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ABSTRACT

One of the more perplexing problems facing middle schools is the use of in-school suspension (ISS). So as to understand better the effects of this practice, one middle school's ISS program was studied and evaluated. Current research on ISS polices and practices is limited, and there is little evidence that supports its use or reform; however, in light of research on young adolescents' needs, ISS does not seem to address those needs, socially or academically. For this study, parents, the ISS teacher, and students and teachers in one eighth-grade team were surveyed to gauge perceptions of ISS's effectiveness and usefulness. The results revealed a general sentiment of dissatisfaction with the school's use of ISS. The use of ISS caused teachers and the administration to become antagonists rather than role models for students. A comparison of reasons for students placed in ISS showed that students and teachers had different perceptions of what is acceptable or unacceptable behavior. This report recommends that if a school must use ISS, that it be used consistently, that teachers expand their repertoire of discipline strategies, that teachers create a workable environment for their students, and that students meet with a counselor to discuss their misbehavior. Appendices contain student, teacher, and parent surveys; student and parent responses; and a list of specific adolescent needs. (Contains 11 references.) (RJM)

School-Wide Discipline Policies: In-School Suspension In One Middle School

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Abstract

One middle school's In-School Suspension (ISS) policy and practice was studied and evaluated. Current research on ISS policies and practices is very limited; there is little evidence that supports its use or reform. However, in light of what research says that young adolescents need, ISS practice does not seem to address the meeting of those needs, socially or academically. A few parents, the ISS teacher, and students and teachers on one eighth grade team were surveyed to gauge perceptions of effectiveness and usefulness of ISS. Results revealed a general sentiment of dissatisfaction with the school's present use of ISS. Recommendations include incorporating a counsellor to talk through problems with students and equipping teachers with more classroom discipline strategies to make ISS less necessary.

Introduction

Among the many issues we confronted during our experiences as student teachers in middle schools, one of the most perplexing concerned the school-wide discipline policy of In-School Suspension (ISS). It seemed as though many of the students who were sent to ISS were not doing outstandingly well academically. Spending the day or several days in ISS for a variety of academic or behavioral reasons took these students out of the classroom, resulting in even less likelihood of academic achievement. We were not convinced that the use of ISS was always the best policy for disciplining student behavior.

If ISS is effective, it would follow that students would learn their lesson after the first one

or two days of ISS. However, in the school we investigated, we found that most students sent to ISS were spending time in ISS on some sort of regular basis. Perhaps the use of ISS as a form of discipline actually has a doubly negative effect on some students, rather than the purported corrective result. Several things happened as a result of frequent visits to ISS: students received less instruction, they handed in lower quality work than those who were present for the instruction, they held less interest in class activities, and they felt less an integral part of the class "family."

In light of these observations and concerns, this study was designed to examine the specific policies concerning In-School Suspension at one middle school, to gather statistics supporting the effectiveness of ISS, and to investigate attitudes concerning ISS held by those involved -- specifically students, teachers, and parents. After collecting information with regard to this school's policies and the related attitudes, we evaluated the practice of In-School Suspension and its effectiveness.

Method

The project was designed in two parts -- (1) a survey which would measure attitudes toward a current in-school suspension program and (2) a literature review to provide a basis for choosing possible alternatives to the current ISS policy.

The written surveys (see Appendix A, B, and C) were distributed among one team of eighth grade teachers at a middle school in Central Virginia. The team was comprised of five teachers in the subjects of Math, English, Science, and Social Studies/History who had a total of

approximately 100 students among them. The teachers, their students, and a group of parents selected by one of the teachers completed the survey. In the survey, we hoped to find:

1. levels of awareness of the current ISS policy among students, teachers, and parents (i.e., for what offenses is it implemented and what is its purpose)
2. general attitudes toward the ISS policy
3. perceptions of the success of the policy and
4. possible suggestions generated by students, teachers, and parents.

Students completed their surveys during a portion of one of their classes with a team teacher. After the surveys were completed, they were collected and analyzed. The first question on each of the surveys was an open question addressing awareness of the ISS policy. Students, teachers and parents also had the common question addressing their perception of how well they feel ISS works which was to be answered on a scale of one to five. The numerical responses to this question were averaged within the respective groups. The written responses were also compiled, repetitive responses were grouped together and a general trend could be extrapolated.

Both teachers and parents were checklist to check reasons for which their students or children, respectively, were placed in ISS. Students, on the other hand, were given an open-ended question regarding the reasons students are placed in ISS which would give us a fuller picture of ISS and the students' perceptions of how the policy is utilized. The decision to use an open-ended question, as would be expected, resulted in a greater variety of responses than the seven reasons given to teachers and parents. In order to compare the results then, the student responses were placed in one of the seven categories which were used in the teacher/parent

checklist. Question 4 addressed teachers' and parents' perceptions of the purpose of ISS.

The last question in each survey asked the respondents for suggestions for improvements.

Literature Review

A review of the literature currently available on In-School Suspension shows that the concept of ISS has not been clearly defined, and is utilized in various forms. Although ISS has been used in many schools for many years, it is a program that seems to remain in transition and constant modification. A comparison of the ISS policies in most middle schools and the developmental characteristics of adolescent students shows a clear incongruity and a real need for a more appropriate method of discipline.

In the most basic sense, in-school (sometimes called in-house) suspension is used in lieu of out-of-school suspension. Even in this sense, however, discrepancies can be found. Many schools choose to use in-school suspension as a disciplinary measure for lesser offenses that do not warrant an out-of-school suspension. Some choose to use the ISS time in a rehabilitative program (Novell, 1984; Opuni, Tullis, Sanchez, & Gonzalez, 1991) while others find the ISS program a useful deterrent because "social isolation and a rigid, structured environment are repulsive to most students. Except for the most hardened offenders, the in-house program is sufficient punishment to alter behavior..." (Nighswander, 1981, p.77).

Ramsey (1981) and Nighswander (1981) cite the following advantages of ISS over an out-of-school suspension: the student does not miss out on necessary regular assignments, the

suspension period is not a vacation for the student, the student remains under proper professional supervision and the school does not transfer its problem outside to the community at large. The student is thus retained in the school, but kept away from distractions.

In the article, "Keeping Children in School: Sounding the Alarm on Suspensions," the Commission for Positive Change in the Oakland Public Schools (1992), although addressing out-of-school-suspension, brought to light several observations concerning any form of excluding students from the classroom. The causes of misbehavior are not necessarily a mere ignorance of the rules, nor a rebellious defiance. "The anger, frustration and embarrassment that accompany poor academic achievement often underlie 'acting out' behavior" (p. 2). Unfortunately, even students who remain in the school building for ISS are still missing out on the crucial opportunity to improve their academic achievement by receiving specific instruction from the teacher. The Commission observed that behavior was less disruptive when students were "actively engaged in learning and helped to succeed" (p. 2).

Suspension of any sort does not help the student who is struggling academically. Suspension, in school or out of school, is more often a convenience for the teacher or administrator, than a benefit for the misbehaving student. As one junior high school principal stated, "Suspension is not supposed to help the suspended child. It is a practice to help the teacher and the children who are not suspended" (p. 7). Rather than pushing the misbehaving student away, the school needs to address the problem head-on by helping the student believe in him- or herself, and helping that student to succeed.

Knopf (1991) conducted a study of ISS programs in middle schools and found that many

schools practicing ISS were not incorporating a necessary component central to the theory on which ISS is based. Whereas "in-school suspension theory promotes the programs as a means to help students develop self-discipline and positive changes, and improve attitudes toward school" (p. 459), Knopf's study found that only a few of all of the schools "provided counselling interventions designed to help students improve their behaviors and attitudes toward school" (p. 459). In fact, "the primary identified goals for in-school suspension programs were behaviorally oriented. Goals that required counseling interventions were not emphasized as much" (p. 458). Actually, Knopf's observations were supported by Garrett's earlier findings: "In-school suspension programs have usually been developed and operated as additional forms of punishment rather than as programs designed and operated to rehabilitate the misbehaving student" (p. 458). When student misbehaviors are treated as the problem rather than a symptom of some deeper problem, the disciplinary measures fail more often than succeed "because they do not make an effort to identify and remedy the cause(s) of the inappropriate behavior" (p. 457). Knopf's (1991) suggestions for improving ISS include placing more emphasis on counseling, involving parents more in the planning, and formalizing and writing down program goals. Overall, "in-school suspension should have an academic component and a counseling component as well as a behavior management component" (p. 459).

Novell (1984), in her study implementing a rehabilitative in-room suspension, sought to offer students an alternative to out-of school suspension as well as a fairly extensive rehabilitation program for a minimum of two weeks. The program was designed to rehabilitate by evoking responsibility. The students who participated were bound to a contract which

featured "isolation, structure, and a guidance curriculum" (p.9). Novell found that students who entered the program with willingness and a need for academic structure benefitted greatly while "reluctant participants" showed a negligible level of improvement. Contributing factors to the success of this program were a competent teacher in charge, involved parents, and good communication among teachers, students and parents.

Opuni et al. (1991) also analyzed a rehabilitative ISS program but on a larger scale, working with nineteen middle schools and several at-risk students within these schools. They found that the program was partially effective because 51.5% of the students did not have a second referral to the Student Assignment Center (SAC) and because it provided non-SAC students with a more conducive classroom environment. By conducting this study, however, they found that to have a truly effective rehabilitative program, much more was needed than what they had anticipated. Full-time counselors and more teachers were highly recommended in order to lower student-teacher ratios. Study carrels, telephones and visits from social workers were also popular suggestions. According to these researchers, one interviewed teacher showed her frustration when she said, "After 2:30 p.m., they [the students] should be assigned to work with the janitors to do chores on campus. The embarrassment and humiliation from their peers might correct their behavior. Many students are not embarrassed for being assigned to the SAC" (p.21).

Even if the ISS policy is not rehabilitative, the policy should be one which has been developed with the input of teachers and students. According to Uroff and Green (1991), "Ideally, rules should be developed with participation from those who are to enforce them and from those who are to obey them. Such participation generates a mutual understanding of what

is expected and a personal commitment to abide by the rules....Enforcement based upon punishment, while necessary in some cases, is not a productive way to achieve discipline over the long range and is generally ineffective in developing self-discipline. Enforcement is best when staff and students unite to achieve agreed-on goals based on mutual respect and trust."

Uroff and Green addressed the rule-making process in their evaluation of an alternative school founded on the principles and theories of William Glasser. Instead of adults trying to control student behavior by coercing them through rewards or consequences, the focus is on students controlling their own behavior. "The reduction of suspensions from 16% in the 1986-1987 school year to less than 1/4 of 1% in 1988-89 was largely due to the elimination of the use of coercion as a means of controlling student behavior. As students became involved in school rules, they became staunch supporters of those rules and helped encourage others to abide by them" (p. 57). Thus, creating school and class rules should not be an adults-only activity. Imposing rules on students, without any discussion for their purpose, was self-defeating, especially for students in the middle-school years, when establishing independence is a crucial factor in their developing maturity.

Eccles et al. (1993) found that " the adolescent years often mark the beginning of a downward spiral in school-related behavior and motivation. Many students undergo psychological upheaval during this time of pubertal development and the coincidence of this plethora of change with a transition to middle school can be extremely difficult for students. There simply does not seem to be enough care or sensitivity exerted in providing the proper support and appropriate discipline for students at this age" (p.553).

Susan Hoover (1992), a middle school principal, did a study of at-risk students at her middle school and found that they needed "more interaction with peers , more direct intervention to deal with their problem behaviors, and more opportunities for intensive systemic intervention for recognizing and correcting problems within the school setting and within a family structure. Cognitively, they needed more assistance in preparing mentally for school and its purposes and recognizing how to prepare logistically for school success" (pp.52-53). In-school suspensions in their current form simply do not conform with these needs.

Guisler and Hoffman (1994), in a workshop for working with at-risk youth, cite several salient characteristics of adolescents which also confirm the need for more appropriate methods of discipline for the middle school -- methods which take into account the students' needs for structure as well as a sensitivity to their tendencies to undergo mood changes and unpredictable reactions.

Findings

Student responses indicated that there was a generally negative attitude toward the use of ISS. Teachers and parents had similarly negative attitudes as the graphs (see Appendix) indicate. Figure 1 displays the students' responses to the question, "How Well Does ISS Work?" On a scale of one to five, students were asked to rank their perceptions of the effectiveness of ISS. The responses of "1" and "2" (very poor and poor, respectively) were collapsed into one column and the responses of "4" and "5" (well and very well, respectively) were collapsed into one column. The "3" 's represented a response of neither "poor" nor "well." The graph clearly

shows that the majority of students felt ISS worked poorly. Furthermore, an analysis of the explanations given for a response of "3" shows that the "3"'s were more negative than positive (see Appendix D).

Figure 2 shows the teachers' responses to the same question. All five of the teachers surveyed felt that ISS worked either poorly or very poorly. Figure 3 compares teachers' and students' responses to the question, "When are students sent to ISS?" The teachers were given a choice of seven possible reasons for referring students to ISS, while students volunteered their own reasons for when they understand students to be sent.

We then categorized the students' responses according to the seven options given to the teachers. There was a notable discrepancy between the responses given by teachers and those offered by students which may indicate differing expectations and definitions of what qualifies as "inappropriate behavior." Another particularly striking difference was in the categories of "other," wherein students in one particular class offered "kissing" as a response, probably due to a classmate being sent to ISS after being caught kissing; teachers made no mention of this.

Finally, students responded to the question "Is ISS used too often or not enough?" by a clear majority of "too often," as Figure 4 indicates.

Parent responses were inconclusive because only three parents returned their surveys. Data from their responses could not be used as representative of parents in general. Nonetheless, Appendix E will show that those who did respond did not have a clear idea of the purpose or implementation of ISS.

An interview with the ISS teacher revealed that one of the major drawbacks in this

school's use of ISS is the inconsistency with which the administration assigns ISS. This was supported by comments made on teacher surveys. The ISS teacher also expressed concern that some students preferred the ISS atmosphere to their own classrooms because the learning/working environment in their classrooms interfered with their ability to complete their work. Additionally, she noted that some teachers use ISS with remarkably more frequency than do others, which led her to believe that these teachers are not equipped with a necessary variety of discipline strategies to maintain discipline among all students.

Conclusion

We agree with Eccles et al. (1993) when they say "...the adolescent years often mark the beginning of a downward spiral in school-related behavior and motivation...There simply does not seem to be enough care or sensitivity exerted in providing the proper support and appropriate discipline for students at this age." (p.554)

Research on the development of adolescent students shows that the present use of ISS is not meeting the needs of middle school students, and is actually inappropriate for their academic and social development. As Appendix F and G show, adolescents have needs that are quite specific to the period of their development. Guisler and Hoffman (1994) cite the importance of adult figures to model and trust. The ISS policy causes teachers and the administration to become antagonists rather than role models for the students. Adolescents not only need information but help in processing it. This corresponds with the many instances in which the students stated that they prefer going to ISS because the environment is more quiet and there is a

teacher there who will help them with their school work. Adolescents also need concrete examples and reasoning. A comparison of reasons for students are placed in ISS showed that students and teachers had quite different perceptions of what is acceptable or unacceptable. Adolescents also have a great deal of energy and need outlets for it. The ISS room does not help this in any way because the students are asked to sit quietly all day long. This certainly does not recognize their developmental needs.

The "High Risk Profile" (Appendix G) shows characteristics of students who are often placed in ISS. These students are already among a population of students who are "at risk." Point by point, we see that ISS does not rehabilitate or seek to work on these at-risk behaviors but may easily cause further damage. Students sent to ISS will certainly not feel capable; they will feel insignificant; they will feel an external locus of control; without counseling, their time out of class will not help their intra-personal skills; they may feel uncomfortable speaking out or expressing themselves in a meaningful way; they will sense animosity toward the system and they will not be helped in their judgment skills..

Therefore, if ISS must be used by schools, we recommend the following for its implementation:

1. Administrators, teachers, and parents, need to establish a determined policy for consistent use of ISS. Students need to have a clear idea of why and when ISS will be used. ISS loses validity because of its inconsistent utilization. If one student receives ISS for an offense but another student does not, the students will notice the disparity.
2. Teachers need to expand their repertoire of discipline strategies. The ISS teacher expressed

concern that some teachers used ISS too often because they did not want to deal with behavior problems in their classroom. The students also felt that ISS was used too often as Figure 4 shows.

3. Teachers need to ensure a workable environment for their students. Adolescents have a great deal of energy but each person needs a certain amount of quiet in order to process information.

4. In the ISS room, students should meet with a counsellor to discuss their misbehavior and any root causes. Students should have a clear idea about why they were sent to ISS and what they need to do to improve. The focus should not be only on the temporary outburst but on the real cause of the misbehavior.

In-School Suspension is a widely used policy and can have positive effects if there is a great deal of consideration about how it is to be implemented. Adolescents have needs as they go through a period of change and confusion. Students' and teachers' negative attitudes toward ISS point to a problem that should be addressed. Erickson in fact cites identity versus confusion as the crisis to overcome during adolescence. Although appropriate behavior must be addressed and encouraged, adolescents need teachers, parents and administrators to model that behavior and help them through this period of change and maturity. The ISS policy must include clear guidelines and goals and a staff which provides support for students who are in a position of risk.

Figure 1

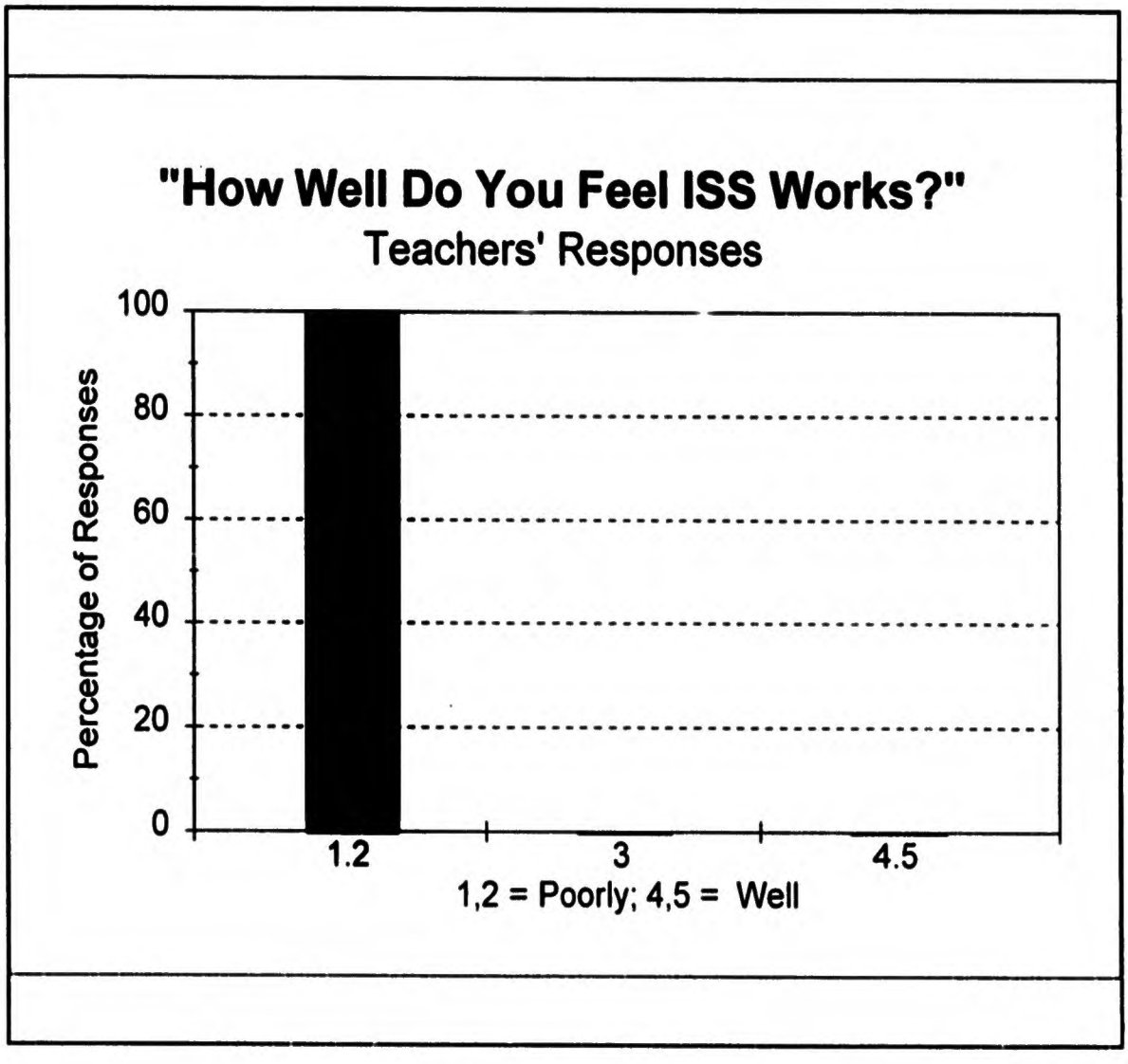

"How Well Do You Feel ISS Works?"
Teachers' Responses
Percentage of Responses
100
80
60
40
20
0
1.2
3
4.5
1,2 = Poorly; 4,5 = Well

Figure 2

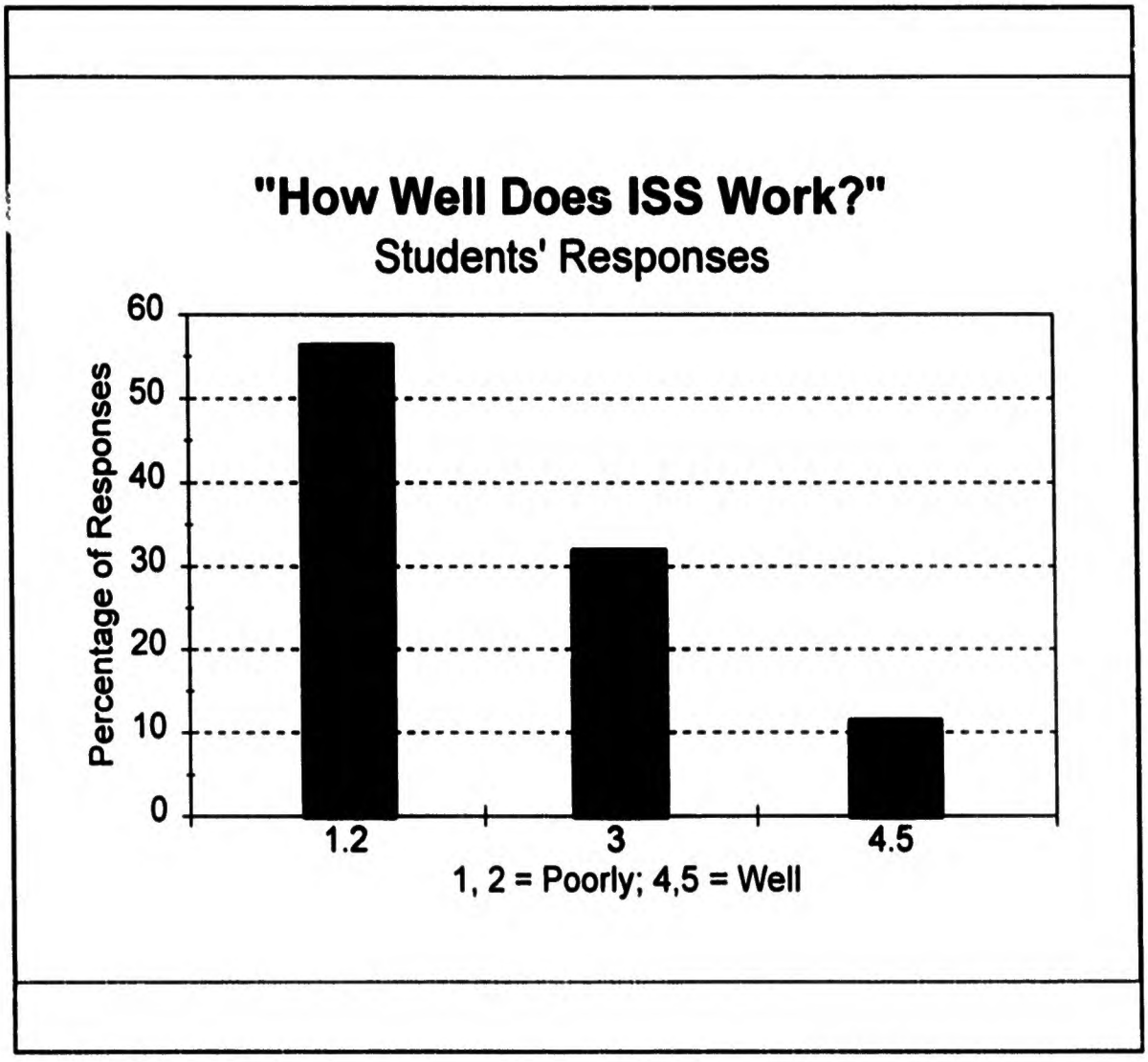
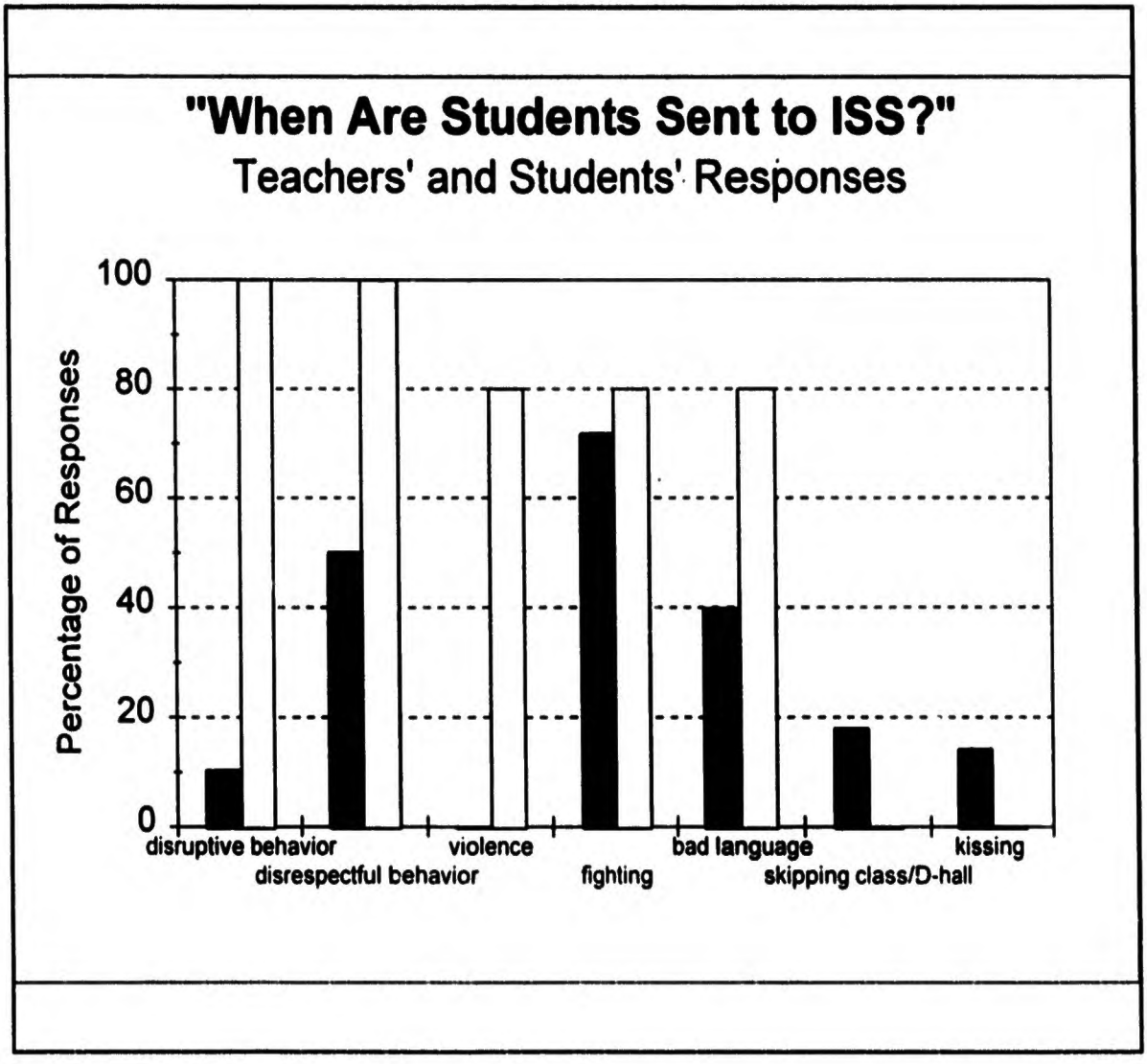
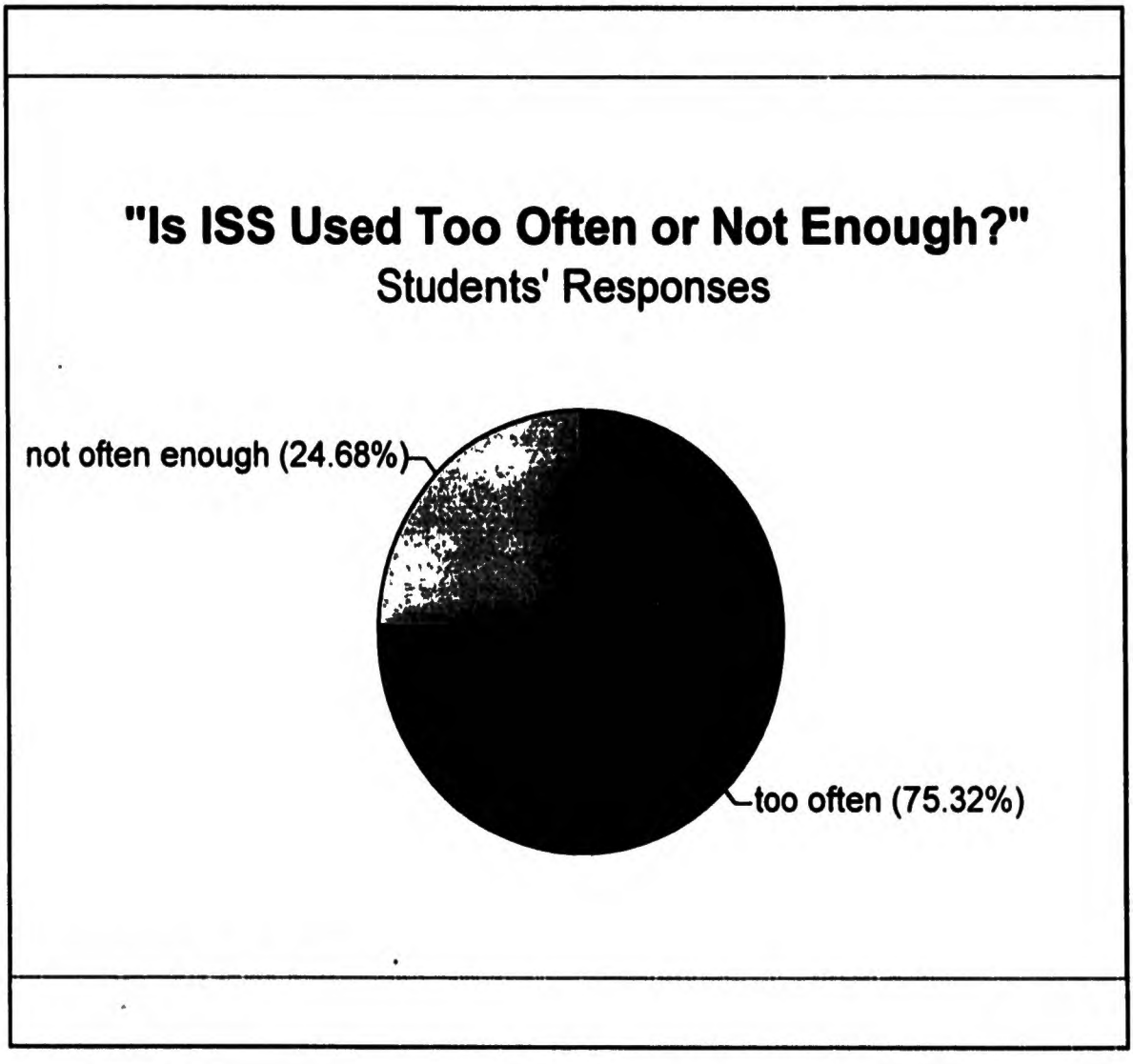

"How Well Does ISS Work?"
Students' Responses
Percentage of Responses
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
1.2
3
4.5
1, 2 = Poorly; 4,5 = Well

Figure 3



yellow = teachers' responses
blue = students' responses

Figure 4


"Is ISS Used Too Often or Not Enough?"
Students' Responses
not often enough (24.68%)
too often (75.32%)

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Appendix A

Survey

Students

1. For what offenses are students put in ISS? (be specific)

2. What do students do during ISS?

3. Have you ever been put in ISS? If yes, how many times?

4. How well does ISS work? 1- very poorly 5- very well

1 2 3 4 5

Explain:

5. Is ISS used

a. too often, or

b. not often enough

6. What suggestions would you have for improvement, if any?

Appendix B

Teacher Survey

1. What is the school polciy for assigning students to In-School Suspension?

2. Under what circumstances have you assigned students to ISS? Check all that apply.

-- disrespectful behavior -- disruptive behavior -- bad language

-- violence -- fighting -- other (please specify)

-- incomplete homework

3. What do you expect students to do during ISS?

4. What is the purpose of ISS?

5. How many students do you assign to ISS per day? per week?

6. How well do you feel ISS works? 1 -- very poorly 5 -- very well

1 2 3 4 5

Explain:

7. What suggestions would you have for improvement, if any?

Appendix C

Parent Survey

1. What is [school name]'s policy for assigning students to In-School Suspension?

2. Has your child spent time in in-school suspension? If yes, how many times?

For what reason(s)? (check all that apply)

-- disrespectful behavior -- disruptive behavior -- bad language

-- violence -- fighting -- other (please specify)

-- incomplete homework

3. What do students do during ISS?

4. What should ISS be used for?

5. How well does ISS work? 1 -- very poorly 5 -- very well

1 2 3 4 5

Explain:

6. What suggestions would you have for improvement, if any?

Thank you for your time

Appendix D

"HOW WELL DOES ISS WORK?"

STUDENT EXPLANATIONS

☺**Well/Very Well:**

- "Most people sit quietly and do work."
- "Because you can't talk or sleep; you have to do some work."
- "I'd rather be suspended than be put in there because it is like a prison."
- "Because you can't talk or leave the room unless you go to the bathroom. And you always have to work."
- "It teaches them not to do it again."

○**Neutral:**

- "It works sometimes, but other people don't care about being in ISS."
- "The students just go and do whatever they did again."
- "For some people yes, but attitude counts a lot."
- "...you just sit and work all the time."
- "Because they don't be strict on the students and they let them talk."
- "The teachers are too leanient [sic]."

☹**Poorly/Very Poorly**:

- "Sometimes people like being in ISS."
- "People (or just me) think ISS is cool because you get out of boring classes and play the computer."
- "They like sitting in a room with no one talking."
- "Not well because people go in for something and then get out and do the same thing again."
- "If you get put in there for not wearing a gym suit, what good is that going to do? If no one want to wear [it], they're not going to."
- "Kids just do what they want anyway."
- "People like to be in ISS because they like it better than class, usually."
- "Sometimes it works but it seems that the same people break the rules."
- "I'd rather be there than in class so I can get more work done."
- "If people didn't like going into ISS then they wouldn't be trying to get in trouble."
- "ISS don't [sic] teach students anything. It's basically a slap on the wrist and being told not to do it again."

Appendix E

Parents' Responses to Survey

Question 1

a. I don't know

b. I'm not sure I know -- have a vague idea

c. I think going to ISS is to allow students to complete school work and not being suspended

Question 2

a. no

b. yes, 1 time for fighting

c. yes, 3 times, for fighting, skipping school, kissing in hall

Question 3

a. As a parent, I don't know

b. Study assigned classwork in a room apart from their regular classes, not conversing with other ISS students or participate in other school activities.

c. They are supposed to do their school work.

Question 4

a. A place for students who are disruptive in class or within the school boundaries.

b. ISS should be used for all the behaviors except incomplete homework or extremes in the above mentioned behaviors.

c. I think students should be placed there so they don't disrupt the class for other students that want to learn.

Question 5

a. Can't answer; I don't know because my children have nothing to do with ISS.

b. 4, My child did not enjoy ISS and does not wish to experience it again.

c. 3, I think how well this works is up to the student. At this point in their life, they do things for attention and don't see things that they are in ISS for as being wrong.

Question 6

a. --

b. Chronic incomplete homework that results in poor grades could be handled with a tutoring class similar to ISS but separate and only for a brief amount of time.

c. I think maybe students need to do some extra work, in addition to doing their regular work. Some students like this set up becuase they get more individualt attnetion than they do in regular classrooms.

Appendix F

Specific Adolescent Needs

Helen Guisler, Tonya Hoffman

- Recognition as an individual
- To be listened to, to be taken seriously
- Structure/parenting
- Freedom and flexibility to try new things
- Information and help processing it
- Peer approval and acceptance
- Concrete examples and reasoning
- Adult figures to model and trust
- A way to communicate to others
- An outlet to release their high energy

Appendix G

ERICKSON'S STAGE THEORY OF "PSYCHOSOCIAL CRISES"

STAGE	TASK	FAVORABLE OUTCOME	UNFAVORABLE OUTCOME
Adolescence	Identity v. Confusion	Seeing oneself as a unique and integrated person	Confusion over who or what one really is

HIGH RISK PROFILE

1. Little/No Experience Feeling Capable
2. Does Not Feel Important/Significant
3. External Locus of Control
4. Poorly Developed Intra-Personal Skills
5. Poor Communication Skills
6. Lacks Ability to Interrelate Within a System
7. Makes Poor Judgement

END

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