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The Perceptions of Charter School Administrators and Leadership Personnel on Delinquency

INTRODUCTION

The issue of school safety has been on the rise, most notably since the infamous Columbine Shooting in 1999. Since then, the safety of schools has become an increasingly important debate as a result of the “Columbine Effect” (Muschert, 2019), which examines how the 1999 school shooting impacted school violence advocacy and concerns. With the rise of school safety concerns comes the question of delinquency and how it can be addressed to give students the best school experience. Studies have shown that school choice in non-public schools can have greater effects on a student’s social behaviors, such as decreased chances of becoming arrested or incarcerated (McEachin, 2020). Keeping this in mind, school safety and the presence of delinquency are other reasons why some parents choose specific schools for their children (Hamlin, 2020). Since safety is so important, it is one of the most common attributes that draws parents to find an alternative to public school for their children (Hamlin, 2019).

School choice, a movement initiated by Minnesota’s Open Enrollment Law in 1989 (Rubenstein, 1992), allows parents to freely choose which public school would best fit both their needs and their children's needs. These opportunities have created a competition between public schools and other schooling classifications (e.g., charter schools, private schools, homeschooling) to increase their enrollment.

Plenty of school safety research is performed in large public school systems in highly populated urban areas like New York City (Christensen, 2007) or Detroit (Hamlin, 2020). Not enough research has gone into school choice or different school classifications, especially when it comes to charter schools since their emergence in the last 20 years. While zoning is the main technique to assign students to a school in their home county, parents do not have much of a choice when it comes to public schooling. However, we know now that school choice encourages parents to look at other options, such as paying tuition or joining a lottery, with the promise that their children will be in an elevated and safer environment than in a public school.

The abundance of research in public schools could be attributed to the large number of public schools in the country compared to charter schools. By the 2021-22 school year, a total of 7,800 charter schools were registered in the U.S., compared to the 91,400 registered public schools (NCES, 2023). There is no question that a sample of that size would make research easier and more abundant, especially when questioning their efficiency, safety, and academic performance. Although charter schools only started to emerge in the early '90s, there remains an underwhelming amount of research on them. While many researchers focus on comparing public and charter school testing performance, many forget to look into other factors that promise a better environment if a parent were to choose a charter school (McEachin, 2020).

The following research serves to understand the perceptions of delinquency from the eyes of administrators in charter schools. This research is intended to examine how students in charter schools exhibit delinquent behavior, how they may differ from public schools, and what administrators believe can be done to reduce the presence of delinquency in their charter schools. It will also be used to see if administrators believe a charter school's environment and

disciplinary tactics influence a student to commit fewer acts of delinquency, and if the tactics their school uses would be worth passing on to public schools for support.

The importance of researching charter schools stems from the need to understand their purpose and standing as they relate to public schools. While most of the existing research notes their testing scores, only a handful of literature goes in-depth into their school safety and delinquency (Eden, 2017). This then asks the question of what kind of delinquent behaviors students exhibit, and what the approaches that administrators take to correct these actions.

While researchers may use public schools as a priority for longitudinal research, it is important to realize that charter schools can yield information that is just as valuable. Since charter schools have not existed for as long, it is even more imperative that research of this kind is conducted.

From the current literature (Christensen, 2007), we know that Charter Schools give the perception of being safer than rival public schools due to the prestige and environment they present to parents. Many studies (Eden, 2017) show that school safety is perceived by parents and students through testing how safe they feel in the charter school environment. By conducting surveys, researchers found that many more students in charter schools experience less bullying, delinquency, and lack of safety compared to the perceptions of safety from public school students (Eden, 2017). Other research (Hamlin, 2020) shows that the physical condition of the building contributes a lot to a parent's perception of school safety, closely following the parameters of the broken windows theory, where correcting small issues, like an unkept building, will soon combat bigger issues like delinquency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing Perceptions of Charter School Safety

Before researching to learn about administrators' and leadership personnel's perceptions of delinquency, it is important to look at what existing perceptions have already been published. This pre-existing knowledge is useful for a study of this kind to offer a foundation to build upon. By understanding the perceptions of school safety from teachers and students, we can help inform the administration's decision on implementing effective conduct policies in charter schools.

According to Eden (2017), student and teacher surveys showed that charter schools were ranked higher in safety than public schools. Using a school safety survey of New York City schools, students and teachers in charter schools were asked questions about their perceptions of safety in their schools. Eden surveyed 150 elementary, middle, and high school charter school students on their perceptions of their safety in school by selecting answers ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Eden then compared these answers to the 2016-17 NYC School Survey, which asks public school students and teachers about their school climate and school safety in a similar format. The survey done by Eden gauged each student’s perception of safety in their school, asking about how safe they felt and if they felt there was criminal and gang activity in their school. Compared to their public school counterparts, Eden concluded that the students surveyed across 150 charter schools reported that 43% of schools were safer, 16% were less safe, and 41% were roughly as safe compared to their neighboring public schools. Out of the schools that were found to be safer, 38% were elementary schools, 41% were middle schools, and 21% were high schools.

Eden's study shows that the perception of safety among students in charter schools in New York City was slightly higher compared to students and teachers in public schools. Regardless of the student and teacher's demographics or community ties, they perceive a charter school in higher regard when thinking about the safety of its environment. Eden also noted that their study offers insights into the differences in conditions between the school classifications, which could be attributed to the perceptions shown in their research.

On a similar note, a study done by Hamlin (2020), who interviewed parents who belong to charter and public schools, learned about their perceptions of school safety. He sought to determine why parents chose charter schools for safety reasons and interviewed teachers for their perceptions to contextualize and support the parents' responses. The study was held in Detroit, MI, which is now known as a "deindustrialized city," which indicates population loss, industrial decline, and urban decay. The city's high crime rate also contributes to parents' increasing need for school safety. Hamlin concluded that parents' perceptions of school safety relate largely to violence, crime, and bullying, which are aspects that can be found abundantly in communities like Detroit and similar cities across the country. Hamlin mentions that other factors, like fear of victimization, physical building conditions, and classroom conduct, also play a role in parents' perceptions. This study showed that a parent's perception of safety relied heavily on these factors, which were supported by the perceptions of safety demonstrated by the teachers who were interviewed.

Frequency of Safety Issues in Charter Schools

The frequency at which safety issues arise in charter schools greatly impacts whether it is considered a safe school environment (Christensen, 2007). Since the frequency of the problems will equate to a school's level of safety, it is important to understand what that frequency looks

like. The existing literature shows how safety issues are presented in charter schools and how frequently they arise. Knowing this information is useful for giving context to why parents look for safer school environments and how administrators' perceptions of delinquency are affected by the number of school safety issues they see.

Christensen (2007) believed that a safe school environment is critical for a student's physical and mental well-being. For this reason, he looked at whether charter schools posed more or less safety challenges than typical public schools. By using the School and Staffing Survey released in 2006, Christensen was able to gather data from school teachers and principals on their perceptions of school safety and discipline while also gauging their thoughts on how often delinquency arose in their schools. The survey responses included teachers and principals from both charter schools and public schools, which allowed Christensen to make comparisons.

Christensen's (2007) research found that public school principals and teachers were more likely to report instances of safety and discipline concerns than those working in charter schools. These instances, as shown in the survey results, include more serious issues than just horseplay among students. They include bullying, fights, possession of weapons, and physical abuse of teachers, to name a few. When it comes to threats to persons and property, Christensen found that public schools were 9% more likely to report that physical conflicts happen at least once a week and 9% more likely to report that bullying happens at least once a week.

Data were also collected on behavioral problems from the survey. Various behavioral problems, such as disrespect towards teachers, verbal abuse towards teachers, and widespread classroom disorder, were reported significantly more for charter schools compared to threats to persons and property. In fact, the survey revealed that daily widespread classroom disorder was more commonly reported in charter schools than in public schools by 15%. This data presents the

idea that charter schools were generally less disruptive in instances of delinquency that threatened people or property. When considering the idea of “school choice”, this is an important conclusion to look at for a parent looking for the safest options for their child.

Another indicator of the frequency of delinquency can be found when comparing different school classifications or sectors. DeAngelis & Leuken (2020) collected survey data from 618 schools in Indiana to determine the relationship between different school sectors (i.e., private, public, and charter) and school safety-related issues and practices. Similarly to Christensen, this study found that charter school leaders are 28% more likely to report ‘never’ having serious school safety issues regarding physical abuse of teachers, and 15% more likely to report ‘never’ having gang activity. However, they are 5% less likely to report ‘never’ having students physically fight and 5% less likely to report ‘never’ having peer-to-peer bullying. The results from this study show that leaders in public schools report fewer school safety-related issues than traditional public schools by a significant amount. Charter schools are 28% more likely to report ‘never’ having a student abuse teachers and 17% more likely to report ‘never’ having gang activity. Because of how significant these percentages are compared to traditional public schools, DeAngelis and Leuken (2020) determined that the school sector, combined with the frequency of safety issues, is an important factor in creating a positive school environment for students to thrive in.

By monitoring the frequency of school safety issues, it is possible to gain a basic understanding of how prevalent delinquent behavior is in a charter school. Being able to make this connection will help administrators and leadership personnel gain a better understanding of how students exhibit delinquency and how they can become better equipped to address it. It will also help parents stay informed about their choice in school when it comes to determining the

safety of its environment, which can push administrators to adopt new disciplinary techniques and plans of action.

Charter Schools' Effects on Social Behavior

While most of the current literature on charter schools examines school performance or its environment, and school safety, not many researchers look into the long-term effects on students' "social behavior" or the actions they engage in outside of school. The idea of a charter school environment is assumed to improve the environment of a student's education, which includes academics and school safety. However, the true test of this "improved" environment seems to be researching the long-term effects it has on a student's behavior outside of the classroom. McEachin, Lauen, Fuller, and Perera (2020) believe that long-term effects on behavior are a determining factor in school choice for parents.

McEachin et al. (2020) used data from a longitudinal study of students enrolled in North Carolina public schools (including charter schools) and public offender records in North Carolina to compare where each child ended up since their time in a charter school. McEachin studied over 9,500 charter school students to make conclusions on things such as being convicted of a crime as an adult, being convicted of a misdemeanor as an adult, and being convicted of a felony as an adult. By looking at both short- and long-term effects, McEachin found that students who join a charter school in 9th grade are 2% less likely to be chronically absent and 7% less likely to be suspended from school, as well as being convicted of crimes as adults.

McEachin et al. revealed that a student's involvement in a charter school results in more positive effects on their social behavior, especially when looking at their involvement with the criminal justice system. By understanding the effects a charter school has on social behavior, not just academic achievement, other public schools can benefit from adopting the techniques that

lessen a student's probability of interacting with the criminal justice system. This can eventually lead to reductions in issues like the school-to-prison pipeline, which McEachin attributes to chronic truancy and other issues seen in traditional public schools. If charter schools employ techniques that can avoid this, then their effects on social behavior could be even greater in the long term.

Addressing the effects that charter schools have on social behavior is a topic that has piqued many researchers' interest. When it comes to the effects on poor urban students, Dobbie and Fryer (2015) looked into how charter schools can increase a student's achievement in what they called "medium-term" outcomes. These outcomes include high school graduation, drug use, teen pregnancy, and incarceration about 10 years after winning this lottery. Dobbie and Fryer used survey data from students who entered the 2005-2006 lottery into a charter school called the Promise Academy, which included 407 responses.

The researchers used these data to create an estimate for how likely students who were admitted into the Promise Academy would participate in different human capital decisions and risky behaviors. They found that female students who won the lottery into the Promise Academy were 10% less likely to report having a teen pregnancy than those who lost the lottery. Male winners of the lottery were also 4% less likely to report being incarcerated at any point after winning the lottery compared to those who lost the lottery. Through these survey results, Dobbie and Fryer estimated that students were less likely to engage in risky behaviors if they won the lottery compared to those who lost. While this study was conducted roughly 10 years after the lottery concluded, the researchers assessed that these risky behaviors could be better understood with subsequent follow-ups to truly test if involvement in a charter school has an impact on the students' behavior.

Being able to see the different effects that a charter school may have on a student's future is important when parents consider school choice. Because of the fewer instances of unsafe encounters in charter schools, the research shows just how effective an education in a charter school may be. It can be determined that the less delinquent behavior and school safety issues a charter school has, the more successful a student will be in that environment. Because of this idea, it is still a question as to why charter school students engage in delinquent behaviors. The school environment is shown to be safer with more promises of future achievement, so understanding how an administrator or leadership personnel views this delinquency can have a large impact on how to reduce these issues. It can then help improve the effectiveness of disciplinary techniques used in other schools when dealing with their own issues of delinquency and school safety.

What Makes a Charter School 'Safer'

With this discussion on charter school safety, it is also important to look at what exactly makes a charter school safer than traditional public schools. Many external factors could affect this conclusion, including familial factors, community factors, school location, and access to resources. It must be noted that school safety can be determined by more than the factors previously listed, and these factors are what influence parents in school choice. With school safety being their top priority, we must look at what constitutes a charter school as "safer" than traditional public schools.

Hamlin and Li (2021) used 5 waves of data from the School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS) to examine which factors contribute to charter schools presenting a "safer" environment. These surveys include data from 12,698 schools, 322 of which were charter schools. Hamlin and Li found that charter schools typically reported fewer incidents and

disruptions (e.g., gang activity) than traditional public schools at a significantly lower rate. This conclusion was determined by using different sociodemographic, school, and neighborhood characteristics. These factors and demographics were identified by the researchers using the SSOCS, which asks about school functions like safety practices, school crime, and violence rates.

Initially, the research found that families who participate in school choice and choose charter schools typically have greater social resources, commitment to their children's development, and motivation to seek positive developmental experiences for their children. It was then concluded that these children would have a lower risk of presenting delinquent behavior in schools, given these familial factors. This contributes to the root problem of school safety and disruptions, as students who are less likely to present delinquent behavior due to familial factors will affect how they behave in school. It was also found that school size, school-based parent volunteering, school removal/suspension, and school disciplinary actions were some of the major factors that caused charter schools to report less crime, violence, and disruptions. Many charter schools typically enroll fewer students than a traditional public school, which would equate to fewer incidents occurring and thus having to be reported. However, the researchers compared small, midsize, and large charter schools to their public school counterparts of similar size to make fair conclusions. Additionally, parent involvement and disciplinary actions like suspensions also seem to curb the number of incidents that occur in charter schools, which presents a safer school environment for parents when deciding where to enroll their students.

FAMILIAL AND COMMUNITY TIES

After analyzing the existing research, it is important to note that familial and community predictors should be considered when looking at delinquent behaviors in students (Hamlin & Li, 2020). For example, charter schools may have lower in delinquency because of the various social classes found in their student population. This means that a charter school with more students from middle or upper social classes may find lower rates of delinquency than a public school in a completely lower social class environment.

It is important to note that the community each school serves, whether public or charter, varies in ways that may affect the population of students seen in schools. Aspects of familial and community ties, for example, impact the way a student is socialized outside of school, which then translates to behavior that is exhibited within the school (Hamlin & Li, 2020). For example, parents who choose to enroll their children in charter schools tend to place higher value on structure, discipline, and high expectations (Hamlin & Li, 2020).

These factors matter when reviewing the existing literature on charter schools and relating their delinquency to public schools. Understanding that the student populations in both school classifications can differ greatly will give context to the following research. Being able to determine charter school administrators' perceptions of delinquency found in their student population will help greatly in the public school versus charter school debate on which is safer, with lower rates of delinquency. Nonetheless, if charter school administrators have specific policies or experiences that public schools can benefit from, it is important to understand what they may be doing right so that these can be shared with public schools.

LIMITATIONS OF PAST RESEARCH

This research followed a topic that is still relatively new to the educational and criminal justice literature. When it comes to determining characteristics of school safety in charter

schools, understanding perceptions, and examining the effectiveness of a charter school environment, there is still a great need for research to expand our knowledge. Since charter schools were just recently implemented within the last 30 years, more longitudinal research would be needed to show the effectiveness of school safety as a whole.

As mentioned before, familial and community ties impact a student's behavior outside of the classroom, therefore, they can be a large correlating factor that affects their delinquency in school. However, this idea has not yet been researched enough, so it is difficult to know if familial and community ties truly cause students to act delinquent in school.

Another limitation of the existing literature is that the direct causes of threats to school safety in charter schools still remain unknown. While there are differences between the frequency of school disruptions and delinquency between charter schools and public schools, the causation of these differences is hard to determine. It is understood that many people, including teachers and parents, perceive charter schools to be safer than traditional public schools, but many factors contribute to this. Factors such as community conditions, frequency of delinquency, physical condition of the school, and discipline techniques are different ways that safety perceptions can be altered. However, according to most of the presented literature, it is too difficult to know what exactly causes these perceptions and allows charter schools to be safer environments.

The existing literature also points out that it is unknown whether the prestige of being a charter school alone affects the school environment. Questions concerning whether students admitted into charter schools through the lottery system are generally less likely to be delinquent. Some researchers believe that a parent who is willing to enroll a student in a charter school

already has a large role in their child's potential success, which could result in the child behaving better in school since coming from a more “structured” background (Christensen, 2008).

The current study focused more on these limitations to understand where the delinquent tendencies may originate in the student's life from the perspective of school administrators and leadership personnel who interact with students daily. The research is more recent than the pre-existing literature presented, and it tackled the limitation of under-researched charter schools because of how new they still are. It also sought to understand what factors play a larger role in the delinquency of a student in a charter school from professionals with a broader perspective on their students' behavior.

METHODS

The current study is an exploratory study that conducted in-depth interviews with a sample of charter school administrators to learn about their experiences with responding to juvenile delinquency. The interviews sought to understand how these experiences impact administrators' perceptions of delinquent behaviors among students and what strategies work best to deter future delinquent behaviors from occurring. Interview participants were collected through a snowball sampling technique to obtain 5 charter school administrators and/or individuals with leadership roles through a gatekeeper. The sample came from a medium-sized charter school located in the southeast of the United States in an economically advantaged community. The qualitative interview was conducted via an online video calling application. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes to an hour.

The interview consisted of 9 questions (see Appendix A) that were open to follow-up for the researcher to better understand the sample's perception of safety and delinquency in their school. The answers and conversations were recorded through typing notes by hand and then analyzed using pseudonyms to protect the samples' identities. Ultimately, the researcher found

consistent answers across the interviews to see if there is a pattern of opinions regarding “what works” from a school administration perspective in terms of addressing juvenile delinquency in charter schools.

Before the interview started, the researcher and interviewees spent time building rapport with small talk about their families' country of origin and cultural background to make the interviewees more comfortable talking to the researcher. The researcher also shared that these interviews would not be recorded to ease the minds of the interviewees, even after starting to build rapport. After completing the interviews, the researcher conducted a thematic analysis on the results and found 5 emergent themes that demonstrate the perceptions given by charter school administrators.

RESULTS

Demographics

Throughout this study, five charter school administrators were interviewed. For this report, the participants will be named “Interviewees 1-5.” All Interviewees were female administrators or possessed leadership roles within the same mid-size charter school in the southeastern United States. Interviewee 1 was an administrator who served as a teacher’s lead and acted as the bridge between grade teachers and higher administration. She also had experience working in psychology in a private kindergarten for 20 years in a Latin American country before moving to a dual-language school in an area close to their current position in the medium-sized charter school.

Interviewee 2 was also a female administrator who works within the middle grades of the charter school. She has prior experience teaching English to inner-city students in a public school in a large metropolitan city for 10 years before moving to this charter school. Interviewee 3 was

also a female administrator who coordinates different programs within the school that serve the students academically. She has experience working in a private school in a Latin American country before moving to her current position in this charter school.

Interviewee 4 was also a female administrator who specializes in student interventions, both behaviorally and academically. For over a decade, before coming to this charter school, this administrator had previous experience in a Title 1 school, where poverty and free lunches were common. Lastly, Interviewee 5 was also a female administrator who advised the lower grades of the charter school and interacted with students both positively (i.e., building relationships) and negatively (i.e., administering discipline). She had previous experience working in public schools and administering very similar tasks.

Types of Delinquency and Their Origins

For this study, delinquency was defined by the interviewer as any behavior from a student that is considered “bad” or requires disciplinary action. This broad definition was used to explain the kinds of behavior that the researcher was inquiring about and to aid the interviewees in recalling the delinquency they had seen in their school. One of the most common themes that came from these interviews was disruptive behaviors that often interrupt class instruction. This was presented in many forms, such as excessive talking, banging on tables, and talking back to the teacher. The interviewees’ answers had many commonalities when discussing the types of delinquency they had seen in their current charter school. When compared to other classifications of schools that they had worked in previously, some interviewees had more conflicting answers. This finding was also consistent with the past literature (Christensen, 2007) discussed earlier.

While disrupting the class was the most typical form of delinquency the interviewees had encountered, each administrator had a few encounters with other forms of delinquency that did

not include classroom disruption. This included students running away from the classroom or the school building, lighting fires in the bathroom, or making threats to hurt others with weapons or violence. Each administrator admitted that these acts of delinquency were not seen consistently in their school environment, especially considering that most of the delinquency they see comes from general classroom disruptions.

It is important to note that the questions asked to learn about the forms of delinquency in charter schools elicited contrasting answers from the interviewees. Interviewees 1, 3, and 5 shared the perception that the delinquency between their previous schools (private and public) and the current charter schools is not entirely different. The previous schools that these administrators worked in were not self-classified as “Title 1” or “Inner City”, showing that these shared perceptions could be due to their previous schools not seeing the same kind of personal issues within students as the other administrators who were in schools that were self-classified as with these titles. These titles, given by Interviewees 2 and 4 to describe the previous schools they have worked in, denote that the students within these schools typically came from lower-income families, single-parent households, or many times had to work from a young age to help pay their families' bills. Interviewees 1, 3, and 5 did not classify their previous schools with these titles or characteristics, showcasing the distinction in the population of their previous school experiences.

Conversely, Interviewees 2 and 4 both agreed that while the students in both schools present different personal challenges, they typically express needing help through delinquent behaviors. Interviewees 2 and 4, who had both previously worked in Title 1 public schools, mentioned that there were different forms of delinquency between the two schools, which shows a clear divide with the perceptions of the other interviewees. They attributed these differences to what they consider to be more “external factors” that affected a student in their public school, as

opposed to the more “social-emotional” needs, or internal factors of the charter school students, as described by Interviewee 2.

Interviewee 2 explained that “In charter schools, students are more inclined to be stressed, have low self-esteem, or not come to school, indicating that they have more social-emotional needs”. This interviewee used this term to reflect on how charter school students typically face stressors that are internal, such as learning delays, depression, or other mental health concerns, which are the more typical reasons for a student to act delinquent. On the other hand, the public schools that Interviewees 2 and 4 had worked in presented student behaviors as a result of more “external factors”, such as coming from a low-income, single-parent household, as mentioned earlier. With this in mind, according to Interviewee 2, a student in the charter school was most likely to show delinquent behaviors as a result of their special needs and not being able to regulate their behavior (i.e. disrupting classroom instruction), whereas a student in a public school would be more likely to be perceived as a delinquent because of the external factors in their lives, like having to work a job as a young teenager, that cause them to present different delinquent behaviors (i.e. getting into fights, skipping school, not doing homework).

Issues at Home

To branch off from the previous theme, the interviewees unanimously agreed that issues at home were just as important to consider when investigating a student’s delinquent behavior. Because this theme was mentioned so frequently, this section aims to explain how the administrators use information on the student’s familial environment and issues they may face at home to begin the discipline process and find more consistent solutions. The interviewees’ responses included the idea that students’ behaviors were solely the result of having personal

issues at home, typically within their family dynamics. This could also be connected to the internal factors that were mentioned previously, and show that issues at home are another reason that is believed to be the cause of a student's delinquent behaviors. This idea was shared among all 5 interviewees, regardless of their previous experience in different school classifications, and they have also mentioned that having familial or economic issues at home can greatly impact how a student behaves in school. Interviewee 1 explained that while students are still young, they do not understand that these personal factors can cause them to commit delinquent behavior in school as a response. Interviewee 4 mentioned that oftentimes, students are delinquent in school because it is their way of asking for help for a need that is deeply impacting their ability to behave.

The interviewees shared the perception that delinquent behavior can be interpreted as an emotional response to a larger issue presented at home. This can range from absent parents, neglect of a child's needs, financial strains, or a reflection of harmful views learned from the family, as explained by Interviewee 2. Interviewee 1 mentioned that reaching out to the family to learn their dynamic will oftentimes reveal why a student may be showing delinquent behavior in school. One of the main conclusions that the interviewees came to was that issues at home often presented the need for attention in other areas of their lives.

The Need for Attention

The answer that was unanimous among all 5 interviewees was a student's need for attention through delinquent acts. Interviewee 1 mentioned that bad attention from acting delinquent is still attention through the eyes of a student who lacks it at home. This was something that was found consistently throughout the 5 conducted interviews, and most

interviewees believe that the need for attention is one of the most common causes for delinquency in their charter school.

Interviewee 4 mentioned that giving students enough attention in school through building a strong relationship will encourage them to behave and signify to them that someone in their life cares about them. Interviewee 5 also had a similar thought, saying that direct attention from higher administrators (such as the principals) will also encourage a student to behave, as they believe most students want to actively be “good students”.

Building Relationships & The Referral System

When faced with a student who engages in delinquent behaviors, each interviewee agreed that building a relationship with the student increases the odds of finding a more long-term solution. Most interviewees talked about how immediate follow-up and action from the administrators are necessary to deter students from further delinquency. They found that their “referral system”, or a way to keep track of students who are presenting issues, was the best way to stay ahead of a student’s ongoing behavior. By using this referral system, administrators found it easier to track a student’s acts of delinquency once they are reported by teachers and take action. Looking back at the kinds of delinquency found, some interviewees admitted that the kinds of referrals submitted differ by teacher. Interviewee 4, for example, explained that many referrals come in from teachers when a situation may not call for it. One example they gave was a teacher writing a referral for a student who was chewing gum. Because the administration takes these referrals seriously, each situation must be investigated to learn more. This situation, in particular, led the administrator to believe that this referral was unnecessary and did not deem it as a behavior worth reporting. Because of this, interviewee 4 believed that the school could do

better in preparing teachers for managing conflict, meaning that a teacher should learn to de-escalate a classroom disruption first before initially resorting to writing a referral.

Interviewee 2 explained that building a strong relationship with a student made it easier to figure out the root cause of the delinquent behavior, which was a prominent conclusion shared by all 5 interviewees. The interviewees also agreed that building a relationship with a student's parents can make correcting behaviors easier, as oftentimes the parent and administrators want to see the student succeed once these behaviors are caught and addressed. This idea closely relates to the "attachment" bond given by Travis Hirschi's social bond theory, in which the student's attachment to an administrator is strong enough to turn them away from acting delinquent. Interviewee 5 explained that a student who has a relationship with an administrator will do their best not to get in serious trouble, which further shows the relationship between their attachment to an administrator and their desire to act delinquent.

Resources and Special Needs

The final common theme found throughout the interviews stems from the need for resources for students with varying needs. These needs can include emotional, physical, mental, or economic disadvantages, according to the interviewees. Interviewees 2 and 4, who had previously worked in Title 1 public schools, noted that the resources and funding for students who need extra care were in more abundance than in their current charter school. Because of this, counselors, training workshops for teachers, and special education classes were available to help these students who require extra attention to their needs.

Interviewee 3 compared the differences between the budgets of their charter school and other public schools, noting that charter schools only receive a certain amount of funding per student. This does not allow for extra resources in the school to be funded sufficiently, such as

in-depth Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) or extra security to help supervise students throughout the building.

DISCUSSION

With the data gathered from interviews given to 5 charter school administrators, this current study aimed to learn more about their perceptions of delinquency in a charter school and how these results could aid other charter schools or public counterparts that are looking to enforce better discipline. The main results revealed that the interviewees believed that delinquency was not entirely present in their school, although they did experience classroom disruptions as the most frequent type of delinquency. These behaviors, along with very minimal serious forms of delinquency, were typically attributed to a student's need for attention, having issues at home, or having mental health concerns or special needs that require extra acknowledgment. It is important to note that the perceptions shared were very similar, except in the case where interviewees were asked to compare their charter school experiences to past experiences in public or private schools. Many of the conflicting perceptions come from different backgrounds or experiences and were further revealed throughout the interviews.

As for a general overview of the results, it appears that, in the eyes of administrators, there are no notable or major differences between the delinquency in charter schools and their previous experiences in other school classifications. However, the perceptions of the frequency of delinquency did vary among all five interviewees, depending on these experiences. The results from the interviews also showed that administrators did not report having different procedures or practices to control delinquency, as the delinquency they reported seeing was nearly the same as what was seen in their previous schools. The results also suggest that choosing to enroll a child into a charter school may not exactly denote more school safety as the literature indicated, but

the interviewees believe it allows adults to supervise students in a more personal manner compared to larger schools.

The perceptions of charter school administrators offer various perspectives concerning the delinquency shown in their schools. It is important to look at the perceptions given by administrators because of their scope across the grades they supervise. These administrators can see how multiple students across their particular grades act delinquent, whereas a teacher will only see the students who act out in their classes, or a parent will only see how their child or their friends act out. Because of the nature of this charter school, administrators are more visible to the student body, meaning they are constantly seen and up to date on the students and functions of the school.

By looking at the administrator's professional background and experiences, varying perceptions of delinquency were revealed. As noted above, the most common forms of delinquency found in this charter school are classroom disruptions, usually stemming from the need for attention when the student lacks it at home. While this is a more general conclusion of the results, the interviewees shared many abnormal experiences with students' delinquent behaviors that may have other explanations or causes.

Throughout this study, the interviewees continuously mentioned having “not a lot of delinquency” in their school, yet still provided examples of students involved in severely delinquent acts. Interviewee 3, for example, followed up this comment with an example of a student lighting a fire in the girls' bathroom because she thought it was funny. Upon investigating the incident, administrators learned that this student came from a challenging home life where violence and neglect were prevalent. However, Interviewee 3, along with many other interviewees, proceeded to explain how this charter school still “does not have a lot of

delinquency” even after sharing similar stories. This finding likely means that the perceptions of each interviewee are varied based on their past experiences in other schools. An administrator who had faced more serious delinquent behaviors in a previous public school will see this current charter school as an easier and more docile environment, whereas an administrator who came from a school with lower rates of delinquency will find their current charter school to be a very similar environment. These differences in experiences and perceptions will likely shape their leadership style and future actions taken to discipline students.

One thing to note is that the researcher, before asking the interview questions, had defined the word “delinquent” as “any behavior that is out of the ordinary for a student, or anything that you as an administrator would consider “bad behavior”, or any behavior that would warrant a call to higher administration”. Even after being given that definition, interviewees believed that they did not have delinquency in their schools after sharing these situations that only happened “once in a while”. This could be attributed to the broadness of the definition, in which many of the interviewees could be considering the more serious situations they have dealt with as “real delinquency”, when the researcher was trying to examine “anti-social” or “deviant” behaviors instead. Because of this wording, the answers given by the interviewees used language along the lines of “We do not have much delinquency in our school, however...” to which they expressed some more extreme instances of delinquency that they had experienced.

Past literature had found that most parents who participate in school choice choose charter schools because of their perceived safety. The perception of safety in charter schools was high among students, teachers, and parents (e.g., Eden, 2007; Hamlin, 2020), however, the current study does not reveal any major differences in delinquency between different school classifications, given the experiences shared by the interviewees. It is important to note that this

is not a true comparison, as the study did not test for delinquency in other schools, only in this one charter school, which can be an area of future research. This would likely be due to the idea of “kids will be kids” that was shared among many of the interviewees.

When asked about the differences in delinquency between their current charter school and past experiences in other schools, Interviewee 4 specifically mentioned that the only reason they saw delinquency in both schools was because they “are just kids”, implying that young kids just do “stupid things”. From the perspective of the administrators who have experience in other school classifications, it did not appear that the differences in delinquency were substantial enough to support the current literature.

The frequency of delinquency was shown to be more “social” in charter schools, referring back to the “social-emotional” needs mentioned earlier. The literature shows that charter schools are less likely to report physical delinquency, like fighting, but more likely to report social delinquency, like verbal abuse or bullying (e.g., Christensen, 2007). While the interviewees of this study mentioned that there were no major differences in the delinquency seen in their charter school versus other public schools, the results seem to align closely with the types of delinquency revealed by past literature (e.g., DeAngelis & Leuken, 2020).

Past literature also examined the effect of charter schools on a child’s social behaviors outside of school, especially their encounters with the criminal justice system after enrolling in a charter school (see McEachin et al., 2020). Although this was not a topic covered in this current study, the interviewees agreed that behaviors learned outside of school were almost always mirrored in the school environment. Many learned behaviors, such as racist remarks or voicing violent ideas, were noted by the administrators, who learned that this was frequent behavior shown at home. While we do not yet know what this means for the child outside of school, past

literature presumes that their involvement in a charter school would give them less of a chance of being involved with the criminal justice system (McEachin et al., 2020). This could be attributed to the smaller school environment that a charter school offers, while also allowing administrators to correct the student's behavior as quickly as possible.

It is important to mention that the behaviors exhibited by a student in school are largely impacted by their familial and communal ties outside of the school environment (Hamlin & Li, 2020). Although the interviewees frequently discussed that many delinquent behaviors are a response to issues occurring at home, this could be generalizable to all students, despite the school classification they belong to. Past literature has shown that one of the most important factors to consider when looking at a student's delinquent behavior is their familial situation and communal ties (e.g., Hamlin & Li, 2020). Hamlin and Li's (2020) findings were similar to the responses of the interviewees, who all agreed that any issues with their family, such as financial strain, will be reflected in the student's behavior. As strain theory explains that delinquent behavior can be a coping mechanism for various strains in life, the interviewees consistently noted how the strain in a child's life typically stems from the need for attention.

The need for attention was one of the most consistent themes found in interviewee responses and was typically paired with the idea of students having issues at home. This usually indicated that the administrators perceived most students' use of delinquency as a coping mechanism for issues that arose at home. One interviewee mentioned a specific case where a student was receiving referrals nearly every day for disrupting classroom instruction, and upon further investigation, administrators found out that this student's mother had left on vacation for 3 months while her son stayed at home with no father figure or other family to watch him. This interviewee concluded that the student ended up feeling lonely and neglected, which resulted in

his delinquent actions to find the attention at school that he was lacking at home. This phenomenon could be attributed to past literature that mentions various social behaviors that emerge as a result of being a charter school student (see McEachin et al., 2020).

While past literature examines the intersection of being a charter school student and a participant in the criminal justice system, this data would also be able to show why parents may choose a charter school over a traditional public school. Many interviewees discussed how parents exercise school choice with this specific charter school because they believe a smaller, more intimate environment would offer their child more stability and attention to their needs. Although this is mostly a claim made about students' academic needs, it could also be used to talk about the behavioral needs that administrators tend to address when parents do not have the capabilities to do so themselves.

LIMITATIONS

While the current study provides useful results for administrators in all school classifications, it still presents limitations that could be addressed. This area of research would benefit from a larger sample size to get more variation in administrators' views. Additionally, all administrators for this study were selected from the same charter school system in the same state. Future research would benefit by including a more diverse sample of administrators in varying charter schools across different areas to see how unique their experiences are in comparison to others. Although only 5 individuals were interviewed, the exploratory nature of this research was intended to get a preliminary understanding of this topic. A lengthier study with a larger sample could allow the research to be useful not only for charter schools but also for schools that are looking for ways to improve their perceptions and reactions to delinquency.

The definition of the word “delinquency” when given to the interviewees may also have impacted the results given. Because of the very broad definition, interviewees still believed they were talking about delinquency as it relates to real crime, instead of anti-social behaviors, as the researcher had intended. This study would have benefited from a different definition or word choice to properly examine and understand the types of behaviors seen in this charter school.

CONCLUSION

Through the use of pre-existing literature and first-hand findings, the perceptions of charter school administrators on delinquency in their schools revealed new ideas that were not yet originally considered. With the research gathered through 5 in-depth interviews with charter school administrators, it was revealed that the perceptions of delinquency vary depending on the experience each individual has in different school classifications. The most emergent themes that stemmed from these conversations turned more towards the delinquency seen in charter schools, which was revealed to not be entirely different from the delinquency seen in private or traditional public schools.

The research gathered revealed that administrators heavily consider a student’s personal life at home, their need for attention, special needs, and limited resources, and building relationships with students when considering delinquency in their school. Future research should continue to build on these themes so that schools of all designations can continue to understand juvenile delinquency and the best responses to it.

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APPENDIX A

Sample Interview Questions

- 1. How long have you been in your current administrative role?**
- 2. How do you interact with your students daily?**
- 3. What is your experience with working in different school classifications (i.e., public, charter, private, etc.), if any?**
- 4. What forms of delinquency do you often come across in your school? Please talk about both common and uncommon cases of delinquency that you have seen.**
- 5. How do you perceive the delinquent behaviors exhibited by students in comparison to external factors that may impact their school lives (Familial relationships, financial situation, educational backgrounds, etc.)?**
- 6. What do you think your school does well when it comes to preventing delinquency from occurring? What notable school initiatives or programs for prevention work best?**
- 7. How well do you believe your school does in disciplining students to deter them from future acts of delinquency?**
- 8. How much influence do you believe the consequences of discipline have on your students who exhibit delinquent behaviors?**

9. When disciplining a student, what motives do they confess when caught committing an act of delinquency? (e.g., stole something because their parents could not afford it)