

## **Teacher Behaviors and Adolescent Girls Who Are At-Risk**

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### **Abstract**

This study inquired into the effects of teacher behaviors on the academic and social performance of incarcerated juvenile adolescent girls prior to their incarceration. Data were collected from 12 adolescent girls who participated in at least two (no more than three) individual interviews. Qualitative data analysis identified five overarching themes which revealed that some teachers are negatively influencing the academic and social adolescent girls who are at risk for school failure and juvenile delinquency. Implications and contributions of the study's findings are discussed.

### **Introduction**

*Maybe "Carol can't read" because she has teachers who do not believe in her academic and social abilities and interacted with her based on their emotions rather than their ethical charge as an educational professional. Anderson, 2005*

A vast body of research indicates that student behavior and academic performance are influenced by the quality of teacher-student relationships (Jones, 2000). According to Fisher (2001), constructive teacher-student relationships are linked to more positive student responses in school and improved academic achievement. In a study conducted by Crosnoe, Johnson, and Elder's (2004), data were analyzed from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) investigating the effects of teacher-student relationships on achievement and behavior. Their sample contained data from 10,991 adolescents from 126 schools across the United States. Achievement was defined by the student's grade point average (GPA) and behavior problems were defined by the number of times a student was suspended or expelled from school. A self-reporting instrument called the In Home Interview done as a follow-up to the initial Add Health study gathered achievement and discipline data. An analysis of the results determined that student - teacher bonding has a positive impact on both achievement and discipline. The authors suggest that this student - teacher bond may act as a protective resource that mediates against a child getting into disciplinary trouble.

In a similar study, Wentzel (1998) studied the relationship between students' perceptions of support from interpersonal relationships with teachers and academic motivation. She administered the School Motivation Scale to 167 students in the spring of their sixth grade year. The following spring the students were given an achievement

measure. The results of the study suggest that students learn more when positive interpersonal relationships with teachers exist.

Skinner and Belmont (1993) conducted a study which investigated three dimensions of teacher behavior (i.e., involvement, structure, and autonomy support). The researchers investigated how the three dimensions of behavior affected the behavioral and emotional development of 144 students from third through fifth graders. When teacher perceptions and student perceptions were compared, a significant relationship between student motivation and teacher behavior existed. The overall findings of this study revealed that students are more enthusiastic in class and have a generally happier disposition when teachers are warm and affectionate.

### **The status of negative teacher behaviors towards adolescent girls at-risk**

The notion that positive teacher conduct can produce a warm and inviting classroom as well as increase student achievement is well-documented in educational literature, however, behaviors that some teachers engage in that are seen as less than positive by their students is rarely documented in educational literature. After a keyword search of '*negative teacher behaviors and student achievement*' for the years 1995 – 2005 on EBSCO – ERIC no articles were found specifically investigating this topic. In the past decade, researchers who have mentioned anything about negative teacher behaviors are usually mentioning something about the topic after they have presented an excess of data that supports the fact that positive teacher behaviors have a positive effect on student achievement and social skills (See Cotton, 2002). Possible reasons for this oversight could be due to (a) individuals in the educational profession are in denial that such teachers exist, (b) researchers believe that the number of teachers that fall into this category is so small that the number is not significant enough to make a difference in the academic and social lives of students who are on the recipient end of these teachers, and/or (c) the students who were on the receiving end of such behavior have not been given a voice to speak out against such educational neglect. Whatever the reason or reasons are, it is the authors' contention that educators should not dismiss the fact that students (no matter how small in number) are being treated unjustly by some teachers. We are of the opinion that if one student's education is suffering at the hand of an unprofessional and uncaring teaching that that one student is too many! According to Cotton (2002), most teachers are not aware of the costly influence their negative behaviors have on the academic and social growth of their students. We believe if teachers became more aware that their behavior could be negatively influencing a student both academically and socially they would likely reflect on their actions and change.

During the last two decades, the research literature on the effects of teacher behaviors toward adolescent girls who are at risk for school failure and juvenile delinquency is sparse (practically nonexistent). In an effort to provide more information on this topic, the authors decided to investigate how teacher behaviors can influence the academic and social performance of adolescent girls who are at risk for school failure and juvenile delinquency before they were processed through the juvenile justice system.

## **Theoretical Framework of Study**

The theoretical framework that guides this study is based on Bronfenbrenner's (Paquette & Ryan, 2001) bioecological systems model. This model defines complex "layers" of the environment, each having an effect on child development. One of these layers is described as the immediate environment that comes after the center layer (the child) that includes family, school, and religion. For the purposes of this study, we have decided to look at the school as our primary focus of our investigation. Since the formation of relationships with adults outside of a student's family is typically developed at school and the length of time students spend in school is substantial it becomes imperative that teachers and other school personnel be cognizant of the lasting effects their interactions can have on students.

The positive impact that school personnel can have on the academic and social success of adolescents at risk for school failure and juvenile delinquency was studied by Benard (1997) and Seita (2005); however, research investigating the impact that negative teacher behaviors have on the academic and social performance of students as well as the life choices they make is scarce. We know from our review that teachers view girls differently than they do boys which leads to differentiated treatment for girls (Sadker & Sadker, 1995; Bennett, Gottesman, Rock, & Cerullo, 1993; Morgan, 2001). What we do not know is the effect teachers and other school personnel (e.g., counselors, and principals) with poor interpersonal behaviors have on adolescent girls who are at risk for school failure and/or juvenile delinquency. This study is an effort to elucidate this concern.

## **Research approach**

Due to the sensitive nature and vulnerability of the population, the first author was meticulous in her efforts to secure human subjects' approval. Approval had to be obtained from the university as well as the Department of Corrections (DOC). The arduous process included three submissions and subsequent revisions prior to human subjects' approval from the university and the DOC. The development and content of the research protocol was of extreme priority to the human subjects' committee for both institutions. The protocol was designed to allow these young girls to freely express themselves regarding their school experience without incriminating themselves. Thus, the protocol was carefully developed and then peer-reviewed by two of the first author's colleagues.

Two one-on-one interviews (approximately an hour each) were conducted with each participant. Interviews were mostly conducted in a vacant classroom or office in the facility. The interview process remained constant throughout the study. Once all data were collected, the authors copied each set of interviews and read each participant's interviews separately looking for commonalities. The qualitative design orientation used in this research was interpretive (see Merriam, 2001) in that interest was placed on the participants' experiences with teachers and how those experiences influenced their success or lack of success in school. An inductive position was taken and an attempt was

made to build toward a more general conception from our intuitive understandings gained from the unique situations of each of the interviewees. Similar to Merriam's belief, we too believe that "research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education" (Merriam, 2001, p.1).

### *Setting and Participants*

This study was conducted in 2003 and 2004 in a Midwestern US city (population over 1 million). This study took place in a juvenile correctional facility for girls. Twelve adolescent females who were confined to the facility voluntarily participated in this study. Our sampling was purposeful in that we sought to recruit participants who were confined to a juvenile correctional facility for girls. All participants were randomly selected from a pool of 120 adolescent females who were confined to the same facility. The participants' ages ranged from 13 to 18 years. Seven of the participants were white and five were black. The nine of the participants came from single parent homes while three of the participants lived with extended family members.

Of the initial twelve selected, one was released from the facility before the study was complete and was replaced by the same random selection process used with the initial sample. The first author met with each potential participant to explain the study and invite her to participate. The researcher was careful not to exert any pressure on the participants and to distance herself from the facility administration so as to maintain her status with the girls as an impartial outsider. All the girls selected agreed to participate through written consent.

### *Interview procedures and data analysis*

A structured (meaning that questions were asked exactly as proposed to the human subjects committee and were not changed due to the sensitive nature of the participants) interview protocol was used to conduct the interviews. The protocol included neutral questions and statements that elicited information about the participant's demographic background. Examples include: Tell me about you mother and father. How many brothers and sisters do you have? The protocol also included 'force-choice questions that required participants to state specific events that happened while they were in school outside of the facility and their feelings toward teachers and other school personnel. Examples include: Do you feel you learn better from female teachers or male teachers? Why? What are some of the characteristics you would like teachers to have? The protocol was developed and used by the first author during the course of the study.

Analysis involved each author reading the interview data several times with the task of identifying emerging patterns. The authors then met weekly in extended meetings to discuss the patterns found, to confirm or disconfirm each author's interpretation of the data, compare the coding systems used, and come to an agreement on the system to be used for the final analysis.

## Teacher behaviors and adolescent girls who are at risk

Each of the twelve girls interviewed had unique experiences with and opinions of various school personnel. Nonetheless, in exploring the interview data, definite threads surfaced and themes could be identified as universally present in most of the participants' interviews. During the process of analysis, six preliminary themes emerged which were later collapsed into five overarching themes: 1) If they don't like me, why should I like them? 2) Early adolescence is critical to academic and social success, 3) Don't misjudge me, I am worthy!, 4) Parent/student/school relationships lacked cohesion, and 5) Extracurricular activities were absent in the participants lives.

*If they don't like me, why should I like them?*

When talking about their general interactions with teachers and other school personnel before their incarceration, most of the girls stated that their interactions with teachers and other school personnel after elementary school were not good. When asked to share experiences they had with teachers and other school personnel during school hours outside of the facility, Tavionia said, "Teachers did not like me and I did not like them. They thought I was a menace to society - bebe's kid."

Jamie shared with the interviewer, "Some teachers showed they didn't like me and so I showed I didn't like them even though in the inside I did." Jamie perceived teacher behaviors such as not wanting to help her, bringing out the fact that her family is not rich in front of others, and sending her and her sister to the office for their lice problem while other kids watched as signs that teachers didn't like her. Lisa expressed similar dislike feelings, "Some teachers I just didn't get along with. I didn't think they liked me." For Lisa, the way teachers acted when she asked them a question or turned in her homework was an indicator of teachers' dislike feelings.

When asked, Tavionia responded,

... I had a lot of teachers that I didn't like because they used to suspend me for stupid reasons (i.e. for eating in class). I hated Mr. P. I used to eat in his class, and slurp on pop in his class and chew bubble gum... Ms. F. I couldn't stand her. She was a snob -- she thought she was better than everyone else, she was white and she was mean. I can't stand her- she used to kick me out of class everyday. That's probably why I can't do math now.

Kim indicated similar feelings,

I did not have relationships with teachers. I did not like teachers. I didn't want to listen to them; I didn't want to hear what they had to say... Ms. B. she used to paddle the kids and she hit me with a ruler and it broke on my leg... I hated all teachers.

Skie indicated similar feelings of dislike by her principal, "Principals -- never got along with any of them. I don't know why they just didn't like me. Some of them say I was a bully."

Tavionia commented, "The dean, I couldn't stand her -- she would suspend me for petty things."

*Early adolescence is critical to academic and social success*

In soliciting information about the grade in which the participants started getting into the most trouble in school, over half of the participants reported the sixth grade. Kelly reported,

Well, my sixth grade is when I started getting in trouble. I liked school, but I never thought I fit the needs of school because I have a learning disability. I thought like I had a LD so I never put forth any effort in schoolwork. The only class I put in effort was art. I was involved in stealing, running away... All my other classes I didn't care for. After 6<sup>th</sup> grade life went way down hill. I started drugs and stuff and didn't pay any attention in class. I started getting into the social life of school and didn't pay attention.

Similarly Kim stated,

Elementary was fun. I made straight As and never got into any trouble. Then, I went to middle school and things got a lot worse. I stopped making As and made straight Fs and got into arguments every day with different girls who wanted to fight me. I sprayed a boy with tear gas and got locked up.

Kelly, one of the participants who reported to start having trouble in 6<sup>th</sup> grade shared her feelings about school and why she started having trouble then, "I just didn't like school... My mother started going to work before we went to school so I just skipped."

Other participants who indicated getting into trouble in earlier grades report the case to be even worse during middle school years. Tavionia stated, "During my middle school years I never had time to know my teachers, I was always getting suspended or they were calling me out of class." Kisha expressed similar problems with management strategies schools used and the time she had lost when she said,

Basically I am in love with school. I always made As and Bs, and on the honor roll and had perfect attendance. Things started getting shaky in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. At that time I started getting in trouble (legal trouble - running away) and going from placement to placement.

*Don't misjudge me, I am worthy!*

Participants were disturbed when they felt they were being judged and bombarded with negative comments by school personnel based on their past educational experiences or on their backgrounds. They wanted the professionals to see the potential in them and try to foster the good traits they had rather than forming opinions based on misconceptions and unfortunate events in their lives. Champaign stated,

Those teachers judged me for the trouble I was getting into and the people I hung out with. I don't know, I just did not like um. I guess it was because they doubted my ability to do their work because I did drugs and got locked up and stuff. I really didn't like Ms. G. because she was judgmental and doubted my ability like the other teachers.

Jamie told the interviewer,

Certain teachers when I was in school didn't help me much at all. Mostly in 7<sup>th</sup> grade ... our family ain't that rich and teachers would bring that out in front of other students. They did not like my sisters and brothers and me because we had problems with lice. They would always send us down to the office to get our heads checked -- any even when it was cleaned up then would send us to the office and all the kids knew why and that's why I tried to get kicked out of class.

Negative comments made by teachers provoked bad behavior by participants while in school and subsequently affected their self-image. Most of the participants felt vulnerable due to these negative comments and felt they were being discriminated against by the teachers based on the teachers' perceptions or misconceptions. Lisa articulated, "I cannot remember her name -- she was my science teacher. She would talk to me any kind of way, she would talk to me like I was stupid or something and she wouldn't do that to others [students]." Sarah commented, "My 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher was mean. I did not like her; she would give an attitude and pick on me." Kelly also had similar comments,

My 6<sup>th</sup> grade history teacher, he never gives us time to work on our pace. He was rude; if you asked him a question he would say 'Not now, I am not answering any questions', he would ignore you, if you were considered a bad student he would ignore you and wouldn't help you.

In most cases students expressed a feeling that professionals underestimated their abilities. They reported that teachers would look at them as if they were stupid, and, in some cases, even conveyed this openly. Skie shared,

My middle school principal, I don't know what's wrong with him, but he didn't like me at all. He used to call me stupid. He always told me I was going to be a low-life like my dad. That I wasn't going to make anything of myself. ... Teachers judge you for who you hang out with.

During another interview Julia said:

Until the seventh grade I got along with all my teachers except for the cheerleading coach who was also a substitute. She was really preppy and rich and she looked down on people and one day in front of the class she told me that I was ignorant and I got mad at her and threw a desk at the chalk board-not at her but -- I was put out of her class for good.

During the interview with KeKe she stated that she couldn't stand most teachers. One teacher, Mrs. -- I really couldn't stand. Something was wrong with her. She would tell me to do something and then when I did it she would fuss at me. She acted like she was a racist. ... she would look at us [KeKe and other students] like we were crazy and talked down to us.

#### *Parent/student/school relationships lacked cohesion*

When participants were asked to share experiences they had in schools outside of the facility, various responses led us to deduce that parents were not always officially informed of their daughter's behavior problems in school. In addition, school personnel did not follow up on documented behavioral infractions with parents in manners that ensured that parents were informed of the school's actions. The following quote is an example of a comment which some of the participants shared that led us to our conclusions:

Kim said, "I was late every day [when she was asked if any teacher or administrator discussed her tardiness with her she responded] Nope, they sent papers to my house [which she intercepted] and they called, but I was there when they called so I hung up on them."

#### *Extracurricular activities were absent in the participants' lives*

A majority of the participants stated that they were not involved in extra curricular activities even though several of them had an interest. We wanted to know what filled their time if they were not involved in school activities. Here is what was stated when the first author elicited responses to the following statement: "Tell me some things you did before and after school."

Kim, before school, I would go to the store, get some food and after school I would go over to one of my friend's house and smoke and drink and go skating. Or I would go to the mall and steal clothes. Kelly: Before school I ... -after school drugs (weed), fight, get drunk. Monica: Before school I would get ready for school, eat, listen to music, dance and go to the bus stop. After school I would smoke cigarettes and weed (only when stressed). Kisha: Before school I would shower, watch videos, and then go to school. After school I would hang out with my boyfriend, have sex, and go the movies, park, or out to eat.

## Implications and contributions of the study

In summary, analyses of interviews revealed a prototype or progression of communication in the girls' accounts of their educational experiences with teachers and other school personnel that indicate: (1) girls who are at risk for school failure and juvenile delinquency need healthy and productive relationships with teachers and other school personnel, (2) identification of girls at risk for school failure and juvenile delinquency needs to take place before they reach the sixth grade, (3) involvement in extracurricular activities could be a deterrent factor in decreasing at risk behaviors in such girls, and (4) teachers and other school personnel need to be cognizant of the influence their behavior (particularly negative behavior) has on such girls.

The idea that a positive teacher-student relationship can help to keep young girls out of trouble is more than just an intuitive notion. The teacher-student relationship has been studied from several different perspectives that have shown the potential contribution a teacher's behavior can make in preventing adolescents from making some bad choices. From student motivation (Skinner & Belmont, 1993) to student achievement (Wentzel, 1998) to student discipline (Crosnoe, Johnson and Elder, 2004) the impact of positive teacher behavior is clear. Crosnoe, Johnson and Elder used the term *protective resource* when describing the relationship that existed between teacher and student in their 2004 study. It is the converse of the notion that a caring relationship with a teacher can protect a student from making some ill-advised choices upon which our study has focused. Sadly, we have shown what can happen in the lives of adolescent girls who have not had the benefits of being involved in such a relationship.

According to the results of various national studies girls at the middle school grades (6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup>) have a significant decline in self-esteem and academic achievement (Backes, 1994, Orenstein, 1994, AAUW, 1991). Reasons for the decline in academic performance and self-esteem are not articulated clearly in the research literature. However, there is evidence to support that teacher behaviors towards girls at this age are less positive than they are toward boys (AAUW, 1991; Orenstein, 1994). Regardless of the reasons for the decline in self-esteem and academic performance of young girls around the middle school years teachers/educators should be proactive in ensuring that these areas of concern are addressed appropriately. Teachers should be cognizant of their interactions with girls at the middle school level to determine if their interactions are up-lifting regarding the girls' self-esteem and academic performance.

Concerning the lack of involvement in extra-curricular activities, most of the girls interviewed in the study had little or no involvement in extra-curricular activities. According to research, students who participate in extra-curricular activities are more likely to have higher academic achievement and a higher attachment and commitment to school (Duncan, 2000; Holloway, 2000). Perhaps, if young girls who are at-risk for school failure and juvenile delinquency were encouraged to participate in after school programs there may be a decline in their deviant behavior, poor school attendance, and their poor academic achievement.

As mentioned earlier, there is a great disparity between the treatment of girls by teachers when compared to their male counterparts. Research explicitly states that girls are called on in class less often than boys, teacher expectations for girls in various academic subject areas are lower for girls than boys, and there is an overall inactive learning process for girls compared to boys in most schools (Sadker & Sadker, 1995). An understanding of how we as teachers might be affecting the academic and social growth of young girls who are at-risk for school failure and juvenile delinquency based on our pedagogical approach may prevent us from falling into the gender bias trap while in the classroom.

This study contributes to the understanding of the educational and social (through teacher relationships) needs of girls who are at risk for school failure and juvenile delinquency by documenting the experiences they had with teachers and other school personnel prior to their incarceration. In addition, it shares how teachers and other school personnel can facilitate better learning environments and school experiences for girls who are at risk. As a final point, we would like to state that it is our hope that through the reading of this study, teachers and other school personnel will reflect on their personal interactions with girls who are challenging to work with concerning all aspects of the education profession. As educators, we need to examine where the pendulum falls with regard to the teacher behavior continuum (i.e., positive or negative). If our findings indicate that the pendulum's placement is in the neutral area or in any area in the negative range, we sincerely anticipate that you will heed to the cries of these girls and change.

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