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The Voices Behind the Labels: Perceptions of Students with Consistent Challenging Behaviors

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Abstract

This study addressed the topic of students with consistent challenging behaviors and their perceptions of school, teachers, education, and needs. The author was a preservice teacher serving her clinical teaching internship in an eighth-grade Spanish Level 1 classroom. The goal of the study was to better understand students with numerous referrals, or that identified as “bad students.” For this study, the author collected data in the form of surveys, student interviews, and classroom observations. The students were asked about their experiences in school, with teachers, and their feelings about their education. Their behavior was also observed. Utilizing the constant comparative method, the author analyzed for major themes, which ultimately included the following: characteristics that the students dislike in teachers, their apathy towards discipline, their acknowledgement of needing teachers and education, desire for agency, their perceptions of the school work given to them, and what they claim they need.
The Voices Behind the Labels: Perceptions of Students with Consistent Challenging Behaviors

It was my eighth-grade year, and as a part of a bridge program to help first-generation, low-income, and minority students become college bound, we had a guest speaker come in to talk to us and complete numerous activities in hopes of building up morale within our group. There was a group of students, the "bad and cool" kids, causing a ruckus, like always. These students had a reputation amongst our class, they were always in trouble, and they were proud of it. While the motivational speaker was trying to share his testimony, this group of students focused on talking, joking, being loud, and making snarky remarks. The man tried to relate to them, tried to explain that he understood, and in the midst of his words David (all names are pseudonyms) slammed a chair on the gym floor and yelled, "Man, shut the fuck up. You don't know shit. You don't understand. You know nothing." As the guest speaker pressed and pressed into David, David angrily yelled his life experiences at the man.

David was a 16-year-old in eighth grade. His mom had lost custody of him because she was a heavy drug user and encouraged him to do drugs at the age of nine; his dad, who had guardianship of him, was in and out of his life. David had a lot going on at home. However, it was not why he "hated school." Truth was he felt that teachers were the reason his mother no longer had custody of him; he couldn’t trust them. He thought that if he were to let that anger go, he was betraying his mother. I don't remember what else happened that day, other than more students spoke up and shared their personal stories. We all ended up hugging, and most of us were crying. Nine years later and that story is my inspiration to understand why particular students behave negatively. In David's life, the teacher was not at fault; she did her job, but
would knowing earlier on David's reasons for hating school, change his teachers' and his educational experience?

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of the students who demonstrated consistent, challenging behaviors at school. In other words, I wanted to know what students that behave badly think. There is research that suggests designing lesson plans with clear expectations, objectives, and discipline, building emotional relationships, and using positive reinforcement, are all practices that can help limit or prevent behavioral challenges, but these are actions done unto the student, in hopes of limiting the bad behavior (Bullock, Zolkoski, Lusk, & Hovey, 2017). These practices don’t consider the voice of the child. My study looked into the students’ perceptions of teachers, education, their needs as students from teachers, and what they thought others could do to relate to them. Specifically, this study aimed to answer the following questions:

- What are the perceptions of students who demonstrate consistent, challenging behaviors at school regarding their teachers and school in general?
  - Sub-question: What do these students say they need from a teacher to be successful?
  - Sub-question: How do they want others to interact with them?

The main research question pertains to the opinions of students that continually receive redirection or consequences for their actions. The sub-questions look to identify potential practices or implementation that could be used to decrease the challenging behaviors. This study explored the opinions and thoughts of students that consistently get in trouble, hoping to develop an understanding of these students and their experiences.
While I was conducting this study, I was completing a yearlong co-teaching placement in an eighth-grade Spanish setting. The middle school was in a small West Texas town populated by about 121,885 people. The middle school where I taught, Marina Middle School (all names have been replaced with pseudonyms) served about 920 students, grades 6-8. The majority of the students were economically disadvantaged, and the campus was dominantly a Hispanic population. For this study, I invited all students to participate, since I needed consent forms to be able to find the students I desired for my research.

Since my first field placement as a preservice teacher education student, and the beginning of my clinical teaching experience I heard teachers vent about the same students, and the stories were always similar. I wondered if it was because I was a new teacher that my heart sided with the students; I wondered to myself if while the teachers vented, they ever considered the students’ personal thoughts. I became interested in the students’ feelings towards the teachers that spoke negatively of them, and I wondered when they began to act the way they did and why. This study served as an opportunity to talk to middle school students about their actions, and feelings, about school and teachers; it was a chance for them to express what they wanted from their educators.

**Literature Review**

In his book, *The Courage to Teach*, Palmer (2017) labels the students that teachers tend to blame as their source of “self-pity, fraudulence, and rage, as the student from hell”(p.42). Palmer (2017) described “the Student from Hell as a universal archetype that can take male or female form…” (p. 43). I looked to previous studies to form an idea of the qualities and specific characteristics of the students that I wanted to research. As I read, research showed that students with consistent, challenging behaviors tend to exhibit the following characteristics: a high maintenance temperament, disruptive behavior, shared demographics, and resistance to teacher
instruction (McClowry et al., 2013). McClowry (2013) explains that students with high maintenance temperament give up on their work quickly or tend to not even start, and react negatively to instruction and situations. Cruz & Rodl, (2018) found that the demographics of these students seem to be Hispanic, African American, or from a low socioeconomic class. Due to the hardship of dealing with students of high maintenance temperament teachers reported a continual feel of loss of control in their classrooms and frustration at the resistance of these students (Bullock, Zolkoski, Lusk, & Hovey, 2017).

Research shows that “91 percent of teachers suffer from stress, and as many as 41 percent of teachers leave their jobs within five years of starting,” suggesting the emotional exhaustion leaves teachers with emotional overload (Rankin, 2018, p.28). Because of the frequency of such situations there is a term for an individual’s “response to great chronic emotional strain” coined by a research study as “burnout” (Schnaider-Levi, Mitnik, Zafrani, Goldman, & Lev-Ari, 2017, p. 75). Due to the strenuous work that teaching requires, educators, overtime, often begin to feel that their effectiveness diminishes (Bullock et al., 2017). Inevitably, as Palmer (2017) wrote, with time the teachers’ negative emotions infiltrate the teacher-student relationship leading to more negative feedback towards students (McClowry et al., 2013), and the teachers’ perceptions become prejudices (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015).

Researchers have attempted to help with students that are more difficult through numerous approaches. Specific resources have encouraged teachers to change their expectations to save themselves some trouble. For example, if the students are not turning in homework, Rankin (2018) suggested not giving any. There have been developments in methods of instruction promoted for use in the classroom. An example of this is the concept of metacognition. Metacognition practices are an approach that supports the students to think on
their own, and about their thought processes through planning, reflection, self-regulation, and monitoring, in turn helping improve students’ learning and engagement (Lauchlan, 2013).

And why do all these ideas exist? Because, a student-teacher relationship is critical in influencing a student’s academic, social, behavioral and emotional development (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015). The tense feelings that come from being burnout further restrain the possibility of a relationship with the students (Schnaider-Levi et al., 2017). The way in which a teacher distinguishes a student bleeds into the relationships they form with their peers (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Also, a teacher's perception of his or her students directly affects the grade that they earn (Keith, Wetherbee, & Kindzia, 1997). For students to thrive academically, they need to feel supported, heard, cared for, and encouraged (Buehler, Fletcher, Johnston, & Weymouth, 2015). Teacher support and relationship affect the school environment, satisfaction, and engagement (Buehler et al., 2015).

The current research has asked teachers about how they feel, about their opinions, and what the "student from hell" looks like to them (Palmer, 2017, p.43). Prior research has been centered on instructional practices that educators can implement in their classroom in hopes of gaining classroom management. With that, there has also been research on teachers’ perceptions of students that demonstrate a challenge in the class. The teachers are able to share who these students are, and how they are affected. Existing research focuses on everything but the students; in my study, I wanted to hear what the students had to say.

**Methods**

This action research study included mostly qualitative data collection and analysis methods, with a couple of numerical aspects; however, no statistical test was needed to analyze data. As I served in my yearlong placement, the students and I formed a relationship; this aided
in the transition for the students to view me as a researcher. In the next sections, I explain my participants, data collection techniques, and how I analyzed the results.

**Participant Selection**

The participants of this study included seven class periods of eighth-grade students in the elective Spanish class setting. In all seven periods, there were a total of 149 students - 84 females and 65 males. The students' ability with Spanish ranged from fluent, to never having had experienced the language. The demographics of my classes were 56 Caucasian, 77 Hispanic, 15 African-American or Black, and one Asian-American. Seventy percent of the students were rated low-income and received free or reduced lunch.

For my study, due to legal issues, I was not allowed to look at the students' records unless their parents had signed the FERPA release form. Due to such circumstances, I invited all my students to participate, in hopes to look at as many records as possible. Parents were asked to give their consent for their students’ records to be accessible to me, and for their student to participate in a survey and possible interview. I also solicited assent from the students to participate in the study. A total of 85 students returned their forms to take the survey, but only 19 were chosen to be observed, and then 13 were picked to be interviewed. The 13 with the highest number of referrals were the ones selected for interviews. From these 13 students six were female and seven were males. Five of the students were Hispanic, two were African American/Black, three were White, and three were mixed. Twelve of these students had more than three referrals for the second semester of the 2018-2019 school year, and one of them had none on record but self-labeled as a problem student and thought he or she had more than 10 referrals due to his or her conduct in class.

**Data Collection**
All the students were invited to participate. From the students that returned the permission slips, I looked at their discipline records and focused on students that had a minimum of three documented disciplinary issues within the second semester of the 2018-1019 school year; I made note of these students for future purposes. All the students that had permission were invited to complete a survey. The survey was a mixture of Likert and open-ended questions (see Appendix A). The topics revolved around the thoughts and opinions of the students about themselves as students, school, higher education, friends, teachers, and classes. The students were encouraged to be honest in their responses.

Once having the responses, I compared what students answered, to the students’ documented disciplinary issues. Based on the students’ opinions of themselves, school, with the most self-reported disciplinary problems, and the students with the most recorded disciplinary matters, I picked 13 students to interview and 19 to observe. The interviews were semi-structured, one-on-one, for about 25 minutes (Hubbard & Power, 2003). The interviews were recorded and were later transcribed (see Appendix B). The questions further digested the themes and the subjects of the survey, giving the students an opportunity to elaborate and share the stories behind their answers. The observations collected were, as well, not structured. Instead, I carried a notepad on hand and tracked the students’ behavior. I noted if they did anything concerning misconduct, misbehavior, positive interactions, and negative interactions. At the end of each class period during passing period, I journaled an overall summary of how the students did that day in class and the events that took place.

**Data Analysis**

From that, the data was analyzed using the constant comparative method, to detect repetitive themes (Hubbard & Power, 2003). I began by using my laptop to produce level 1
codes. For my level 1 codes, I coded chunks of text by labeling them with an overarching phrase; 15-20 level 1 codes emerged from the first 20% of the data. Those codes were used to code the remaining 80% of the data. From the first set of codes I selected three to five codes as my level 2 codes. Level 2 codes were the repetitive patterns or themes that came from the first set of codes, the memos I wrote about those codes will help define them (Tracy, 2009). I did this manually to be able to create separate stacks of information that I thought went together. The data collected from the students’ survey responses, behavioral records, and the behaviors noticed through observations, were graphed to visually see the students’ actions that made up the study (Hendricks, 2017). A codebook served to explain all of the codes and the pieces of data that fell underneath them (see Appendix C). I tried to notice the patterns that these students did and didn't share, and how they represented the findings of my study.

Findings

In the following sections, I describe my findings which include the characteristics that students have not liked in their teachers, their lack of caring towards discipline, their opinions on the school work they have, their desire for independence, their acknowledgment of the teaching profession, and what they perceive they need from their teachers. I also include graphic organizers reflecting my participants’ responses to the survey questions they answered that were not qualitative.

The Teacher from Hell

I was dumbfounded by how many teachers yell, according to the students. During the interview and survey process many students expressed their dislike of teachers with specific qualities. Out of the 13 students I interviewed, nine mentioned their disdain towards teachers yelling in the classroom or yelling at them. For example, Stacy said, “They can be too hard on a
student, and they are quick to snap and like they don't understand." When they would share, I do not like so and so, and I would press for more information, I would get answers like, “He yells at me”, and “She yells too much.” Simply the word “yell”, not including synonyms like shout, came up 33 different times in my interviews and a couple of times on the surveys.

Before my research, I thought that students didn't like teachers because of the work they gave or the subject they taught. I figured if they hate math, they hate their math teacher. However, neither one of those topics came up as to why the students had negative things to say about their teachers. There was a point in an interview with Billy when he was talking about his math teacher, Mr. C, who gave a lot of work, and when I asked him, “Is that why you don’t like him?” Billy corrected me, saying he never said he didn’t like him. He liked him because he would give him time to make up his grades. It seemed that the students were not necessarily complaining about the work or the difficulty of it, more so how the teacher handled that work. Pablo, like Billy, had a teacher that gave a lot of work; however, unlike Billy he didn’t necessarily like this teacher; he believed that she didn’t know the material she taught: “Every time I ask for help, she always be struggling, like even in the math mini things we do, she be struggling, like you're supposed to be our math teacher, you're supposed to know this.” Similarly, Johnny said, “Teachers, not all of them know how to teach.”

Along with a lack of knowledge, students mentioned disapproving of teachers that were rude, and that acted in an overruling manner. For example, Olivia said, “There are some teachers that think that they are overruling us because they have more power than us, so then they’re like okay we are the boss, and they treat us bad sometimes.” The students mentioned teachers acting or making them feel inferior due to age, position, and authority. “When teachers try to talk to you like you a dog, they say 'Sit,' or like they try to tell you, you can't talk,” explained Johnny. While
only Johnny used the comparison of being treated like a dog, other students mentioned teachers having rude and ruling demeanors, or feeling belittled and not acknowledged: “Some teachers think that because they are older, they are more wiser,” explained Olivia; “they forget just because we are kids to get respect you have to show respect” said Pablo.

Another point that emerged from the research was that students have expectations, and when they are not met, they take it personally. There was an occasion where Nelly shared that she disliked her math teacher because at the beginning of the year he gave the class a run through of what to expect. One of the things he mentioned was that he wouldn’t talk too much. Nelly took that seriously and formed the preconceived notion that would mean that he would rarely talk, because in her opinion that teacher talked a lot. During the interview she used that instance to share that she disliked teachers that lie: “He sucks, and he lies too much. Like at the beginning of the school year he told us he wouldn't talk too much, and he talks every two minutes.” During observations I noticed students’ random acts of defiance would at times follow their expectations not being met. There was an instance with a student I observed but didn’t interview, that had asked Mrs. D to go to the nurse. This was a regular occurrence, so she simply replied that she would call the nurse first to see if she had anything that could help him, to not waste time. This student became very upset and shut down the rest of the class, and spent time cussing under his breath. It seems that students think teachers should be and do certain things, and when they don’t do it, it plays into their actions and feelings.

My research was intended to further understand the perceptions of students with continual behavioral misconduct, in the hopes that it could help future teachers understand the points of view of some of the students that were labeled negatively. While the students spoke about a variety of teachers, they mentioned similar negative characteristics throughout the
conversations. The complexity of a student’s behavior goes beyond the power of interactions with an educator, but as teachers, we have the opportunity to influence the way that students perceive school and handle situations. Several students responded defensively. Many of them shared that depending on how the teacher acts towards them, they react equally.

**Apathy**

From what I observed during my year-long co-teaching experience, much of the discipline that takes place at Marina is punitive. At Marina, there is a system in place for when students misbehave. There are three levels to misbehavior depending on the action or actions of the student. If it is a level one or two the teacher is responsible for handling the situation. The first step is to tell the student or remind the student what the expectations are. The next step is to pull the student outside and talk more seriously about the behavior, followed by a parent phone call, and potentially a parent-teacher conference. If there is no documentation that a teacher has done all that then an assistant principal or principal won’t get involved unless the student commits a level three crime. Level three actions are those that are direct harm to another student or are illegal. If the standard one or two misconducts continue to take place, regardless of the teacher going through the steps, then the student is called into the office to have a meeting with the assistant principal and is given a verbal warning. I am unaware of how many warnings it takes but at some point, the students are given lunch detention, the next step is after school detention, and lastly In School Suspension.

Several students are not afraid or remorseful of these meetings; they blatantly express they don't care. For example, Caesar said, “I don’t care, because all they’re going to tell me is not to do it next time. And give me a warning. I never really get in trouble for it.” When I began pressing about this topic during some interviews, to my surprise, the students didn’t get upset to
get in trouble; instead, they were indifferent. Mikey said, “I just feel like I don't care what anybody says to me, like what they say doesn't, I just don't pay any attention to none of that. When someone tells me I have ISS, I just sit there and laugh. When Mrs. LM yells at me when I am at the office, she's trying to talk to me, I just ignore." Worse yet, five of them shared that they enjoy ISS! For example. Pablo shared, "Mrs. LM already gave me four days in ISS. I just be watching YouTube."

During my data collection period I decided to visit ISS a couple of times since many of my participants were there for several weeks. When I visited these students, I saw students were sleeping, watching movies, playing games, and drawing on desks. Hagen said, “At school it really doesn't matter if I get ISS or whatever cuz like it's kinda fun over there.” The perception of students in regard to discipline seems as though they are not learning the totality of consequences. In the survey, the students were asked to rate themselves, as the type of students they think they were. Fifty-eight percent of students did not think they were that bad (see Figure 1), because many of them explained, like Stewart, that they “choose to be good or they choose to be bad.” The students shared the idea that because they choose their behavior, then they don’t see themselves as being bad students.

Both the in the surveys and in the interviews several students mentioned that they choose if they wanted to be bad, or they admitted they had the ability to be good. One student in specific, Brooke, talked about the thought process she goes through; she mentioned knowing that she should do such and such, but for some reason decides not to. This lack of respect for administration and guidelines influenced students' perceptions of school. Another aspect to consider, was not only did the students express lack of care, but it was obvious that the same students continued to get in trouble; there was no growth through the discipline in place. What
do we do when our methods of discipline are enjoyable to the student and don't help minimize the behavior that keeps them from class and learning? As the graph shows (see Figure 1), students were not aware of the behavior record that they had, and if they were aware, they thought they were still okay students. Five percent even thought they were the best student there could be.

![Graph showing Students' Rating of Self]

**Figure 1.** Students’ rating of self.

**The World Needs Teachers**

"*Without teachers, we would just be like animals.*" – Hagen

The second to last question I asked in every interview was “Do you think the world needs teachers?” All 13 students answered yes. They all had different reasons for why they felt the world required teachers. Some echoed each other’s ideas about needing teachers for college. Many brought up needing teachers for jobs, and several of them recognized the diverse role that a teacher can play in a students’ life, and in society. Stewart said, “Some teachers help kids and like they're more detailed about things. So, it helps kids a lot more than other teachers.” Similarly, Stacy said, “They’re there not only to provide education but also make their impact on
you. It has a lot to do with the success you are going to have, and how far you are going to go.”

And Mikey said, “Cuz without them [teachers] the world it wouldn't be right, because that's how everybody learns what they need.” During my time at Marina, many of my co-workers expressed their concern for students not knowing the value of an education; yet, according to their responses, it seems that they did.

During some of my observations on several occasions, out of anger or discontent, students had blown up in the middle of class. They would cuss at the teacher about the class, the material, and school in general. Some of their actions would indicate that they could care less about learning and about being in school; they seemed preoccupied with their friendships, relationships, and dress code. While the students might have mixed perceptions of their teachers, their work, and the school itself, every single student from my study perceived that education of some sort is essential and that teachers are needed to accomplish that. This included students that don’t want to go to college when they grow up or have a job that is considered white collar. Every single student gave credit to the teaching profession: “Like you need schooling, everyone needs a lil bit of school. So, like how would you like know how to do stuff and be smart,” said Pablo.

For part of my research, I wanted to know the students’ perception of the institution of education and the concept of having to go to school. I believe this part of my data shows that the students perceive school as a basic need. The students that verbally expressed hatred for school and teachers, the students that seemed to take actions that would remove them from the classroom, the students that were sent to the office frequently, all thirteen, believed an education was essential in one way or another.

Agency
There were two sub questions to my central research question, one of them focused on how students want others, including teachers to interact with them. Based off of my observations and what students talked about during their interviews, it appeared that students wanted some form of agency, freedom, or choice. The students that I interviewed seemed as though they felt they got no choice or treatment of independence. This included simple authority over their own bodies like “getting up without asking,” as Cesar explained. They wanted the opportunity of privileges or options. Some of their requests were basic like, “I think you should be able to listen to music if you can still work and stuff,” said Pablo. As the surveys reflect, not a single student answered that he or she loves school, and even though the majority said they disliked it, they also thought there were good aspects to it (see Figure 2). These opinions of the students affect their behavior and give insight to my research questions.

Another frequent topic that came up along with this concept was their dislike and negative feelings about dress code. Their desire was not to get rid of the dress code but lessen the strictness of it. When I would ask the students to expand on their thoughts, many would set a dress code anyway. They would restrict certain clothing like crop tops and short shorts, but they repeatedly shared they felt restrained to be themselves through the uniform requirement. I imagined this would be a hot topic during interviews since in my observations there were many instances where a student had to go to CIS (Communities in School; this is a program that offers assistance to students of financial need) to change into appropriate clothing or go to ISS for refusing to wear what CIS offered.

One of the most surprising requests the students made was their desire for middle school to resemble college. They wanted the freedom to pick a topic to focus more on, and classes to attend. Pablo said, "I think you should be able to pick, and like major in that, take math all
through fifth grade to high school.” Alike, Johnny shared, "Classes designed to like help you like it depends on what you wanna learn because some people are good at math or they think they are stupid because they can't do math, reading, science but really it's like they're not good at these things, but they can feel smart if they were doing something else." They also wanted to have the opportunity to build their own schedule: “I would kinda like it to where you could choose when you came in. Almost like a job, where you chose how long you stay here for and how many days you come in,” said Hagen. “They pick another elective or have their choice to learn about science or history. I’d have to say more being like we do what we need to do, and then like everything we chill. We just do what we have to do, and the teachers and not always constantly on students,” shared Nelly.

![The way students felt about School](image)

*Figure 2. The way students felt about school.*

**The School Work**

Through a variety of questions and in their surveys the students only had negative feelings regarding school work. The majority of the students brought up the idea of different work, less work, more time, and different classroom structure: "It’s all too much. They teach a lot; we have to stay still, you can’t move, only get a small time to eat, we have to raise our hand, it's really hard for me to stay still,” Johnny said. Inevitably, the topic of homework came up several times during my interviews and students’ conversations in our class. During observations
I would see students copying it from one another, I heard jokes about it, and in the interviews they all complained about it. Stacy said:

   How stressful it is. Because students there’s like a lot of students that they have their athletics, then they have their home life, and from the time they get out of school is late than everybody else because of athletics, and then they go home and do their homework, and it's like already 7 o'clock. I don't think students should like, we should have time to go home and not have to worry about homework most of the time. Like I understand it's important to do it at home too, but like we come here, and we do it all day like we should have a break from that. If you don't do it in class then do it at home, but no extra homework.

   Along with complaining about homework, there were two extremes in the responses that students gave in both the interviews and surveys. One was that all the work they were being taught was redundant, and the other was that it was too difficult, and they wished for more time to grasp the material and finish their work. Four students felt that the material taught was all repetitive and had already been taught to them. Nelly said, “They just teach us stuff that we've already reviewed and stuff.” Then another four students, expressed their stress with the limited time that they had in learning the material and completing assignments. Olivia said, “They should ease up because we are still like kids. Like the videos they have to do for math, they expect us to have to be able to do it every night. But some people have lives and some people have stuff to do, and some people don't have access to a phone or internet to have to do the videos. They put three papers in front of us, and they expect it due within 45 minutes, and some kids aren't, like some of us, like me, don't get things very easily.”
Figure 3. Students’ perceptions of needs met by teachers.

**What I Say I Need**

In hopes of having a direct answer I asked every student during the interview what they thought they needed from a teacher to succeed. Prior to this, I asked in the surveys they completed if they felt their needs were met (see Figure 3 above). I did this wanting to know how students felt, and if their responses showed any specific pattern (see Figure 4). This section of my data ranged more in diversity than any other. Still, what the students shared they needed, could be arranged under one of the previous sections from my findings.

Some students mentioned the qualities that they needed in a teacher. Caesar said, “Just a teacher that is going to help me through the rough times, and that I can trust and always talk to.” Nelly said, ”Teachers also need to like have more positive energy.” ”Support, encouragement, praise. Like helping out with any like problems. Not just on paperwork,” shared Hagen. Some repeated what they had said about the school work. Oliva said, ”Mainly, like I understand the work they have to give us for us to be ready for like STAAR test and all that in the higher grade,
but they should ease up because we are still like kids. They give us so much work, and then they expect it to be within us like a certain time period, but some people like me take forever with stuff.” Others focused on specifying agency, and the desire to be treated with more independence. Stewart said, “If they would be more nice about things, and approach it in a different way. And trust me to eat food during class.” A few repeated the request for their learning to be modified to their speed or level of achievement. Nelly said, “Like I don't like asking teachers questions after questions after questions. Cuz I don't get stuff the first time, sometimes I don't get it the second time, sometimes I don't get it the third time. I don't catch on too fast with work.” Likewise, Johnny said, “Sometimes I need him to come and just help me because I don't understand it; it’d be cool if every class I had a teacher to just teach me because then I could get what they're saying, and they wouldn't have to be worried about 20 other kids learning too.”

I think it is important to note that the students felt the need to repeat themselves even after having addressed some of these topics explicitly. My study sought out to inquire about the students that act up, the students that teachers dread having, the students that all the teachers know, whose discipline records you sometimes have to scroll through to read. I wanted to know what these students thought about school, about teachers, what they wanted, and what they considered they needed. According to the students, they wanted learning that was fun and not restricted to the environment (Tracie and Brooke). They wanted teachers to approach situations with kindness and humbleness (Stacy, Olivia, and Stewart). They wanted time to understand the material, and they didn’t want to have to verbally tell teachers they weren’t following, but that they needed help (Khloe, Nelly, and Johnny). Lastly, while they did not admit it, they wanted a supportive educator in all aspects (Cesar, Billy, Hagen, Mikey and Pablo).
The fundamental purpose of my study was to give students with continual behavioral issues a voice to talk about their feelings and thoughts. Although I struggled with getting the students to speak their truth at times, the experience was what I hoped for my students and myself. I feel that the students were given a chance to feel heard and that what I learned will help me as I continue down the path of education. The implications for fellow teachers fall into a few categories.

Students expressed multiple characteristics that they dislike in a teacher. The most prevalent topics they talked about were teachers yelling, having overruling attitudes, inappropriate actions and tones of voice and not helping the students. This is one of the most significant aspects that as individuals we can control and change so that our students do not have the opportunity to experience times where they are treated or talked to in a manner that we would
not want a person of authority to do unto us. As a student mentioned, “Teachers forget that to get respect you have to give it.” While there are a lot of other influences in their lives, maybe as their educators, we can encourage different methods of interaction, behavior, and display of character. Our exchanges with students could shape the perceptions that these students have of teachers and school. Maybe it would help, if as educators we reflected on our behavior towards our students, and the interactions that we have with them.

Another substantial finding this research presented was the students’ apathy towards discipline. It is not a secret that the “troubled” students seem to be the same ones every year, so why do we follow the same process? There are different methods of restorative discipline (Zehr, 2002) that as teachers we can attempt to apply when these students misbehave in our classroom. Like some restorative practices suggest, offering a mediation opportunity, or having the students practice a communicative method could change the behavior and resolve the issue. My research didn’t focus on testing or finding such approaches; however, through the survey and interviews it became apparent that we are not helping these students learn the true definition of consequences. There is a pattern of avoidance of work through misbehavior. The best way would be not to make avoidance enjoyable and instead help keep students in the classroom.

One of the most significant aspects of completing this research was finding out that 13 out of 13 students that I interviewed recognized the need for education and teachers. While some of them didn’t want to pursue an education for themselves or even go to school, they all felt that as a whole school had importance to the world. As teachers, I believe we can use this information to our advantage and to encourage ourselves that what we are doing is not in vain. If the students are aware of the importance of education then when teaching, we can further add to what they know and explain to them how our instruction is essential and pertains to their
personal growth. Regardless of what they show to us, these students admit that in a way they need school and teachers; we can play that to our advantage.

Another implication that this research gives us teachers is the students’ desire for autonomy, independence, and the type of school work they wish for. The students want to be granted privileges that they can keep while completing the required work and behaving in the way that is expected of them. The consideration of more freedom can seem scary, especially if we link it to a lack of classroom management. The last thing we would want is to hinder learning due to lack of structure, but there must be a way in which we teach our students to thrive in more independence. In addition, I wonder if the students with behavioral issues would thrive in a least restrictive environment. While it is difficult to find ways to change many well-established structures, an idea that could be up from modification is homework. Many students mentioned that it causes stress, and there were a few that fell behind on homework, so their grade would get worse, so then they just stopped trying to fix it. Based off of their responses and what I saw, it seemed that Rankin (2018) had a point; homework seemed to cause more of a strain than aid learning. In reference to the students wanting more time and different forms of instruction, as educators we can use different practices to ensure that our students don’t feel lost. Some of those practices could come from books like or similar to *Make it Stick* (Brown, Roediger III, & McDaniel, 2014). I think it would help advance society if we taught our students more about being collaborative and independent in their learning, and while they develop that maturity, rewarding them along the way to encourage productive behavior.

Lastly, the relationship and trust that I formed with the students I interviewed were, in my opinion, the most excellent features of completing this research. Once I had talked to these students one on one it was easier to get them to stop behaviors that would impede instruction
during class. Also, when they would take part in specific actions like sleeping in class, I had a significantly better response in telling them to wake up than I had before. I believe that this had to do with the concept of giving the students a chance to tell me what they liked and did not like. During class, I made mistakes using language that the students explicitly shared they disliked. For example, one time when talking to Johnny I told him to sit. In his interview, he mentioned he hated this because it made him feel like a dog being told commands. Having remembered that, I was able to apologize and repeat my request with a different tone and different words. Although their behavior didn’t necessarily change through the building of a relationship, the process helped in redirecting the students, and their level of defiance in the classroom was less intense.

Pleasing all students is challenging. It is strenuous to form a strong relationship with them all, plus with the limited time for instruction, it is impossible to interview every student. Nonetheless, I think it would be beneficial if we surveyed our students towards the beginning of the year. The survey would allow us to know more about the students and give them an opportunity to share their thoughts, feelings, needs, and expectations of the school year, or of you as the teacher.

**Final Thoughts**

In bringing my study to a close, I spent a great deal of time reflecting on my experience in asking students about their perceptions of their teachers, education, and what they believe they need to succeed. I think these questions are incredibly valuable in encouraging the student-teacher relationship, as well as helping teachers to reflect, grow and learn. In the future, I hope to integrate surveys at the beginning of the school year to give my students a chance to have a voice and understand what they need from me that school year. Besides, I hope that future research investigates different practices to reduce student misbehavior potentially, or further investigates
these students’ opinions and presents different information that can be useful for educators to positively communicate with students that display continual challenging behaviors. It would be wonderful for future research to form a method or program that could help teachers with students that are consistently defiant.
References


Appendix A

Research Survey

Fill out these questions honestly, and openly. This will not count against your grade!! Please know that I want to know you actually think and feel!!

Email address *

Valid email address

This form is collecting email addresses. Change settings

What is your actual name? REAL Legal name

Short answer text

How many times have you been sent to the office by an adult this school year, NOT including good things?

☐ 1
☐ 2
☐ 3
☐ More than three
☐ More than 6
☐ Other...

How many referrals do you think you have received this year?

Short answer text

On a scale from 1-5; 1 – love it, 2- like it, 3- dislike it, but there are good parts, 4- don't like it, and 5- hate it; How do you feel about school?
THE VOICES BEHIND THE LABELS

Love it

Hate it

Do you feel like teachers call home about you a lot? If so why?

Long answer text

If you had to pick one, would you say teachers like you or not? Explain why you think that.

Long answer text

If you could change how school works, what would you change about it?

Long answer text

On a scale from 1-5; how do you rate yourself as a student? 1- being the worst student possible and five being the best.

1 2 3 4 5
WORST student EVER

BEST student EVER

On a scale from 1-5; 1 being not at all and 5 being a lot; Do you feel like teachers meet your needs as a student?

1 2 3 4 5
NOT at all

They meet ALL my needs

Tell me what you like most about school right now.

Long answer text
Tell me what you dislike most about school right now.
Long answer text

Who is your all-time favorite teacher? Why?
Long answer text

Give me three options for a fake name that I could use to represent you in the study.
Short answer text

ANSWER KEY (0 points)
Appendix B

One-on-One Student Interview Protocol

1. When you think the word “school” or hear that word, tell me about your thoughts. Why do you think that?

2. In the survey you rated yourself as a __ student from the 1-5 scale, tell me more about that, why do you think you are a __ student?

3. Tell me about what gets you sent to the office, how do you feel about those situations? Why?

4. Pretend the world is perfect, tell me what you wish school looked like, why? How would teachers look like or be like?

5. As a student, what do you think you need from a teacher to be successful, learn, and be ready for high school?

6. Tell me about how a teacher has made you feel negatively? What did they say? What did you feel? What happened afterwards?

7. What about a time a teacher really made you feel loved or cared for, what did they do that was different?

8. Whenever you and a teacher talk, or a teacher is getting onto you, do you think about how your teacher feels? Why? So, how do you think they feel?

9. Who do you think is the best student? What qualities do you see in them? Do you see these in you? Why or why not? If you do, then why not use these qualities?

10. What does success look like for you? Do you think you need an education for that? If not, why? If yes, why?

11. Do you think the world needs teachers? Why?

*Note: Questions may be added, changed, or omitted during the course of the interview.
## Appendix C

### Codebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CODE NAME</th>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideal Teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>The student mentions the teachers that they really appreciate and what they like about them, or wish other teachers had.</td>
<td>“just makes sure that every one of her students is okay like she sees that you're having a bad day she tells you to take a minute, or if she sees that you're coughing she'll tell you to go take a drink, even if you don't want to, she still makes you. She's real positive.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dress Code</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Students’ understand dress code but don’t want it to be as strict.</td>
<td>“not everything should be so strict on the way they do things. Like with the dress code too that's like a major thing for us and so students feel like we are not being treated fairly.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secret Behaviors</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Students admit to something that they don’t want their teachers or classmates to know.</td>
<td>“I just really don’t like playing games because I have anxiety, and I don’t like getting up and doing things in front of people.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I Feel Like It</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>The student chooses how they want to behave and are aware of what sets them off but decided to act out anyway.</td>
<td>“Because I could be really disrespectful, and I'm usually really talkative and I won't listen to teachers as much. Sometimes I can listen, and then I do my work sometimes.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time of School</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>The student wishes that school hours were different.</td>
<td>“I would like it to start later because I've been reading that your brain doesn't start functioning till like at a certain time.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Quote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>School is associated to relationships of any kind by student.</td>
<td>“You meet new people, you are not confined in a classroom, you go to eight different classes, and hang out with different people, and so people act different, way different.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treated my Age</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Want to be trusted or treated with maturity, either through privileges or being allowed certain current restrictions</td>
<td>“He could've said, could you please throw that away? or don't make a mess, and allow me to eat. Kinda trust me to do what's right.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I grow up</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>The student mentions what they want to do in the future, and what they success as for them.</td>
<td>“I want to be a doctor. I want to work in labor in delivery. I think I want to go to college in Oklahoma.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy for Adult</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Student mentions thinking about how the teacher feels when they are misbehaving.</td>
<td>“, I always put it into perspective like what if they're having a bad day or like or what if something is going on with them that makes them just angry, or what if they hate their job.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silly Does it</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Student gets into trouble for misunderstandings and just messing around.</td>
<td>“most of it is just to act out and be funny. But some of it is unintentional sometimes.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The golden student</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>The characteristics the students think make the perfect student that teachers love.</td>
<td>“They’re funny, kind, and they have a good personality, everybody knows them, they’re cute and get good grades, they are liked by teachers and students.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Teacher from Hell</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>The students talked of teachers that they dislike and what they do.</td>
<td>“they can be too hard on a student and they are quick to snap and like they don’t understand.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apathy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>The students expressed that they don’t care for</td>
<td>“I just feel like I don't care what anybody says to me, like what they say doesn’t, I just don't pay any attention to”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Score</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Work</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>The students expressed their feelings and opinions on the academic work that they are given.</td>
<td>“He always assigns homework. He assigns homework on weekends Saturdays and Sundays, I just don’t wanna do it. He’s the only teacher I have that assigns homework.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>The student expresses wanting choices in academic aspects.</td>
<td>“I think you should be able to pick, and like major in that, take math all through 5th grade to high school.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers Needed</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>The student says that the world needs teachers.</td>
<td>“Cuz without them [teachers] the world it wouldn’t be right, because that’s how everybody learns what they need. And like a lot of jobs you wouldn’t be able to do them without going to college and everything and getting your education from teachers.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Needs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>The student makes a statement of what they need from their teachers or school.</td>
<td>“like support, encouragement, praise. Like helping out with any like problems. Not just on paperwork.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>