An analysis of fifty years of research reveals that direct influences such as classroom management affect student learning more than indirect influences, such as school policies (Wang, Haertel, and Walberg, 1994). Effective classroom management is not limited to the management of disruptive problems, but includes those behaviors which produce high levels of student involvement in classroom activities, minimal amount of student behavior that interferes with the teacher’s or student’s work, and efficient use of instructional time (Emmers and Evertson, 1981, p. 342). In a study of 49 first grade classes, Kounin (1970) identified specific elements for successful classroom management that minimize behavior problems and improve learning. These elements can be applied to all grades including the middle school. The most useful elements, “with-it-ness” and “overlapping” have been found to be significantly related to managerial success in the classroom. “With-it-ness” is defined as the teacher’s ability to communicate to the student the knowledge of what is occurring in the classroom by his actual behavior rather than by verbal communication. With-it-ness also includes the degree to which teachers communicate that they are knowledgeable about a student’s capabilities and are not limited to evaluation of the student’s immediate performances. The other element, “overlapping” refers to what the teacher does when confronted with student disruption, off-task behaviors, and other instructional issues in the classroom at the same time. The appropriate implementations of “with-it-ness” and “overlapping” have proven to increase learning time available for all students.

As schools move through the twenty-first century and there continues to be “dramatic changes in student population, public demand for school reform, and increased student performance on tests, the nation is faced with an overwhelming need for renewal of all educators” (Sparks, 1995). Middle school teachers must not only be prepared in their content areas, but they must have an understanding of adolescent development at the middle school level. To meet the demands for dealing with adolescent behavior, teachers and administrators must be able to appropriately deal with specific disruptions in the classroom. They must know students’ cognitive abilities, and they must have diverse teaching strategies and practices that put students on-task in
meaningful activities. According to the findings of Evertson and Emmers (1982) and Evertson (1985), a relationship exists between disruptions in the classroom and direct instructional issues. Hence, classroom teachers should engage in practical staff development that increases their knowledge of specific classroom disruptions that disrupt and interfere with student learning and skills in handling disruptions, while facilitating the learning process in the classroom.

In the following discussion, related literature will be used to review teacher preparation, student misbehavior and disruption, planning for instruction, and delivery of instruction in an effort to identify methods for dealing with learning-inhibiting problems encountered by middle school teachers in the classroom. This review will provide implication for staff development.

Teacher Preparation

Today, teachers are being asked to learn new methods of teaching at the same time they are facing the challenges of new technologies for teaching and learning in the classroom. A study conducted by the U. S. Department of Education (1999) found that of more than 4,000 full-time public school teachers surveyed, less than 50% of the respondents felt “very well prepared” to meet the challenges facing the education profession. Additionally, only 44% of the middle school respondents were assigned to teach the subject that matched their training. These results suggested that 56% of middle school teachers were assigned to teach out of their academic discipline. With on-going educational demands, teacher preparation programs must include diverse instructional methods and techniques to meet the challenges in the classroom, and to ensure that teachers have the educational knowledge to perform in areas where there has been limited training.

When examining middle school teacher preparation programs, the middle school concept is in its third decade and is considered by many educators as the bridge between elementary and high school (Kohut and Range 1986). As early as 1968, William Alexander, one of the founding fathers of the middle school, recommended that middle level teacher education programs be divided into three phases: a common core of professional education courses, study in the academic discipline, and middle school practice including observing, tutoring, small group instructing, and team teaching. In 1977, McEwin expanded Alexander’s early listing to include the
study of middle school concepts (goals and programs), special methods for teaching adolescents, learning theory, classroom management, and discipline, as well as seminars to discuss the integration of theory and practice, and a series of extensive clinical experiences.

With the continued transformation from junior high schools to middle schools, a committee of the National Middle School Association developed a position paper entitled “Preparing Teachers for Middle School” (Gatewood, Cole, Vars, and Rottler, 1981). While reemphasizing the characteristics listed by McEwin (1977) and Alexander (1968), the committee highlighted the importance of attending to characteristics and needs of early adolescents, the role of the teacher as an advisor, and knowledge of specialized methods and materials appropriate for early adolescents.

In addition to the vast number of recommendations gathered from research and from practitioners on middle school teacher preparation, surveys have been conducted with middle school teachers and educators in school districts, colleges and universities to determine if their teacher education experiences were consistent with student needs in the classroom. Clark and Jones (1986) conducted a study with 101 middle school educators to determine their perception of teacher preparation. Using a Pearson correlation and analysis of variance, the results ranked field experience (student teaching) and classroom management as “most important.” Student counseling, educational technology, and curriculum design were rated as “vitaly important” in teacher preparation. This study supported earlier findings on extensive field experiences and classroom management of McEwin (1977) and the importance of addressing early adolescents needs as noted by the National Middle School Association in 1981. In a similar study of secondary teachers, Rancifer (1992) designed questions for 51 secondary teachers to examine the similarity of student learning experiences with student needs and expectations. Thirty-nine teachers responded to the survey. Using a frequency table for data tabulation, the top-ranking areas of weaknesses included lack of discipline, lack of classroom management organizational skills, and the inability to teach at the students’ level, especially those students with negative attitudes toward school. Similar weaknesses were noted by Drummond (1991). In a qualitative study of 90 beginning teachers on how they evaluated preservice teacher education and performance, the teachers likewise ranked skills in classroom management as an area of weakness.
In 1992, the Center for Early Adolescence released a report that included data from an eight-state study from 439 randomly selected teachers, 86 deans and directors of middle schools and chief state school officers of the eight states. This was the largest sample of middle level teachers that had yet been asked to evaluate their preservice preparation, and the first sample in the literature that was randomly selected. The results of the study found that only 17% of the teachers in the eight states had special preparation for teaching young adolescents (Scales and McEwin, 1994).

It would appear that widespread agreement among researchers has been reached on the problems most frequently encountered by teachers, especially those beginning their careers. The most frequently recognized problems are in discipline, classroom management, teaching methods, and understanding adolescent characteristics (Clark and Clark, 1983; Scales, 1993; U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

Although first year teachers typically appear prepared to enter the classroom based on recommendations, completion of certification requirements and practical field experience, researchers have continued to examine teachers’ readiness in their course content, their teaching models, their attitudes toward theory and their ability to apply practically the concepts learned in their teaching preparation (Pugh, Stone, Lindow and Pryor, 1991; Rancifer, 1992; Murphy, 1992). With what appears to be an extensive background in preservice education, teachers consistently self-identify their weaknesses in student discipline and classroom management skills followed by their lack of understanding of adolescent developmental needs of middle school students.

A study involving 136 middle and high school teachers from four states reported that most teachers understood adolescent developmental needs; however, only half of the subjects indicated that they understood the behaviors of adolescents (Sparapani, et al., 1991). More than 50% of the subjects responded that the middle grades needed a “structured classroom management system.” The respondents suggested a classroom where instruction is presented in an “organized fashion.” The data suggested that the subjects may not have understood fully how to implement instructional practices in ways that would lead to a well-managed classroom (Sparapani, et al., 1991).

Teacher preparation programs have typically focused on lesson preparation in content
areas and not on the match between instruction and developmental needs of students (Martin and Baldwin, 1993). Consequently, a majority of studies indicate that teachers perceive a lack of connection between the information provided in teacher preparation course work and the “real” classroom (Kagan, 1992), especially how to maintain classroom control while providing instruction.

Upon examination of individual cases of college students and their practical teaching experiences, Knowles and Sudzina (1994) found that the students who failed student teaching did so because they were not fully prepared to manage a classroom and they were not ready to work with diverse populations of students. Because the teacher preparation programs were modifications of programs for elementary or secondary teachers, strategies for dealing with diverse populations and discipline at the middle school level are often not included in teacher preparation (Sparapani, et al., 1991; Rancifer, 1992; Walhstrom and Clarken, 1992).

Based on the theories of adolescent development as illustrated by Jean Piaget and Eric Erikson, middle school teacher preparation must include an understanding of the knowledge that most adolescents have the ability to think out problems and to apply logical thought but few think abstractly or comprehend abstract concepts. Middle school teachers should know that many young adolescents need to be challenged with complex and abstract tasks in order to develop this level of thinking. Teachers also need to know that, according to Erikson, adolescents are concerned about achieving their identity to the degree that they are assured of receiving recognition from significant adults in their lives (Fitch, 1985). Because of these needs, teachers must be knowledgeable about different learning practices, and they must implement these practices into teaching in ways that promote learning and healthy socialization among students.

The nation is in the midst of educational reforms to raise standards, reshape curriculum, and restructure schools and their operations (U. S. Department of Education, 1999). Hence, the redesign of middle school teacher preparation must include all the stages of training: academic preparation, on-the-job training, diverse instructional practices, an understanding of adolescent development and continuous professional enhancement experiences (Scales, 1993).

Student Misbehavior and Disruptions

For years, concerns about discipline have continued to plague educators. For the past 20
years, the annual Gallup poll, has cited lack of discipline as one of the most serious problems confronting the public schools (Gallup, 1977, 1981, 1992, 1997). Disruptions must be addressed by the classroom teacher before learning can continue. Evertson (1985) utilized an experimental design with 102 secondary teachers in an Arkansas school district to show that management training to deal with disruptive behavior strengthens teachers’ skills. Teachers were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups from six school districts. Those in the experimental group were given a one-day classroom management workshop, a manual and additional follow-up. Data was collected from a summary rating during classroom observation on each teacher after the completion of the workshop.

Data were analyzed using a two-way analysis of variance, one between-group differences and one group factor to determine the difference in measurement before and after the workshop. After the treatments were applied, the treatment group exceeded the control group on all the ratings and significantly so on four of the five ratings in managing student behavior. These areas measured (a) restriction on student movement, (b) signals correct behavior, (c) consistency in managing student behavior, and (d) effective monitoring. Disruptions were considered to be student behavior that actually halted class activities. Disruptive behavior was identified as inattentiveness, uncooperativeness, and inappropriate chatting with friends. The treatment group had less appropriate behavior and teachers were less likely to ignore it when it did happen. Similar findings were noted by Evertson and Emmers (1982) in a study conducted with thirteen junior high mathematics and English teachers that investigated effective and ineffective management techniques of classroom teachers. The teachers were randomly selected after being stratified by subjects taught and years of teaching experience, which was classified into two groups (1 year, 1+ years). The results indicated that more effective classroom teachers identified and stopped disruptive behavior quickly and ignored the behavior less often than the least effective classroom teachers. This study also coincides with Emmer, Evertson, and Anderson’s (1980) study of third grade classes. In this study, the most effective teacher was distinguished from the least effective teacher by the degree to which the effective teacher monitored the students and carefully stopped disruptions when they occurred. These studies support Kounin’s (1970) belief that “with-it-ness” and “overlapping’ are important elements in classroom management because they raise teachers’
awareness of the environmental surroundings. Teachers practicing these techniques can stop inappropriate behavior while continuing instruction in the classroom.

Planning for Instruction

Effective use of educational time in the classroom is essential to the learning process. Therefore, preparing instructional materials and lessons to allow for class to start quickly and purposefully, handling administrative matters with expedient and efficient routines that keep class disruption to a minimum, and establishing smooth rapid transitions between activities through the day or between classes (Blum, 1984) are critical in preventing learning-inhibiting problems in the classroom. Researchers and theorists have followed Carroll’s (1963) model of school learning and incorporated his elements into other research on effective instructional practices. Carroll defines the degree of learning as time actually spent in learning divided by time needed for learning. Although Carroll’s concepts on time related specifically to the learning process, the factors of ability (the capacity to understand instruction), aptitude (the amount of time an individual needs to learn a given task), and perseverance (the amount of time the individual is willing to engage actively in learning) supports Kounin’s elements of accountability in effective classroom management. Kounin (1970) defines accountability as the teachers’ ability to help students to be more conscious of the tasks that they are expected to complete and the progress they are making toward completion.

Evertson (1985) noted, in her study of management skills training of secondary school teachers, that after the treatment teachers in the experimental group had significantly fewer students off-task (7.09%) as opposed to the control-group classes (14.8%). These findings were parallel with the on-task behavior. In the treatment classroom, 88% of the students were on-task whereas 76% of the students in the control group were on-task. Although these differences seem small, over time they can represent a significant concern for control and attention in the classroom. Students spend more time on-task when they are focused on tasks that they can complete (Peterson and Swing, 1982). Planning for student involvement in varied activities and consideration of individual student ability levels involved in those activities during a given time unit are essential elements in minimizing disruptive behavior.
Delivery of Instruction

“A volatile mismatch exists between the organization and curriculum of middle-grade schools and the intellectual and emotional needs of young adolescents” (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, p.8). If the middle school’s focus is on appropriately addressing adolescent developmental characteristics, then instructional activities should be designed to meet the wide range of achievements and interest of youth (Wiles and Bondi, 1981). In an ethnographic study of three seventh-grade classes, Deering (1994) focused on cooperative learning in the classroom as a means of providing instruction with adolescent developmental needs in mind. The results of the data collection from interviews, document analyses, and audio recordings suggest that during cooperative learning, subject matter and social participation are inextricably linked. Competition can develop within groups, resulting in exclusion of a group member or members. Deering recommended that competition of interaction among students be carefully scrutinized before it is used to motivate students. In addition, middle school teachers must be aware of patterns of exclusions that may develop among group members which could affect students’ interactions within the classroom.

In the middle school, individualized instruction is utilized in many curriculum designs to ensure that students receive fundamental skills in the identified areas of need. Therefore, middle school instructional practices must be appropriately planned and delivered to facilitate individual learning while preventing disruptive behavior.

Summary

After a careful review of the related literature, this researcher has discovered opinion papers, dissertations, and articles on classroom management, teacher preparation, and beginning teacher concerns about discipline. Limited quantitative research is provided on middle school disruptions or learning-inhibiting problems in the classroom with respect to years of teaching experience and education. This study investigated specific learning-inhibiting problems that disrupt and interfere with student learning, and based on those findings, provides recommendations for staff development at the middle school level.