in this group requested cooperation from the students. Mrs. White reported that she said to students, “Okay, I understand that this is the way you are, but here it would be helpful to us, and others if you could, you know, follow the different, the other rules, you know?”

These teachers successfully enabled students to make choices that upheld their personal values and cultures and honored the school rules at the same time. They did so by causing the students to contemplate the cultural differences rather than demanding the students abandon their personalities and character for the sake of school rules.

*Uwduakwng't evkqp 'qt 'lwt vj gt 'f gndgt c vkkp0* When conflict resolution is problematic, sensemaking is biased toward either identifying substitute action or further deliberation (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obsfeld, 2005). In this study, the conflict bringing sensemaking into play was student misbehavior versus classroom engagement.

***High referral rate teachers.*** The teachers in the high referral rate group attempted to resolve conflict and resume flow by attempting to deliberate. When those attempts were unsuccessful, the teachers resumed flow by removing the student from the classroom. Counterintuitively, these teachers thought they upheld their own authority

in the classroom by relinquishing the student discipline to the school office (Gioia et al., 1994; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obsfeld, 2005). Sensemaking, for these teachers demanded that they “teach the children a lesson” by writing the referral (see Table 4).



Table 4

Substitute Action or Further Deliberation

Teacher	White	Blue	Black	Green	Pink	Brown
Asserts Referrals are Effective and Beneficial	no	no	No	yes	yes	yes
Tries to Help Student Resolve His/Her Anger	no	no	No	yes	yes	yes
Asserts Referrals are not Effective or Beneficial	yes	yes	Yes	no	no	no

The teachers who wrote many referrals justified their actions by insisting students benefitted from discipline referrals. The teachers did not allude to any possibility a referral would improve behavior. When asked how referrals helped students' behavior in class, the high referral group yielded very consistent data. Mrs. Green asserted, "When you give a negative consequence to a child, that will, umm, help them realize that is not what they should be doing." Miss Pink agreed, saying, "It shows them that that behavior is not acceptable in the classroom or at the school, and that behavior will not be tolerated." Mrs. Brown added, "It helps clarify your expectations so that it doesn't happen again."

The teachers failed to offer any evidence that issuing referrals indeed taught the concepts they claimed. Discipline data from the school records indicated otherwise; students rarely received only one discipline referral for a rule infraction. Had the students learned from the referral, they would have changed their behavior and would not have received subsequent referrals for the same type of infraction.

Another benefit the high referral rate group suggested was that students learned about consequences for not following rules, and that these experiences prepared them for a future time when they will have an employer who imposes rules in the workplace. They offered no evidence as to whether the students actually learned those principles through receiving referrals. This indicates their use of sensemaking did not rely on evidence-based outcomes, rather on their own convenience. The high referral rate teachers followed the institutional framework of applying the final step in their procedural plan based on those inherited from predecessors in the school.

Tsoukas and Chia (2002) reported that sensemaking and organization are mutually dependent aspects of giving order to disorder. With this in mind, removing a student from a classroom where they engaged in off task behavior or misbehavior seems like a rational way to provide order to that situation. This course of action requires other systems (principals, assistant principals, in school suspension, etc.) to engage the situation. This teacher behavior relies on other systems to resolve the misbehavior. The teachers who wrote many referrals experienced order for their environment by removing the offending student, and their sensemaking made referrals appear beneficial. The

classroom environment may have looked the way the teacher wanted it to after the offending student left the room.

*Low referral rate teachers.* The teachers who wrote few referrals resolved the conflict by identifying the substitute action of guiding the students into choosing to actively participate in the lesson without detracting from it. The deliberation these teachers employed upheld their own authority by helping the students discover the way they would resolve misbehavior on their own (Gioia et al., 1994; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obsfeld, 2005). Sensemaking for these teachers demanded that they successfully resolve the underlying problem instead of removing students from the classroom.

The interviews with this group revealed that these teachers were convinced that writing a referral does not change student behavior or benefit students in any way. They felt it was their role, not the office's, to change students' behavior. Therefore, they were committed to finding other ways of resolving student behavior. These teachers discussed how they did not notice any improvement in student behavior when they had written referrals in the past. The student did not benefit academically because the consequences meted out by administration caused the student to miss class time. Upon return, the teachers found it necessary to spend more time with the student in order to fill gaps in learning due to the referral. Often, the student would resist the teacher's attempts toward remediation especially when the student resented the teacher for writing the referral. Sensemaking to this group of teachers required them to change the way they responded to misbehavior in ways that would benefit the student. The substitute course of action they chose involved listening to the student's concerns, accepting the student within the

student's contexts of culture and maturity, and proceeding with the least intervention possible.

During the individual interviews, the teachers who wrote few referrals all stated that students did not benefit from referrals. Although all the teachers in the study reported that they use referrals in their management plan, the interviews revealed something contrary. None of the teachers in this group believe referrals are a viable option for addressing misbehavior, and the discipline data supports this belief. There were several reasons they arrived at this conclusion, and they were all in agreement with each point.

First, they concluded student behavior in the classroom did not improve after receiving referrals. Mrs. Blue said she “used to think a referral would be the ‘end-all change-all’ and the students would arrive back in class with the attitude of ‘I was so wrong, Mrs. Blue, I will never do that again.’” Instead, she noticed that the students returned with more resentment toward her and more resistance to learning and class participation.

Once she realized this, Mrs. Blue changed the way she conducted class and interacted with her students. She began writing lesson plans that included student movement, speaking, and participation. She also filled up every moment of class time with activity. Her observation was that first, the students did not have time to get bored and occupy their time with mischief. Second, her lessons called for students to move around the classroom and speak to other students using academic language about the

class content, which she claimed satisfied their need to talk. If talking was something the teacher expected of the students, they would not be in trouble for it.

Another change Mrs. Blue made was keeping a log of students with whom she conferenced. She would make note of the student, date, and issue precipitating the discussion. This helped in two ways. First, if there was a trend in behavior with a particular student, this enabled her to identify it. Further, it helped her to be patient with the students. If she conferenced a student late in the year and noticed she had not had any prior issues, she would respond with that in mind. This provided further evidence of her use of sensemaking.

Mr. Black addressed his maturing as a teacher this way:

When I started teaching, a kid pops off at me and I would want to pop back. This time in their lives when they are just coming into adulthood they need to feel their opinion is valued, that they are being heard. These kids flip-flop! One minute they are adults and the next they want to be treated like little kids. It's a tough time.

After a short time as a teacher, he noticed the students would not change overnight, but they did grow and mature over time. He modified the way he treated the students and determined not to behave the way the students do. This did several things for the students. It gave them an adult model on how to address minor day-to-day conflicts because he always treated the students the same way. He also learned that he could help his students grow through immaturity but could not punish immaturity out of a student.

## **Conclusion**

The teachers who write referrals do so because they find sense in maintaining their classroom environment the way they want it to be maintained. Conversely, the teachers who do not write many referrals work to help students resolve underlying causes of misbehavior and honor the student above the process. Both types of teachers claim to maintain authority. Those who write many referrals used sensemaking to relinquish their disciplining authority to administrators. Those who do not write many referrals used sensemaking to purposefully design their processes in order to resolve the causes of misbehavior.

When the teacher's planned activity for a class was disrupted because of student misbehavior, one of two courses of action was initiated and followed by the teacher. One group of teachers followed a standard behavior management process resulting in the removal of a student who had misbehaved from class. This group of teachers had a high number of discipline referrals because warnings, reminding the students of the rules, talking to the student, and calling a parent did not extinguish the misbehavior. These teachers said their only option was referring the student to the office. The sub-themes these teachers incorporated into their sensemaking involved telling the students what to do, and belief that referrals would help the students behave more appropriately.

The low referral rate group had the same management processes at their disposal, but did not hold the position that referrals will extinguish misbehavior. Their sensemaking called upon them to ask the students to respond in any number of appropriate ways, and then move on with class. These teachers had the same number or

fewer incidences of student misbehavior as the high referral rate group of teachers, yet the misbehavior extinguished in these classrooms with little need for follow-up redirection.

All people, whether students or teachers were subject to emotional highs and lows. All teachers in the study addressed this. The high referral group devoted more effort trying to work through students' bad moods or anger. The other teachers focused more on how their own emotions impacted their communication with the students. They tended to leave the students alone a few moments and then invite the students to engage with the class activity. They were personally committed to not write a referral or reprimand a student while they were angry.

The teachers in the high referral group issued directives and threats (although they did not consider telling students they would receive consequences for further misbehavior as threats). In contrast, the low referral teachers asked the students to remind the teacher of the rules. This proved to soften resistance and enable the student to effectively participate in class. The type of verbal engagement teachers initiated with students impacted student behavior and the propensity for writing referrals.

Cultural differences contributed to teachers' decisions to issue discipline referrals. The teachers who wrote a large number of discipline referrals discounted the need for teachers to display cultural sensitivity or even an understanding of cultural differences between students' home culture and school culture. Further, they took the position that the classroom is like a place of employment where the employee must do what the boss says, regardless of their cultural norms. This group felt they were

conditioning their students for future workplace rigors. The low referral group, by comparison, shared ownership of the classroom with their students and received a healthy cooperation. They maintained high standards while honoring the students' cultural norms at the same time. Their aim was more for the student to participate in learning more than for the student to meet arbitrary behavioral standards.

All teachers in the study were comfortable with their procedures and the ensuing results, whether they were in the high referral group or the low referral group. The sense they made of the institutional and personal norms influenced their student management processes. These processes, in turn, impacted student behavior.



## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

#### **Overview of the Study**

The intent of this case study was to examine the processes teachers used to make sense of discipline. This study was designed to view discipline referral writing from the teachers' perspectives. Although a great deal of research has been conducted on school discipline, very little has been done on teachers' decisions regarding how they responded to student misbehavior. Further, unlike other studies conducted on teachers, this qualitative study examined the teachers' sensemaking for writing discipline referrals. The data collected were important in understanding the context surrounding consequences for classroom misbehavior. The results of this study add to existing scholarship related to school discipline by qualitatively analyzing teachers in their decision-making regarding discipline. Much of the extant literature is quantitative in methodology and focuses on volume of referrals rather than the processes involved in referrals (Fabelo et al. 2011).

Discipline is a complex issue of policies and procedures which warrants its own body of scholarship. Most studies on discipline frame the issue as a vehicle of inequity among social and ethnic differences. Several problems arise from this model. First of all, the number of precipitating behaviors differs among both faculty and students, and the number of discipline referrals may correlate to rule violations according to social and ethnic differences yielding the differences null. Fabelo et al. (2011) noted that even schools with similar demographic compositions of teachers and students differ in the

amounts of referrals processed. In addition, teachers differ in their definitions of misbehavior and have varying thresholds for the amount of off-task student behaviors they tolerate before intervening.

The data in this study were examined using Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory as a framework for analysis. Weick (1995) claimed that sensemaking is invoked when a current state of events is disrupted and the reason for the interruption is identified in written or spoken language. In the present study, student misbehavior threatened to disrupt the flow of classroom events. The instructor, as a sensemaker then decided which of his or her own behaviors to invoke in response to the interruption. Finally, either further verbal deliberation or substitute action was invoked in order to resume flow or initiate a new flow. This last step consisted of either verbal conferences with students or included written referrals. Sensemaking theory is uniquely suited for studying teachers as they respond to classroom misbehavior. Although the argument may be made that discipline is a subjective matter, the elements contributing to its subjectivity impact educational outcomes.

Although qualitative research does not attempt to completely generalize across a population, looking at the data through Weick's (1995) theoretical framework allows for analysis and generalizations within similar contexts. Sensemaking is valuable in all disciplines (Ancona, 2012) and education is no exception; the micro analysis of discipline processes using sensemaking theory revealed differences in the ways teachers make sense of disruptions. Data was recognizable by looking at the principles and themes of the theoretical framework and is anchored within the context. Further, if the

data are valuable within a recognizable context, then it qualifies to be realized and actualized within that framework. Particularly, the data analyzed here within this framework provide a deeper understanding of both school discipline and teacher sensemaking.

### **Summary of Findings**

Over half of all students in Texas secondary schools serve at least one suspension between their seventh and twelfth grade years (Fabelo, et al., 2011). The present study did not attempt to quantify amounts of referrals, but instead sought to determine why some teachers wrote fewer referrals than others who taught the same students in the same school. Using sensemaking theory, at least four differences in decision-making relative to classroom management were discovered (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obsfeld, 2005). Delpit (2006) found teachers regard academic mastery on higher regard than do students, and the tension this created in teacher-student interactions contributed to teacher frustration because of misunderstandings and misaligned priorities. The researcher expected to find differences, yet the findings were surprising. The reason teachers wrote referrals was more dependent on the teachers' responses to minor disruptions than originally anticipated. This finding shed light on previous research that demonstrated differences in amounts of discipline according to social and racial demographics (Kern & Clemens, 2007; Rausch & Skiba, 2004; Skiba & Sprague, 2008). Schools' institutional norms also influenced the processes teachers were comfortable in following (Terry & Hogg, 2001).

Throughout the data analysis, the researcher found commonalities in participant comments. In particular, the teachers who issue many discipline referrals' sensemaking operated uniformly within their own group, and the teachers who issued few discipline referrals' sensemaking operated similarly within their own group. Yet, remarkable differences emerged when comparing data among the two groups. The researcher identified the commonalities and differences because they permeated all research questions. Yet the commonalities were not specific to only one question. These commonalities and differences which were viewed collectively and within the framework of sensemaking comprised the study findings.

**Classroom management processes.** Neither group of teachers tolerated more student misbehavior than the other, but one group wrote many more referrals than the teachers in the other group. This is consistent with Rausch and Skiba's (2004) findings about differences in discipline practices. Teachers noted vastly different behaviors from their students based on the ways the teacher responded to misbehavior, which agrees with Brophy's (1986) findings. Although all teachers in both groups listed similar discipline management procedures as part of their discipline management, the high and low referral rate groups followed their own procedures differently, a result predicted by Costenbader and Markson's (1988) research. The teachers who wrote many referrals emphasized rules and consequences when addressing misbehavior (Costenbader & Markson, 1988), whereas the teachers who wrote few referrals learned why the student was being disruptive. Once a rule and consequence was recited to the offending student, a high referral rate teacher was then obligated to follow through with the consequence,

which was often a referral. The low referral rate teachers asked students what was bothering them and attempted to help the student remedy the situation, encouraged cooperation from the students, and often these actions minimized further misbehavior.

Consistent with Weick's (1995) study on sensemaking in different contexts, the sensemaking used by the group who wrote many referrals called upon removal of the student who disrupted the flow of activities as expediently as possible. Also consistent with Weick's (1995) study of sensemaking in other contexts, the sensemaking used by the group who did not write many referrals led them to resolve the underlying cause of the misbehavior and an agreement to fully participate in class. Both groups of teachers executed the following pattern of action: a) warned and redirected the students, b) repeated the rules, consequences, and expected behavior, c) conferenced with the student, d) notified a parent of the issue, and e) issued a referral for the misbehavior. Although the low referral rate teachers claimed to use these five steps in their discipline management plans, they successfully resumed class flow with the conference. The parent call and referral were not needed. The teachers who wrote few referrals felt they had more immediate resolution and return of flow because of their choices and actions.

Conversely, the teachers who wrote many referrals felt they had more immediate resolution (Losen, 2011) because of their choices and actions. The teachers who wrote many referrals did not acknowledge any problems and inconveniences the referrals may have caused. Once the referral was issued, the case was regarded as closed and issue seemed to be resolved, as consistent with McCallum (1993). The teachers who wrote few referrals, on the other hand, considered these other issues and chose to resolve the

misbehavior themselves. They preferred for the students not to miss instruction time and learning opportunities, occupy administrators' time, or consume valuable school resources while serving the suspensions.

**The groups differ in their consideration of moods.** Before initiating verbal redirection, the teachers who wrote few referrals used sensemaking in a way that was sensitive to current emotional states and cultural norms, whether or not they or the students were angry at the time. This sensitivity was consistent with prior research conducted by Monroe and Obidah (2004). If teachers were angered by the student, they gave themselves time to cool down and vice versa.

The teachers who wrote many referrals used sensemaking to consider the referral and subsequent consequence as a break for both the teacher and the student. It was easier to write a referral when teachers or students were emotionally charged as Noguera (1995) found in a study on school violence. The referral was an almost immediate resolution of the disruption and this group's sensemaking led the teachers to feel as if writing a referral contributed to forward progress of that day's lesson.

**The groups differ in upholding the students' or the institution's honor.** High referral rate teachers' use of sensemaking demanded punitive consequences in order to honor the institution's traditions and rules. Resolution within the immediate context and without punitive consequences was the preferred course of action for the teachers who wrote few referrals. The differing, almost oppositional results of sensemaking were predictable based on the existing sensemaking research (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obsfeld, 2005). The teachers who wrote many referrals used sensemaking to

emphasize the established protocol of conducting a quiet, teacher-controlled class. These participants noted how students needed to learn to follow school rules in order to be able to function in what they called the “real world”. The teachers who wrote few referrals employed sensemaking in a manner as to honor their students’ home cultures, which may be louder and include more movement on the students’ parts. These participants noted how their students valued personal honor more than material things and framed their interactions with the students accordingly, as also found by Monroe and Obidah (2004).

Public schools offer a great deal of freedom for teachers to employ and follow policies (Fabelo, et al., 2011). Sensemaking can honor the procedures one generation of teachers passes to the next without encountering resistance. This allows for certain established procedures to carry more clout than helping students succeed in the classroom. Sensemaking also allows teachers the flexibility to creatively resolve conflict or disruption without resorting to the traditional means of referring problems to the principal, and this agrees with Weick’s (1995) model of sensemaking in other contexts.

**The groups differ in their perceptions of how referrals benefit students.** The low referral rate group believed that student misbehavior was best resolved in the classroom, involving no other parties than the teacher and student. The high referral rate group’s position was strikingly different: misbehavior left the teacher with no choice other than to write a referral and the students benefitted from the referral.

The teachers’ sensemaking differed in regard to the benefits they claimed students received from getting a referral. The teachers who wrote few referrals expressed

skepticism about any purported benefits to students. The high referral rate group, in contrast, was confident that students benefitted from receiving consequences. Also, these teachers benefitted by getting a break from a tiresome student when the student was sent to the office, as Ogbu (1995) found.

Despite the fact that Fabelo et al. (2011) found no evidence of behavioral improvement following referrals, these teachers maintained that the students benefitted by learning that their actions bring real consequences. Also, they felt that teachers were obligated to write a referral at the end of their discipline management process. As predicted by Skiba and Peterson (1999), this was a matter of honor for these teachers.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

There will always be a segment of the student population who engage in misbehavior. The severity of misbehavior, the potential for significant disruption of learning, and teachers' attempts to manage the behavior will continue to warrant research. Teachers have options other than to follow a check-list type list of procedures when addressing disciplinary concerns and it is not always best handled by the principal's office. In keeping with Fabelo et al. (2011) as well as Rausch and Skiba (2004), the teachers in this study agreed that discipline referrals do not stop student misbehavior.

This research may be used to create an instrument capable of informing school administrators about teaching-candidates' likely reaction in classroom scenarios.

This present qualitative case study is not exhaustive. This topic is suitable for further research using a number of themes and theories. Questions still exist concerning



how teachers who are successful with classroom discipline learn their techniques and if unsuccessful teachers can learn or adopt more successful techniques. Research in the areas of teacher ethics may demonstrate differences. For example, teachers may intuitively tend toward ethics of either mercy or justice, and these biases may impact their approaches to student behavior management.

This study may be replicated using teachers who work with students in elementary and high schools. Disciplinary policies vary with the age of the students; therefore the results from this study may not correlate with teachers of students at older or younger ages. Also, a study of administrators' sensemaking when attending to discipline referrals and assigning consequences would contribute to the literature on school discipline.

If faculty members want to help students engage more successfully in classroom learning, they must adopt different procedures than those commonly used in education. This is particularly true among teachers or campuses which experience a high volume of student referrals. Adopting different procedures might alleviate the problem reported in Fabelo et al. (2011) regarding the overuse of out-of-class discipline. Further research is needed to examine the techniques teachers use to learn how to manage student misbehavior without disrupting the students' opportunities to learn.

### **Significance of the Research**

This study does not solve student discipline, but it does offer a look into the ways teachers make sense of and inform their own decision-making when attending to student misbehavior. Identifying how teachers approach discipline and their classroom

management efforts has deepened existing understanding of how teachers manage student misbehavior. It is time to stop thinking about discipline without considering the potential benefits or damage to the student. Instructors have a responsibility to seriously consider their role in encouraging healthy, productive student behavior. In addition, when students violate the teacher-imposed norms of a classroom, it is important to understand why the violations occurred in the first place. The task is not easy, but a student-centered learning environment demands the effort.

Studying faculty decision-making regarding student discipline through the lens of sensemaking, therefore, can frame the issue of discipline as a complex, multi-layered problem. The students' needs for quality education along with a healthy respect for their values must be components of educational design. Discipline management is a crucial component of pedagogical design, for students do not learn when they are in trouble. Students' academic success requires educators to provide functional channels and avenues in order for the students to navigate the schooling process. If educators want their students to behave within certain parameters of conduct, educators must behave in ways to warrant reciprocity. Unless educators guide students to form good habits of behavior, the problems of discipline and inequities in education will persist.

### **Conclusion**

The central focus of this record of study was to examine the sensemaking of teachers when their students misbehaved in class. The findings revealed that teachers who wrote a large number of referrals and teachers who wrote few discipline referrals used sensemaking differently. There was a relationship between the teacher's procedures

for attending student misbehavior in class. Due to the nature of the results, it is important to continue efforts to research teacher ethics. Further, this study is in agreement with Rausch and Skiba (2004) among those to concur that additional research is needed on the impact teacher responses to student behavior.

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APPENDIX A

APPROVAL LETTER FROM SCHOOL DISTRICT TO INTERVIEW TEACHERS

EMPLOYED WITH THE DISTRICT

Navasota Independent School District

*Navasota ISD Central Office*

Denise Morgan, Ed.D. -Executive Director

To: William F. Russell, Director of Student Recovery and Retention

From: Dr. Denise Morgan, Executive Director

CC: Rory S. Gesch, Superintendent

Date: August 13, 2012

Re: Approval of Application to Conduct Research in Navasota ISD

Your request to conduct the following research project in Navasota ISD has been approved.

Title:

**A STUDY OF TEACHER PERCEPTIONS AND RESPONSES TO STUDENT  
CLASSROOM MISBEHAVIOR IN A SIXTH THROUGH EIGHTH GRADE  
TEXAS MIDDLE SCHOOL**

Summary of Protocol and Data Collection:

As a Problem of Practice, this research will be conducted on the campus of which the researcher has been principal. The research will consist of two sets of individual interviews of six purposefully selected teachers and one pair of triadic focused groups from those six participants. This process will take place in order to qualitatively determine elements necessary to inform a plan by which a more effective and equitable classroom discipline management process may be devised. Audio recording will be the

means of data collection. Data will be analyzed according to research proven methods of analysis and all measures will be taken to ensure accuracy, validity, and an adherence to ethical standards.

As you pursue this project, please refer to the conditions listed below:

Keep Dr. Morgan, Executive Director, informed of all activities involved with the project.

Data collection for this study will take place on Navasota ISD property after school hours during the 2012-2013 school-year. No students or school personnel will be present during data collection. Data will be collected using an audio recorder.

You may only contact informants once. Invitations and recruitments will be made through telephone calls.

Data will be collected using voice recordings.

The researcher has no limitations or restrictions.

Practice confidentiality while conducting the various steps necessary to complete the project.

The district will receive a copy of the stamped, approved IRB document.

The district assumes no liability associated with the study.

There are no time restrictions associated with the study.

The district will receive the results of the study, but no other benefits.

Use a random code system to record data collected. Never use any identifying information such as names or Navasota ISD identification numbers.

---

Signature of District Representative

---

Date

## APPENDIX B

### INFORMATION SHEET / CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

#### **Title of Research Study:**

A STUDY OF TEACHER PERCEPTIONS AND RESPONSES TO STUDENT  
CLASSROOM MISBEHAVIOR IN A SIXTH THROUGH EIGHTH GRADE TEXAS  
MIDDLE SCHOOL

#### **Principal Investigator**

William Folsom Russell - doctoral student, Texas A&M University

#### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this form is to provide you (as a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research and to record the consent of those who agree to be involved in this study. You have been asked to participate in a research study about classroom behaviors and discipline. The purpose of this study is to investigate what classroom behaviors teachers perceive to affect the generation of discretionary disciplinary referrals. The study will also be used to generate a behavior management plan.

You were selected to be a possible participant because you served as a teacher at Navasota Junior High School for each of the past three academic years.

#### **What will I be asked to do?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in two 45 minute semi-structured individual interviews, and one 45 minute focus group including you and two other teaching colleagues from the same campus.

Your participation will be audio recorded and transcribed. It is not mandatory to have the interview audio taped; if you do not wish to have your interview audio taped the researcher will take manual notes of your interview and answers.

**What are the risks involved in this study?**

The risks associated with this study are minimum and not greater than the informants' feeling uncomfortable as they discuss their experiences with students.

**What are the possible benefits of this study?**

Informants will not receive any direct, tangible benefits from participating in this study. However, potential benefits to the educational field will be discovery of what are the best practices and programs to motivate, encourage, and support junior high school students in their academic and school-related endeavors..

**Do I have to participate?**

No. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without our current or future relations with Texas A & M University being affected.

**Who will know about my participation in this research study?**

This study is confidential. Confidentiality will be maintained through the use of a number coding system to identify informants. Two other participants in a focus group discussion will necessarily be aware of your participation, as you will necessarily be aware of their participation. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only William F. Russell, the researcher, will have access to the records and the data.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only William F. Russell, the researcher, will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept for one year and then erased or destroyed.

**Whom do I contact with questions about the research?**

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact William F. Russell (903)870-8489, or via e-mail at russellj@navasotaisd.org.

**Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?**

This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A & M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact these offices at (979) 458-4067 or irb@tamu.edu.

**Participation**

Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to our satisfaction. If you would like to be in the study please sign in the spaces provided for informants.

Name and signature of person who explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature and printed name of Principal Investigator

Date

**You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. Your signature on this page indicates that you understand what you are being asked to do, and you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.**

\_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name and Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C

SUBJECT ISD DISCIPLINE POLICY

Subject ISD

093904

STUDENT DISCIPLINE

FO

(LOCAL)

A District employee shall adhere to the following general guidelines when imposing discipline:

A student shall be disciplined when necessary to improve the student's behavior, to maintain order, or to protect other students, school employees, or property.

A student shall be treated fairly and equitably. Discipline shall be based on an assessment of the circumstances of each case. Factors to consider shall include:

The seriousness of the offense;

The student's age;

The frequency of misconduct;

The student's attitude;

The potential effect of the misconduct on the school environment;

Requirements of Chapter 37 of the Education Code; and

The Student Code of Conduct adopted by the Board.

Before a student under 18 is assigned to detention outside regular school hours, notice shall be given to the student's parent to inform him or her of the reason for the detention and permit arrangements for necessary transportation. CONDUCT

At the beginning of the school year and throughout the school year as necessary, the Student Code of Conduct shall be:

Posted and prominently displayed at each campus or made available for review in the principal's office, as required by law; and

Made available on the District's Web site and/or as hard copy to students, parents, teachers, administrators, and to others on request.

Revisions to the Student Code of Conduct approved by the Board during the year shall be made available promptly to students and parents, teachers, administrators, and others.

Throughout the Student Code of Conduct and discipline policies, the term "parent" includes a parent, legal guardian, or other person having lawful control of the child.

Corporal punishment may be used as a discipline management technique in accordance with this policy and the Student Code of Conduct.

Corporal punishment shall not be administered to a student whose parent has submitted to the principal a signed statement for the current school year prohibiting the use of corporal punishment with his or her child. The parent may reinstate permission to use corporal punishment at any time during the school year by submitting a signed statement to the principal.

Corporal punishment shall be limited to spanking or paddling the student and shall be administered in accordance with the following guidelines:

The student shall be told the reason corporal punishment is being administered.

Corporal punishment shall be administered only by the principal or designee.

Corporal punishment shall be administered only by an employee who is the same sex as the student.

The instrument to be used in administering corporal punishment shall be approved by the principal.

Corporal punishment shall be administered in the presence of one other District professional employee and in a designated place out of view of other students.

The disciplinary record reflecting the use of corporal punishment shall include any related disciplinary actions, the corporal punishment administered, the name of the person administering the punishment, the name of the witness present, and the date and time of punishment.

Within the scope of an employee's duties, a District employee may physically restrain a student if the employee reasonably believes restraint is necessary in order to:

Protect a person, including the person using physical restraint, from physical injury.

Obtain possession of a weapon or other dangerous object.



Remove a student refusing a lawful command of a school employee from a specific location, including a classroom or other school property, in order to restore order or to impose disciplinary measures.

Control an irrational student.

Protect property from serious damage.

With the approval of the principal and Superintendent, sponsors and coaches of extracurricular activities may develop and enforce standards of behavior that are higher than the District-developed Student Code of Conduct and may condition membership or participation in the activity on adherence to those standards. Extracurricular standards of behavior may take into consideration conduct that occurs at any time, on or off school property. Extracurricular behavioral standards shall not have the effect of discriminating on the basis of gender, race, color, disability, religion, ethnicity, or national origin.

A student shall be informed of any extracurricular behavior standards at the beginning of each school year or when the student first begins participation in the activity. A student and his or her parent shall sign and return to the sponsor or coach a statement that they have read the extracurricular behavior standards and consent to them as a condition of participation in the activity.

Standards of behavior for an extracurricular activity are independent of the Student Code of Conduct. Violations of these standards of behavior that are also violations of the Student Code of Conduct may result in independent disciplinary actions.

A student may be removed from participation in extracurricular activities or may be excluded from school honors for violation of extracurricular standards of behavior for an activity or for violation of the Student Code of Conduct.

Video and audio recording equipment shall be used for safety purposes to monitor student behavior on District property.

The District shall post signs notifying students and parents about the District's use of video and audio recording equipment. Students shall not be notified when the equipment is turned on.

The principal shall review recordings as needed, and evidence of student misconduct shall be documented. A student found to be in violation of the District's Student Code of Conduct shall be subject to appropriate discipline.

Recordings shall remain in the custody of the campus principal and shall be maintained as required by law. A parent or student who wishes to view a recording in response to disciplinary action taken against the student may request such access under the procedures set out by law. [See FL(LEGAL)]

## APPENDIX D

### **First Interview Questions:**

The two questions for the first round of semi-structured interviews:

Describe the factors influencing teachers' decisions to write disciplinary referrals on students.

Describe benefits teachers believe students receive through discretionary referrals.

### **Second Interview Questions:**

The two questions for the second round of semi-structured interviews:

Describe the typical behaviors students exhibit prior to, and leading up to the issuance of a discipline referral.

Describe your typical responses while student behavior is escalating to the point of the need to write a discipline referral.

### **Focus Group Questions:**

The two questions for the focus-group discussions:

Discuss what classroom protocols should be implemented in all classes for the purpose of reducing student misbehavior and in-turn, increasing on-task behavior and student academic success.

Discuss how administrative procedures may be implemented to ensure the fidelity of the proposed classroom protocols to reduce student misbehavior.

APPENDIX E

VITA

**WILLIAM FOLSOM RUSSELL**

705 E. Washington Avenue  
Navasota, Texas 77868  
Telephone: (903)780-8489 / e-mail: jimandleahrussell@yahoo.com

**EDUCATION**

5/2007 Masters Degree – Educational Leadership  
Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches Texas  
5/1989 Bachelor of Arts Harding University, Searcy Arkansas

**CERTIFICATIONS**

Superintendent  
Principal  
ELA (Grades 6-12)  
ELA Reading (Grades 6-12)  
Generic Special Education (Grades 6-12)

**PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

06/12 to present- Director of Federal Programs and Student Services  
Navasota ISD, Navasota Texas  
05/09 to 06/12- Principal  
Navasota Junior High School, Navasota Texas  
06/06 to 05/09- Assistant Principal  
Navasota Junior High School, Navasota Texas

**AFFILIATIONS**

Texas Association of Secondary School Principals  
Texas Middle School Association, Past President ESC VI Chapter