CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

Background

In the United States, three levels of public education correspond to three stages of life. The elementary level of education, or childhood, develops the sense of autonomy and allows children to separate themselves from the dependency on home and explore their values and beliefs within the context of a controlled, structured environment. Middle school education, or adolescence, is the actual transition period between childhood and adulthood; it provides an environment for the individual who is undergoing biological and cognitive changes such as maturing sexually, developing abstract thinking skills, and becoming more independent (Stantrock, 1990). This separation from dependency is also in a moderately structured, controlled environment. High school education, or the onset of early adulthood, develops personal and economic independence so that young people can begin making decisions regarding their futures. At this stage, they can more fully explore the world through their own perspectives within the least structured but still relatively controlled, environment of public education.

The early adolescent (middle school student) is not seeking a complete separation from adults' influence but wants opportunities to test and develop his or her own skills and values (Braddock and McPartland, 1993). "Evidence of this mind set is found in their dress, habits, and language" (Wiles and Bondi, 1981 p. 33). Young people in middle school are characterized by significant growth and change--the emergence of sophisticated thinking ability, and exploratory behavior much of which is developmentally appropriate for this age level (Hill, 1980; Steinberg, 1989; and McKay, 1995). They are exploring opportunities to choose a path leading to a productive and fulfilling life (Carnegie Council, 1989).

Alexander and George (1981) describe the middle school as inclusive of three to five years of school experience with students ranging in ages from ten to fourteen. The middle school encompasses a program that emphasizes learning and exploration rather than premature specialization (Tarter, Sabo and Hoy, 1995). Middle schools are "potentially society's most powerful force to recapture millions of youth that are adrift, and help every young person thrive

during early adolescence" (Carnegie Council, 1989, p. 8). Because of the changing society and outside influences of violent behavior, illicit drugs, sexual promiscuity, negative peer pressure, and family instability, these students often have become victims of their environment. Consequently, middle school teachers face daily classes of uninterested students who feel that their time and energy could be spent more wisely elsewhere (Henson, 1988). The challenges before teachers are twofold. They must implement instructional strategies that are diverse enough to meet the global thinker, the analytical student, and the student who learns best through the use of manipulatives and hands-on experiences. They must also maintain a learning environment that will prevent behaviors in the classroom that disrupt and interfere with the learning process (Coles, 1995).

Few adolescents purposely set out with a planned campaign to disrupt classes. Misbehavior is more likely to build from a series of minor incidents such as chronic talking, being inattentive, and talking back to a teacher in an inappropriate manner (Brophy and Evertson, 1976). Consequently, it is necessary to look beyond the classroom to identify factors that interfere with the teaching and learning process, impairing the teacher's ability to maintain appropriate classroom behavior, and implement staff development to teach strategies for improving academic achievement.

Problem Statement

This study investigated learning-inhibiting problems experienced by middle school teachers in the classroom relative to years of teaching experience (0-5, 6-12, 13-20, 21+), and education (middle school trained, middle school untrained). These problems included chronic talking in the classroom unrelated to instruction, refusing reasonable request as perceived by the teacher, tardiness to class, inattentiveness in class, and talking back inappropriately to the teacher. The purpose of this study was to provide specific recommendations for staff development.

Significance of the Study

In the 1989 Carnegie Council report, "Turning Point: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century," the task force recommended that middle schools be "staffed with teachers who are experts at teaching young adolescents and who have been specifically prepared for assignment to

the middle grade" (p. 9). Lasley (1985), Kohut and Range (1986), and Wesley and Vocke (1992) have respectfully conducted research on teacher performances, teacher preparation, or student discipline. However, Sparapani, Abel, Edwards, and Herbster (1991) found that the teacher preparation programs were modifications of programs for elementary and secondary teachers, and that these programs were inappropriate for middle grade teachers because they lack inclusion of the study of adolescent development. These researchers recommended that teachers be trained to work with transient adolescents. President Clinton, in his <u>1997 State of the Union Address,</u> restated the importance of preparation of teachers by recommending "reinventing teacher preparation for beginning teachers and improving professional development for more experienced teachers so they get the training they need to help students master the basics and reach high standards in core academic areas."

While extensive research has been conducted on instructional strategies, classroom management and discipline in classrooms, the issue of discipline is not synonymous with classroom management. Limited quantitative research has been done on specific disruptions in the classroom and instructional strategies for minimizing disruptive behavior. If the nation's teaching force will have access to programs for the continued improvement of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skill needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the challenges in the 21st century, (National Education Goal Panel, 1997) then middle school teachers must engage in professional development that is carefully designed to increase their knowledge and skills in adolescent development. These skills would enable them to handle misbehavior and disruptions in the classroom. To facilitate the learning process and to prevent learning-inhibiting problems in the classroom, teachers must challenge students' beliefs and assumptions about education, provide support and coaching to develop students' comfort with new practices, and engage students as active participants in any form of school culture (National Staff Development Council, 1997). This study will contribute to the body of knowledge for middle schools by investigating learning-inhibiting problems through the use of teacher surveys, classroom observations, focus groups and a review of teacher summative evaluations; thus, providing some ways to ameliorate the effects of those problems on instruction.

Theoretical Base and Conceptual Framework for the Study

"Don't laugh at a youth for his affectation; he is only trying on one face after another to find a face of his own."

Logan Pearsall Smith, Afterthoughts (Fitch, 1985)

From its beginning in the early 1900s, the concept of junior high school was that it would be a bridge between elementary and high school. Its purpose was to ease the transition from self-contained classrooms in the elementary schools, where there were broad units of work, to departmental programs in the high school, where there was emphasis on subject specialization. This concept was to be developed with the knowledge and understanding of adolescent development as the driving force. What evolved from the junior high school program was the creation of miniature high schools rather than an "in-between" school, a school for bridging the gap between elementary and secondary education (Alexander, 1963).

Middle schools emerged in the 1960s as a result of the failure of junior high schools to provide a unique place where adolescents could progress through their stages of development while succeeding at the academic level (Clark and Clark, 1993). The characteristics identified by early reformers of middle schools included the placement of teachers who were knowledgeable about their content areas; who made provisions for individual student differences, and who were knowledgeable about the developmental needs of adolescents (Briggs, 1920; Koos, 1927, Alexander, 1963). The middle school concept that addresses adolescent needs and differences is supported by the two-stage theory of intellectual development as described by Jean Piaget (Wiles and Bondi, 1981) and Eric Erikson (Fitch, 1985). Stage theory focuses on levels of development in which each stage represents a reorganization of behavior.

Piaget labeled the stages of development for the middle years, ages 7 through 15, as the concrete and formal operational thinking. In the concrete-operational stage (6 to 12 or 13 years of age), the adolescent has the ability to think out problems and to apply logical thought. In the formal stage (12 to 18 years of age), the adolescent begins to comprehend abstract concepts. He learns how to apply the concrete operations learned previously to abstract generalized concepts in his social and academic thinking. Hence, the adolescent ability to think of alternatives is not necessarily coupled with the abilities to prioritize and to make the correct decisions.

      Erikson provides a framework which illustrates personality development in eight interrelated stages which he identifies as crises. Each crisis is a turning point in a positive or negative direction. The term crisis refers to an active decision-making period in a person's life when his beliefs, plans, and values are examined. The adolescent who feels a sense of anxiety, confusion, disorientation and isolation, Erikson theorizes, is experiencing crisis in identity. If the crisis is resolved satisfactorily, the adolescent will achieve a stable identity. He will be able to synthesize previous experiences and to make sense of who he is and where he is headed in life (Fitch, 1985). Failure to actively achieve identity may occur because the adolescent lacks goals or is unclear about who he is or the direction in which he is headed (Fitch, 1985). Most middle school adolescents function in Piaget's concrete-operational stage, with a few functioning at the formal stage (Popjoy, 1980), and struggle with the identity crisis as described by Erikson.

Comparison of Theories

The stage theories of Piaget and Erikson coincide with the control theory of behavior: "one chooses to do what is most satisfying at the time (Glasser, 1986, p.19). Neither the stage nor control theory provides a complete framework for adolescent development. Nevertheless, both claim that development occurs from the ages of 6 to18 years, in spurts of changes. These theories clearly describe the behavior of middle school adolescents.

Education: Preservice and Inservice

In the United States, there is concern over the growing number of teachers who are entering the classroom with emergency or temporary certification (U.S. Secretary of Education Riley, 1998). There is also concern that there are teachers in classrooms who are teaching out of their academic levels or content areas in which they have been trained. A recent survey of a representative sample of 4,049 full-time teachers in regular elementary, middle, and high schools in the 50 states and the District of Columbia, showed that the percent of teachers having an undergraduate or graduate major or minor in their main teaching assignment was significantly lower, 44%, for teachers of grades 7 through 12 than for grades 9 through 12, 66% (U. S. Department of Education, 1999). This lack of adequate preservice education in a teacher preparation program is inappropriate, especially at the middle school level.

With the diversity in ethnicity, gender, developmental stages, and intellectual abilities in the classroom, middle level teachers must be academically prepared to teach the adolescent child. They must have adequate training in teacher preparation from an accredited college or university. This training constitutes preservice education before entering the classroom. They must also have continuous inservice training after hire. This training would enhance teachers' knowledge of learning theories, and teaching techniques that would be appropriate for the diversity in student learning and child development.

Delivery of Instruction

Teachers must plan for and deliver instruction with the cognitive levels of their students in

mind. Because there is a biological maturation that is age-related, most children are 12 or 13 years of age before formal reasoning develops (Popjoy, 1980). Hence, lessons must be presented that challenge both the formal thinkers and the concrete thinkers in the classroom. "The educator who understands the differences in physical, intellectual, and socioemotional needs of young adolescents, and who has learned to provide instruction that corresponds with the needs, contributes to young adolescents social and academic achievement" (National Staff Development Council, 1995 p. 38). Additionally, the educator with this understanding will lose less instructional time dealing with behavioral problems in the classroom.

Classroom Management

Management refers to student control as it directly relates to learning or to on-task behavior; discipline relates to student off-task behavior (Tucker, Plax, Kearney, 1985). Classroom management has been observed to be a primary influence on teacher performance. It has been a source of teacher job-related stress not only because of the knowledge needed to handle a variety of classroom situations, but also because classroom management is a prerequisite for student learning. If there is a lack in student control as it relates to on-task behavior and off-task behavior problems that disrupt and interfere with classroom teaching and learning, students' acquisition and processing of knowledge will be impeded.

Summary

To meet the growing needs and changes in adolescents, teacher preservice education acquired in teacher preparation programs and inservice education that provides additional training after hire must be designed specifically for facilitating learning in middle school students. Teachers must have continuous training in instructional delivery to aid them in dealing with learning-inhibiting problems in the classroom. Given the framework of personality development of adolescents as described by Piaget and Erikson, teachers should be given the opportunities to have input in the selection of specific staff development initiatives that connect the challenges that they face daily in the classroom rather than initiatives preselected by administrators (National Staff Development Council, 1995). The following conceptual model illustrates and supports the need

for this investigation of learning-inhibiting problems experienced by middle school teachers in the classroom and the factors that may contribute to these problems. It shows the relationships among preservice and inservice education, delivery of instruction, classroom management and learning-inhibiting problems (chronic talking, refusing request, tardiness, inattentiveness, and talking back to teachers) (Figure 1).

Implications For Staff
Development Needs

Delivery of
instruction

Education:
preservice &
inservice

Learning-Inhibiting Problems
in the Classrooms
- chronic talking
- refusing request
- tardiness
- inattentiveness
- talking back to teachers

Classroom
management

Triangulation of Data Analysis
Survey
Classroom Observations & Focused Interviews
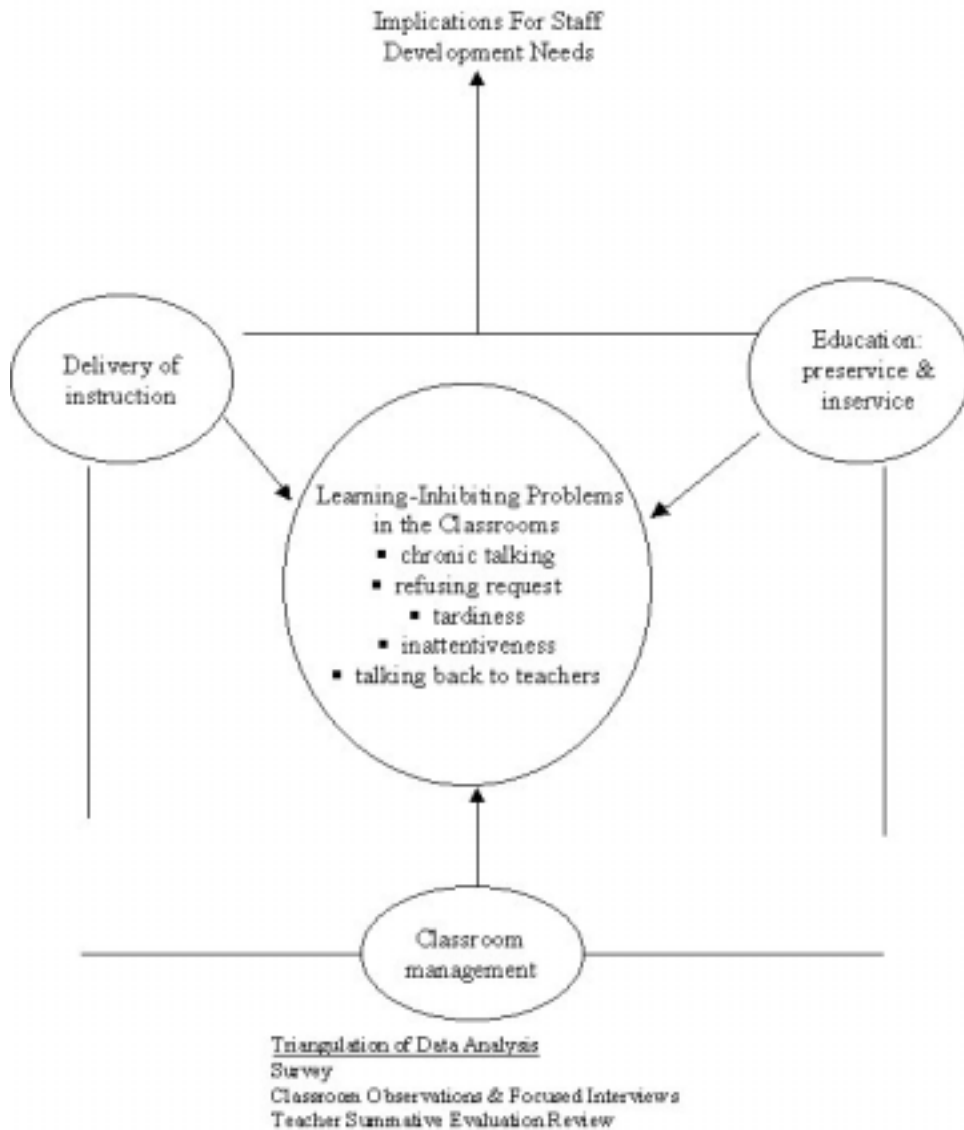Teacher Summative Evaluation Review

Figure 1. Conceptual Model: Variables Associated With Learning-Inhibiting Problems in Classrooms and Implications for Staff Development

Research Questions

Using a quantitative-qualitative design, this study sought to answer three composite questions. These questions and related hypotheses are as follows:

1.   Is there a relationship between education and learning-inhibiting problems experienced by middle school teachers in the classroom?

Researcher's Hypothesis: There is a statistically significant difference between preservice education (those trained in middle school preparation, those untrained in middle school teacher preparation) and learning-inhibiting problems (chronic talking, refusing request, tardiness, inattentiveness, talking back to teachers) experienced in the classroom.

Researcher's Hypothesis: There is a statistically significant difference between the years of inservice training and learning-inhibiting problems (chronic talking, refusing request, tardiness, inattentiveness, talking back to teachers) experienced in the classroom.

2.   Are years of teaching experience related to the ability to manage a classroom as perceived by middle school teachers, administrators (principals and assistant principals), and the researcher?

Researcher's Hypothesis: There is a statistically significant difference between years of teaching experience (0-5, 6-12, 13-20, 21+) and the ability to manage a classroom as perceived by the building administrator and the researcher.

Researcher's Hypothesis: There is a statistically significant difference between years of teaching experience (0-5, 6-12, 13-20, 21+) and the perception of chronic talking in the classroom.

Researcher's Hypothesis: There is a statistically significant difference between years of teaching experience (0-5, 6-12, 13-20, 21+) and the perception of refusing request experienced by middle school teachers in the classroom.

Researcher's Hypothesis: There is a statistically significant difference between years of teaching experience (0-5, 6-12, 13-20, 21+) and the perception of tardiness experienced by middle school teachers in the classroom.

Researcher's Hypothesis: There is a statistically significant difference between years of teaching experience (0-5, 6-12, 13-20, 21+) and the perception of talking back to teachers in the classroom.

Researcher's Hypothesis: There is a statistically significant difference between years of teaching experience (0-5, 6-12, 13-20, 21+) and the perception of inattentiveness experienced by middle school teachers in the classroom.

Researcher's Hypothesis: There is a statistically significant difference between years of teaching experience (0-5, 6-12, 13-20, 21+) and the occurrence of learning-inhibiting problems in the middle school classroom.

3.   Is there a relationship between years of teaching experience and the types of non-instructional strategies used to prevent learning-inhibiting problems in the classroom?

Researcher's Hypothesis: There is a statistically significant difference between years of teaching experience (0-5, 6-12, 13-20, 21+) and the types of non-instructional strategies (ignore the problem, conference with student, after school detention, consultation with administrator) used to prevent learning-inhibiting problems in the classroom.

Researcher's Hypothesis: There is a statistically significant difference between years of teaching experience (0-5, 6-12, 13-20, 21+) and the frequency of non-instructional strategies (ignore the problem, conference with student, after school detention, consultation with administrator) used to prevent learning-inhibiting problems in the classroom.

Researcher's Hypothesis: There is a statistically significant difference between years of teaching experience (0-5, 6-12, 13-20, 21+) and the ability to deliver instruction as perceived by the building administrator (principals and assistant principals).

Researcher's Hypothesis: There is a statistically significant difference between years of teaching experience (0-5, 6-12, 13-20, 21+) and the ability to plan instruction in the middle school teacher as perceived by the building administrator (principals and assistant principals).

Definition of Terms

The terms in this study are constitutively defined to indicate how the terms are used in this particular study, and operationally defined to illustrate how the data were collected. See Table 1.

Table 1

Constitutive and Operational Definitions of Terms

Variable	Constitutive Definition	Operational Definition
Learning-inhibiting problems	Problems that disrupt and interfere with student learning. Problems include chronic training, refusing request, tardiness, inattentiveness, and talking back to teachers.	Survey No. 7 (Appendix C) Classroom Observations
Preservice and inservice education	Preservice education - academic degree in a teacher preparation program from an accredited four-year college or university with eligibility for Virginia State certification. Inservice education - additional training received after hire.	Survey No. 1 and No. 6 (Appendix C)
Planning for instruction	Ability to plan for on-task instruction	Summative Teacher Appraisal Instrument (Appendix G)
Delivery of instruction	Ability to adopt a variety of teaching techniques and to utilize those techniques that are most appropriate for the student.	Summative Teacher Appraisal Instrument (Appendix G) Survey No. 9 and No. 11 (Appendix C)
Classroom management	Ability to manage behaviors that disrupt and interfere with classroom teaching and learning and impede children's acquisition of knowledge and the process of learning.	Classroom observations Survey Nos. 8, 9, and 10 (Appendix C) Summative Teacher Appraisal Instrument (Appendix G)
Staff development needs	Needs implied from the learning-inhibiting problems.	Information gained through nominal group process selected respondents (Table 23). Survey analysis Summative Teacher Appraisal Instrument (Appendix G)

Overview of Study

Chapter 1 provides the context for the study: the background information, the purpose for the study, the justification of the study, and the theoretical base with a conceptual model. Definitions of terms and the research questions are provided to guide the reader through the document.

Based on the conceptual model driven by the theoretical base in Chapter 1, the related review of related literature is presented in Chapter 2. Research in the areas of teacher preparation, student misbehavior and disruptions in the classroom, planning for instruction, and delivery of instruction is outlined.

The description of the methodology in Chapter 3 includes the sampled population studied, the research design, and the methods of data analysis. Results of the data analysis from the documents, observations, and surveys are summarized in Chapter 4. The corresponding conclusions and implications are presented in Chapter 5.