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Pre-Proposal for a Research Project

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Pre-proposal for a Research Project

Title of the Study

School Climate: A Significant Contributing Factor to the Achievement Gap or Not?

Research Paradigm

This proposal and its research paradigm would be most accurately described as Post-Positivism with some criteria of research system thinking falling into the Interpretivist/Constructivist paradigm. The Post-Positivism paradigm seems to be most appropriate because of the focus and reason for this research. The proposed project is based on understanding and describing, from multiple perspectives, the reality of school climate affecting the achievement gap. The only aspect of the research paradigms that overlaps concerns the theory. Both Post-Positivism and Interpretivist/Constructivist accurately describe how theory is viewed and will potential be used in the proposal. Theory in this proposal is fallible, revisable, and a description of how a group's meaning system is generated and sustained.

Statement of the Problem

There has been an increase of violence in school settings in Colorado Springs, Colorado, especially schools located in low socioeconomic areas and areas with high minority populations. As the deterioration of school climate among the students has increased, it has become clear that this problem is negatively affecting the learning that takes place within the classroom walls. It is important for the leaders, teachers included in this description, of the schools to take control of the situation by understanding their beliefs about violence and its effects on school culture and climate; their actions, whether reactive or educational, in and around the school when violence occurs, and their students' reaction to a violent school or negative school culture.

Background and Context for the Problem

There is one school in particular in the Colorado Springs area where violence seems to be more of an issue. In order to maintain its anonymity, this school will be referred to as XS High School. This title 1 high school is located on the south side of Colorado Springs. The socioeconomic status of the students which XS High School serves is low. Many of the students come from single parent homes or come from homes with severe domestic abuse issues. Many of the Latino students come from non-English speaking homes. At the beginning of the school year, 77% of the students were on free and reduced lunches. There is a large population of African American students, 52% of the population, a large number of Latino Americans, 34% of the population, and a small percentage of Anglo American or other ethnicities, the remaining 14% make up the share of the population.

Within the last two years this school has had several gang fights, which extend from Bloods and Crips to the rivalries of the Mexican gangs of the Sureños and Norteños. There have been several gang fight that have been racial motivated instead affiliation motivated.

Importance or Significance of the Study

There is a huge deficit of proficiency in all areas, reading, writing and math, across the board. The data suggests students attending XS High School as a whole are under performing between 10-15% below the state average in the required testing areas. This can be attributed to many factors, both home and school based. However, the school climate and the amount of violence occurring in the halls, cafeteria, and classrooms are severely affecting the learning environment. Every year for the past four years, the amount of school violence has risen by at least 6% and while academic scores have dropped by at least 7% in the core content areas. Also,

in the past four years there has been a high teacher turnover due to lack of support and staff morale. In each of the past four years, the teacher retention rate has been around 58-62%.

Many staff and students have stated in district meetings that they are fearful of what may happen on any given day, at any given time, and in any given location. This is an important issue to address for if this is not a safe environment, learning cannot occur.

Research Design

Ethnographic designs are based in the post-positivism paradigm because their purpose is to understand and describe patterns of cultural variables over a period of time. Observation is a key factor in this model. This model seems to be most appropriate for this research problem because the focus is on understanding the school climate, which is a part of the school culture, and the populations belief of the effect of it.. This study would be an exploration of understanding a particular aspect of the school culture and how it affects the beliefs about learning from all sides. Since ethnographic designs consist of three types, I would be using the first, the realist ethnographies, which is an account of a situation, usually observed by a third party person and is unbiased. Several steps are required to ensure this happens.

As this proposal is further specified, it becomes clear that the very nature of the plan itself and how it plays out is true ethnographic design. This is seen particularly in the section Data Collection and Data Analysis and Interpretation. Though steps in conducting ethnographic design are key, it is important to understand why one is taking on this study (step one), and this is indicated in the aforementioned sections of the proposal. The respect the site in which one is conducting the study (step two), use multiple types of data collection to make sure the study is not biased (step three), make sure interpretations are balanced (step four), and make sure finding

shed light on knowledge of shared patterns (step five) are specifically detailed in throughout the entirety of the proposal.

It is because of the plan itself to complete the research that makes ethnography most suitable.

Research Purpose Statement

The purpose for this ethnographic research is to understand the beliefs systems and actions that cause the poor school climate and to propose a plan to decrease the violence that is occurring within the school by supporting parents, staff, and students to create and enforce policies that will make violence an unacceptable offense. This needs to be done because in the age of school shootings and student violence on the rise, our society is needs to send a message that fear will no longer stop institutions from filtering out those who wish to corrupt society rather than promote it. Schools are on the frontlines of this battle due to the fact that it is the institutional trade to form the foundation for which students build their lives.

Research Questions

In order to better understand this problem that is evidently contributing to the achievement gap and causing learning to be secondary; ethnographic design research will be required to determine:

- What is the belief on how school climate affect the achievement gap, especially for students in a low socioeconomic educational setting?

By examining this central question, the following sub questions will also be explored.

- How much learning students feel they absorb based on the school climate?
- How many meaningful and effective teaching practices do administrators and students feel are employed by teachers based on the status of the school climate?

- How much do staff, students, and administrators believe current school policy plays a factor in violence continuation?

Annotated Bibliography

Aronson, J. (2004, November). *The Threat of Stereotype*. *Educational Leadership*, 62(3), 14-19.

Retrieved April 8, 2008, from Academic Search Premier database.

Joshua Aronson, a professor of Psychology and Education at NYU and co-director of the National Task Force on the Achievement Gap at NYU, suggests that the achievement gap is based on the psychological factors associated with cultural and racial stereotyping. He asserts, that the achievement gap is a true phenomenon that is negatively affecting our educational system. In the article, he contends that it is our society and its negative impressions of certain groups, who un-coincidentally are those struggling most in the achievement gap, psychologically drives people who are members of those groups to achieve less because it is what it expected of them. Aronson believes that one of the most contributing factors to the achievement gap is more psychological, than it is some of the other concrete factors. Aronson argues stereotyping has a definite and credible effect on the achievement of students who fall within the cultural or social classes that are attached to negative stigmas. This article stated “by age 6, virtually everyone in our culture is aware of a variety of cultural stereotypes... [and] suggests that the stereotypes are widely believed” (p. 7). He furthers his assertion that half of white Americans believe the disparaging stereotypes of black and Latinos. These widely held beliefs or stereotypes contribute to an almost subconscious feeling of inferiority among these groups and have made students “hyperaware” of this credence, leading them to question their abilities and confidence in themselves, regardless of whether they had the same advantages and positive factors as those of white students.

This source was good for understand cultural beliefs and norms of society, which indirectly fits with understanding norms and social connection with impoverished people. There was a lot of support with other research in this article and it was helpful in comprehending how societal beliefs contribute to actions.

Barton, P. (2004, November). *Why Does the Gap Persist?*. *Educational Leadership*, 62(3), 8-13.

Retrieved April 8, 2008, from Academic Search Premier database.

According to Paul Barton (2004), an education writer, Senior associate in the Educational Testing Service Policy Information Center, and author of “Why Does the Gap Persist?” asserts that there are 14 factors that effect student achievement, or lack thereof, creating this deficit in learning, which is crippling our educational system. These factors are rooted in five significant areas: Developmental Environment, Home Learning Conditions, Student Mobility, Home-School Connections, and School Factors. While Barton(2004) contends that the achievement gap has subtly been in existence since the desegregation of school in 1956, it is now something that primarily affects students of color and students who stem from low socioeconomic areas. This article gives compelling statistics and information that lead the reader to conclude that “both school and non school factors underlie the achievement gap” (p. 9).

This article was extremely helpful in discerning what other factors contribute to the achievement gap and how to use those factors as possible variable in this study. There was also extensive previous research completed, which made this more credible!

Farmer, T., Farmer, E., Estell, D., & Hutchins, B. (2007, December). *The Developmental*

Dynamics of Aggression and the Prevention of School Violence. *Journal of Emotional &*

Behavioral Disorders, 15(4), 197-208. Retrieved May 8, 2008, from CINAHL with Full

Text database.

“The Developmental Dynamics of Aggression and the Prevention of School Violence” (2007) is a qualitative research study that explores the philosophical solutions to the dynamic of what causes violent tendencies in students. One of the major factors in this study is the idea of social dominance. It discusses how humans need to be socially dominate is a primal factor. It also goes further to say that in this primal nature, intellectual dominance is secondary. Though this is not directly tied to my purpose of study, I think it indirectly yields information as to why the climate and not the education is becoming primary to students.

Another interesting and useful thing about this particular article is that it too discusses home factors as means for contributing to social aggression and violence. This also helps me in my study because it can further solidify my research on which factors most contribute to the achievement gap, home or school factors. This type of information can help me establish a nature versus nurture approach and whether negative things at home can be unlearned through a nurturing climate at school.

Greene, M. (2008, February). *Reducing School Violence: School-Based Curricular Programs and School Climate*. *Prevention Researcher*, 15(1), 12-16. Retrieved May 8, 2008, from CINAHL with Full Text database.

The article “Reducing School Violence: School-Based Curricular Programs and School Climate” is written by Dr. Michael Greene in 2008. In this article, Greene (2008) approaches and critiques two different methods of reducing school violence. The first approach is based on a curriculum put in place to teach coping skills and behavior practices to the students on school wide scale.

The second approach is improving school climate through examination of teacher/student relationship, administration/student relationships, and teacher/administration relationships. This second approach also explores the depth and breadth to which school rules and policies are enforced. The article describes how professional curricula is an asset but the problem of school climate can only be solved by integrating the curricula with sound enforcement of policy because “effective strategies have not been developed to change school climate in ways that are robust and replicable” (p. 5).

Though this article only focuses on the school violence and its effect of school climate portion of my study, it offers helpful strategies and research based probability for effecting school climate. This is particularly important because without establishing strategies for correction of the school factors for the achievement gap, one cannot begin to measure the improvement in skills and the amount of effect climate has on the gap.

Wong, M., Rosemond, M., Stein, B., Langley, A., Kataoka, S., & Nadeem, E. (2007, February).

School-Based Intervention for Adolescents Exposed to Violence. Prevention Researcher, 14(1), 17-20. Retrieved May 8, 2008, from CINAHL with Full Text database.

“School-Based Intervention for Adolescents Exposed to Violence” is an article that focuses on intervention for those who have experienced trauma. This article explores how violence and trauma create more violence for students who only observe violence as a means for solving problems. Enumerating also the academic effects of violence and trauma, this article solidifies the finds of other researchers who state that the achievement gap is affected by school climate, which in many cases is violent and traumatizing.

One other specific aspect of this article is that the interventions listed in it do not take in account of social, racial, or cultural factors that could contribute to the interventions success.

This was interesting because much of school wide violence occur in areas where there is a high concentration of specific ethnic groups or socioeconomic status. This tells me that this article was very thorough in explaining the short coming of the interventions, but this article may only prove to be helpful in establishing the violence correlation with poor academic results.

Data Collection

Observation is vital in reporting during this sort of qualitative research because it is based in group beliefs, attitudes, and actions. Groups can be defined as educational or cultural. For the purpose of this study, both will be examined. The objectives will be to observe and evaluate the following:

- the teachers' attitude towards school violence, learning, and achievement gap factors
- the administrations' attitude towards violence, learning, and achievement gap factors
- the students' attitude towards school violence, learning, and home life
- the learning environment and school climate

Upon observing these, my objective will be to accurately report findings of observations and evaluations, then to create a solution that addresses the dynamics of violence, a reduction of violence and increase of learning, and proactive interventions. This project observation would begin during new teacher induction and veteran teacher return at the beginning of the school year, August. The project observation would cease during Spring Break, March. All data would be collected, interpreted, and data-based solution should be ready to present by the first week in May in preparation for the next school year.

The strategies used to achieve the first set of objectives will be based on field notes, questionnaires, and interviews. The field notes will be taken while observing the teachers' reaction and general attitude when violence occurs and how learning is approached in light of the violence. The field notes will be used in the same manner when observing administrators, especially the way they handle school violence on an administrative level and their attitudes toward the amount learning taking place. Finally field notes when concerning students will be used to record their tendencies toward violence, the belief system associated with violence, their attitude towards learning in such an environment.

The questionnaires will be used as one of the evaluative tools. Many times people will say they believe one way then act another. This specific tool will be used to determine and evaluate the discrepancies between what is said and what is done on account of all participants.

The interviews will be used to complete the second set of objectives pertaining to discovering a realistic and viable solution to reducing violence and increasing learning in order to close the achievement gap. The interviews will be conducted with all participants of the study.

The implementation of this plan includes various steps. Step one is to obtain site permission for qualitative research. The researcher will be responsible for gaining permission in this first step. This includes writing letters of intention to School Board, Superintendent, and site Principal. This step will take place during the early part of August before staff reconvenes from summer break. Once approval is granted from the upper echelons of the system, obtaining permission from a teacher in the core areas (reading, writing, math, and science) will come into play. The study will need a teacher from each of the core areas at each of the high school levels freshman through senior. It will be both the teachers' and researcher's responsibility for

informing the parents of the observational study that will be occurring in the classroom. This should be done within the first week of school. Upon gaining teacher participants' permission and informing families of research, the project will move forward.

Step two is inclusive of observations of teachers, administrators, and students within the educational environment. Field notes will be taken as a means of recording without bias the belief, attitudes, and actions towards school violence when it occurs. The same will be done in terms of field notes recording the learning taking place. Because ethnographic research is based on spending extensive time at a site and with the groups being studied, this is the stage in which a rapport of trust and confidentiality is established by the researcher. Step two will take place during August through December five days a week while school is in session.

Moving on to step three will include the questionnaire portion of the study. All questionnaires will remain anonymous. The questionnaires will be a culmination of the types of beliefs, attitudes, and actions being observed during the first six months of field observations. The generation of the questionnaire will take one month and will be the responsibility of the researcher. The questionnaire that will be dispersed to educators, administrators, and students will be scaled from 5 being strongly agree to 1 being strongly disagree. The questions will range from topics concerning the idea of violence stemming from the need to be socially dominant (Farmer et al, 2007) to the school climate being conducive to learning. The questionnaire will have approximately 25 questions on it. Adult participants will have granted permission during the initial permission request. It will be the researcher's responsibility to not only gather a sample population that is indicative of the school population as a whole but to also request names of student from teachers and administrators whose families would be mostly likely to let them participate.

Step four will be conducted simultaneously with step three. During step four the interviews will be arranged by the researcher. The researcher will try to interview students who will be participating in the questionnaire to maintain consistency. Though this might not be totally possible, interviews will be arranged to the sample population representative of total school population. Interviews will be one-on-one and conducted in a quiet location. The subject matter of the interview will be based on solutions to the problems with school violence, school climate and learning taking place that were observed in the first several months of the study. It will also focus on whether a curriculum put in place to teach coping skills and behavior practices to the students on school wide scale would be most beneficial or whether school rules and policies are to be more strictly enforced or a combination of the two (Greene, 2008). Steps three and four will take place from January to March.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Step five will be the collection, interpretation, and analysis of all data. It is during this step that the observations, questionnaires, and interviews will yield a means for finding a viable solution that will address violence, school climate, and closing the achievement gap. During this time, comparative research may be conducted in order to find current school programs dealing with these issues that already work. It is during this time that I will compare field noted, questionnaires, and interviews to determine similarities in beliefs about school climate and its affect on the achievement gap. Triangulation may be used at this time to fit all data into specific categories. Step five will be conducted during all of April and into the first part of May.

Finally, step six will be the presentation of the findings of field observations and questionnaires, and it will also be the presentation of possible solutions based on the findings of the study, the interviews, and comparative research, if necessary. This will be presented at a

meeting in which students, parents, teachers, and administrators are invited. Though the research report will be complete, the researcher understands that implementation of suggested plan may take longer. Suggestions at the presentation can be made and school action can be scheduled at a later date for voting and implementation of new solution by School Board, Superintendent, and site Administration. Step six will take place in May.

Ethical Considerations

The proper protocol and ethical considerations that a researcher must understand are described in the Belmont Report (1979). In order to ensure that I uphold the basic ethical principles, it is important that I focus on the following aspect as outlined:

RESPECT FOR PERSONS – The manner in which I can show respect for the participants included in my research study, gaining consent from the adults and assent from mature young adult participants is a must. Since personal protection from harm or negative consequence is a factor in the respect for persons, I will be sure to inform them on how the research will be used and ensure them of confidentiality. I will be using survey design, and the surveys being used will be conducted anonymously. Because of the nature of my research, I must know participants age, race, professional background (for adults) and educational background (for minors). I cannot avoid the fact that they may potentially be identified through these means; however, since I will be conducting the surveys on such a large scale, it is doubtful that they will be identified through their participation in the surveys.

BENEFICENCE – Because of the fact that my research is based on the idea of improving educational factors that contribute to the achievement gap, the entire study is about maximizing possible benefits to participants. There is no way that my study could cause mental, physical, or psychological damage to the participants because I am simply evaluating their thoughts, ideas,

and experiences in regards to a particular educational phenomenon.

JUSTICE – Participants from the site in which the study will be conducted will be equally represented. All associations or groups from the site (teacher, students, administrators, and parents) will have an opportunity to participate, ensuring that the questions of merit and worthiness to participate are eliminated.

The other ethical considerations that need to be made to ensure proper research protocol is identifying intangible conflicts of interest. Because I have a very vested interest in the location that sparked my interest in this research problem, I will have to find a site with similar demographic because it will impossible for me to conduct the research at the site in which I work.

Limitations of the Research Project

Since this is a qualitative ethnography, observation and data collection are the only tools used. Because of the nature of the study, it would be difficult to determine the effects and effectiveness of this proposal. However, the implementation of the proposal itself is realistic and timely for the type and breadth of research that is to be conducted. Implementation of the solution based on the finding would be another type of study all together. Though it could be coupled with the ethnography, it would have to be quantitative and therefore would change the entire scope of this study and the manner in which it was presented.

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