Chapter 7

Prevalence Estimates of Behavior Problems in Primary Schools in Trinidad and Tobago: A Baseline Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

There is tremendous concern about the behavior of students in schools today, to the extent that teachers have become extremely concerned about the loss of teaching time and have developed general frustration with behavior management in and outside the classroom (Trinidad Express, 2014). Therefore, the need to put the spotlight on problem behaviors by way of initial inquiry has arisen. This chapter presents a quantitative investigation of behavior problems in primary schools in Trinidad and Tobago. After eight weeks of in-service training, the following three areas of problem behaviors were examined by a group of 14 teacher-researchers: 1) conduct problems; 2) attention deficit hyperactivity syndrome; and 3) under-activity syndrome. Data were collected and initially analyzed across the eight school districts in Trinidad and Tobago, using the ASCA-H Behavioral Rating Scales for Elementary Schools. The findings indicate significant behavior problems at every level and in every district of the school system, with notable differential by gender. There was less variability in class level and educational district. Recommendations for policy and future research point primarily to a need to channel urgently, critical resources into further inquiry and implement interventions guided by evidence-based strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

At the primary school level, problem behaviors are of particular concern because an infectious culture of academic negativism and misdemeanours can frustrate teaching and learning and disrupt the school routine (Adams, 2009). Evidence suggests that such behaviors in the classroom have far-reaching impact that extends beyond the misbehaving student’s own school achievement (McKee, Rivkin, & Sims, 2010). While it may be perceived as “typical” that children will periodically act in ways that deviate from acceptable standards of behavior as a part of their growing experience, cause for concern arises when these behaviors are consistent and widespread. In Trinidad and Tobago (TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO), it has been observed casually that more and more students are exhibiting problem behaviors. Worrell, Watkins and Hall (2002) suggested that evidence for this exists through society’s perception that school was “better” long ago, through media reports about increasing crime statistics, and through casual observations in our classes, schools, and communities. Further, it is estimated that 20% of our students have learning, behavioral and emotional difficulties and that approximately 10% of the students require counselling, career, academic and/ or personal/social guidance (Gopeesingh, 2015). All of these types of casual or non-systematic observations need to be verified by data.

The Context of Trinidad and Tobago

Education in TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO is free at the primary and secondary levels and attendance at school is compulsory for children between the ages of 5 and 12 (which is the age span of primary level schooling). Virtually all children attend primary school. UNICEF (2015) estimated the primary school survival rate to last primary grade for the years 2009-2013 at 89% based on administrative data. Primary school levels range from Infant One and Infant Two, which are comparable to kindergarten and first grade, respectively, in the United States (US), and Standards One through Five, which are comparable to second through sixth grade in the US. The issue of safety and security in schools has generated considerable interest from different sections of society and is one of our overriding concerns. A learning environment has to be safe and devoid of fear of all hazardous elements that might harm or impede education. Since the ban in the year 2000 on corporal punishment from primary schools in TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO, there has been an intensification of national concerns over the discipline of school children (Charles, 2011). The government has indicated plans to research and understand the root causes of deviant behavior in schools and to develop policies to prevent and eradicate negative behavior and better manage the entire school environment (Education Sector Strategic Plan: 2011 – 2015).
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