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Examining Recurring Critical Events in School Years Using School District Staff Perceptions

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Abstract

The goal of this research is to examine critical events that school systems may experience to determine if the events happen in recurring patterns. Researchers share the results of data collected through literature review, narrative inquiry, and panel discussions regarding the perceptions of varied school personnel and recurring critical events in the school year. This information may assist school administrators in developing schedules, planning programs and implementing campus/district initiatives.

The researchers established several goals for this study. The primary goal was to examine critical times that school systems may experience to determine if the events happen in recurring patterns. A secondary goal is to determine if the recursive events can be predicted and proactively addressed. Researchers share the results of data collected through literature review, narrative inquiry, and focus group discussions regarding the perceptions of varied school personnel and recurring critical events in the school year. This information may assist school

administrators in developing schedules, planning programs and implementing campus/district initiatives.

These events are not limited to any specific category. Examples of event categories include but are not limited to: Student Behavior, Parent Communication, Change in workload, Change in stress levels, Athletics, Curriculum, Transportation, Economics/Budget, Medical, Absenteeism, Campus Morale.

Literature Review

The scholarly literature pertaining to the recurrent critical events in school calendars is sparse. There is however, important existing research closely associated with this endeavor. As school practitioners, we often see all things through the lens of student achievement. This research reflects the same perspective. While critical times and recursive events are independent topics, our participants still view these ideas as facets of making students successful, keeping faculty morale high, and making all things school work together. An overall look at the literature connects several topics to this work. We will review each of these briefly to establish the relationship between our study and these important factors.

Quality leadership is always a vital component of the picture of school effectiveness. In this research, the researchers views the principal or other school leaders attempting organizational management within the circumstances of the day, week, or season while remaining focused on instructional leadership. Determining the priorities for this complex job is often difficult. Horng, Klasik, and Loeb (2009) found time spent on organization management activities is associated with positive school outcomes, such as student test score gains and positive teacher and parent assessments of the instructional climate. Day-to-day instructional activities are marginally or not at all related to improvements in student performance and often have a negative relationship with teacher and parent assessments. While the current trend of moving school leaders to the instructional leader role is important, these researchers found that ignoring the organization and its management risked decreasing achievement. Principals cannot be single-minded about instructional leadership while ignoring the complexities of operations. The study divided leadership duties and time spent into 6 categories: administration, instructional program, day-to-day instruction, organizational management, internal relations, and external relations. Almost half of time spent in school by principals in this study was in administration and organization management. While no single category is singly more important, it is critical that the principal or school leader be able to determine the priority at any given time. Good organizational management seems to actually have the most impact on student achievement.

Any assistant principal can identify student discipline as a major source of time and effort for school leaders. The methods and practices of dealing with discipline issues often involve addressing recursive events that occur at particular parts of the day, week or year. Principals often create or at least enforce and manage the campus discipline. This may be a well-designed and uniform plan or a rather fly by-the-seat-of-your-pants method. According to Boyd (2012), a good campus-wide discipline plan helps children to develop self-discipline through a consistent, coherent discipline system and shows them that we care about their lives, not just their grades or test scores. The area of discipline is also often an area of conflict between leadership and faculty. A comprehensive, consistent approach to student behavior is essential for successful schooling. Without this uniform plan and understanding, discipline events become more of a distraction and

an event at school that detracts from quality instruction. Boyd also contends that teachers, particularly beginning teachers, feel left without administrative support unless a good discipline plan and a common understanding exists between administration and faculty.

There is a great deal of scholarly literature regarding the number of days actually spent in school by students and the associated student achievement. Generally, children in the US spend much less time in school than in other industrialized nations. This may not seem of much consequence except that now US schools are essentially in competition with schools from around the world to achieve a level of success or a higher ranking. Compressing an equivalent amount of learning into a shorter time period may create pressures or influence events at school. Further limiting instructional time is the plethora of extra-curricular and other events during a limited school year. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has made clear his view that "our school day is too short, our week is too short, our year is too short" (Craw, 2013). Completing a meta-analysis of studies over a 25-year period, Patall, Cooper, and Allen (2010) found several consistent trends. First of all, simply more time at school is not necessarily effective in regards to student achievement. While extending school time can be effective, a focus on quality instruction is just as important. It also seems in these studies that students at risk of school failure benefited the most. It should also be noted that the strongest research designs for instruction produced the most consistent positive results. Often events beyond our control change the time-at-school structure. Marcotte and Hansen (2010) found in one study that ten or so days of bad weather closure within a school year measurably affects student achievement. Hanson (2007) also found that increased instructional time prior to test administration increases student performance.

One additional factor related to school schedules and student performance that has received much attention recently is the relationship of circadian rhythms to student achievement. According to Vollmer, Schaal, Hummel, and Randler (2011), individuals differ in their sleep habits and their circadian preferences. Researchers classify individuals as morning-types or evening-types while most are actually somewhere in between. This classification has come to be known as a chronotype. This characteristic increases with age and is especially evident in adolescents 13 to 16 years of age. The transition often causes sleepiness in middle school or junior high age students. This age level is also complicated by a rapid change in maturity and other developmental issues. In a quantitative study of this group of children, these researchers posit that later school start times or adolescents changing their late bedtime behavior, induced by an educational program, could reduce the adolescents' stress perception and improve their academic performance. It would be difficult to devise a school system to accommodate all children and their unique neuropsychological preferences, but it is no doubt an issue related to the ebb and flow of the school day, particularly for some age groups.

While there are other factors that may influence recursive events and the critical times of each day, week, or school year, it might certainly improve planning and scheduling to mitigate as many issues that create disturbances as possible. It would also behoove school leaders to understand and reinforce measures that improve or streamline the precious time available for instruction, growth, and learning.

Methods and Procedures

Creswell (1998) is an early utilizer of narrative inquiry to gather data. According to Connelly and Clandinin (2006), narrative inquiry involves the collaboration between researcher

and participants. Narrative inquiry typically occurs over time, in a specific place or places, and within a social setting. Further, it is noted that narrative inquiry is classified as both phenomena under study and method of study. Qualitative research utilizing narrative inquiry requires the researcher to think in narrative terms as they enter into research relationships with others, working to document field texts and written accounts of participants responses during group data gathering sessions.

In this particular study, narrative inquiry was the medium used to collect data and is an accepted means for acquiring data when conducting a qualitative research study. Focus group questions were presented to a varied group of instructional team members within a school district. Narrative inquiry involves the presentation of questions to a select population of individuals and relies heavily on active participation all group members. Benefits of narrative inquiry include the ability for participants to self-reflect while engaging in group dialogue as well as the researchers' ability to capture thoughts, feelings, and emotions that cannot be gathered through quantitative means. Participants responded openly to the questions presented. Data was placed within a rubric to corresponding questions. Data was then filtered for identification of trends using trend extrapolation.

Selection of Participants

Individuals from the field of education were selected for participation in this research study. Participants included teachers, assistant principals, principals, a curriculum coach, and a superintendent of a small suburban school district in the North Texas area. The sample of participants was purposive in an effort to gain broad perspectives from the target school district.

Collection and Analysis of Data

The focus group of instructional team members within the targeted school district was presented with questions. The informal setting allowed participants to freely respond and participate upon desire. The researchers could seek clarification through additional questioning related to the topic presented as needed. During the interview process, data was recorded and later placed within a rubric to corresponding questions. Researchers were free to record data using methods that are personally meaningful to them. Data was then examined to identify trends using trend extrapolation. Trend extrapolation seeks to provide the researcher a reasonable ability to determine if current trends revealed through data analysis will continue in the future (Massengale, 1974). Thus, if certain trends are identified within the data of narrative inquiry, the researcher can forecast allowing one to expect future implications of similar data trends. As the researchers analyze the data, they seek to find consensus thereby revealing common response strands.

Discussion of Results

Research Questions

The following questions were posed to the focus group during the session. Each participant was encouraged to respond and to explore related topics that would enlighten the interaction.

1. What do you find to be your 2 greatest challenges at the beginning of the school year? Why do you think this issue is particularly challenging at this specified time?

2. What do you find to be your 2 greatest challenges during the middle of the school year? Why do you think this issue is particularly challenging at this specified time?

3. What do you find to be your 2 greatest challenges during the end of the school year? Why do you think this issue is particularly challenging at this specified time?

4. Can you identify 1-2 challenge areas that occur almost daily? What time of the day does this challenge typically occur?

5. In your role, what is the most enjoyable part of your daily/weekly/yearly routine? Why so?

6. In your role, what is the least enjoyable part of your daily/weekly/yearly routine? Why so?

7. Do you find that there is a particular day in the week that you and the school feel more "on task" than another?

8. What time of the month do you feel like the school is "running like a well-oiled machine?

9. Is there a certain time of year that "it all falls in place" and the school is humming?

In examining the responses, a significant theme that emerges is transition. The respondents consistently mentioned transitions as a primary initiator of issues and problematic situations for students, teachers, parents, administrators and the larger school community. Synonyms for transition used by respondents to describe recursive situations include: change, escalate, decreases, increases, lose, more, less, longer, worse, better.

The investigators note that respondents believe that transitional events in the lives of all educational stakeholders are impactful to the tone of the school campus and school district. Planned transitional events, whether large or small, alter the mood and tone of the educational community in meaningful ways, when the transitional events are unplanned, the challenges can and do become exponentially more problematic.

Educational/Scientific Importance

The research has implications for shaping the nature of school policy at the classroom, campus and district levels. Superintendents, school trustees, campus administrators and classroom teachers may find great value in having data about the timing of events that change the behaviors of all educational stakeholders. Knowledge of these recursive patterns allows pre-planning to intervene in the possible negative outcomes. Consideration of optimal timing can increase overall success rates of new program implementation and the like.

Identification of recursive events within the school day/year may prove valuable to educational policy makers on the state and national levels. Targeting procedures and supplying resources to identified transitional situations that confound the learning process can increase the efficacy of public policy. The final determinant of the significance of the ability to mitigate recursive events will be increases in student achievement and overall productivity. Transitional events are problematic, when the transitional events are unplanned, the challenges can become exponentially problematic!

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Appendix

Researchers 1 and 3 Data Collection

Question	Primary PK-K	Elementary 1st – 2nd	Intermediate 3rd – 4th	Middle School 5th – 6th	Junior High 7th – 8th	High School 9th – 12th	Instructional Specialist	Superintendent
1. Researcher 1	*Transportation Younger students have trouble staying awake. *Introducing students to the basics of school. * New kids every year (PK & K)	*Grade level placement (ability levels)			Teaching new systems and processes for Junior High.	*Scheduling students into courses. *Hiring personnel with appropriate certifications.		
Researcher 3	Arrivals. Safety issues	Placement of students. Preparing Personnel. Acclimating students.		Developing systems and processes. District plan for transition to middle school.		Schedules. Schedule changes		
2. Researcher 1	*Holiday breaks *Lose momentum *Middle is good	*Integrating new students who enroll later into the "system".	*Long stretch between Beginning and middle of school. Teachers /students get tired.	*Holiday breaks – Lose momentum *Academic expectations increase and so behavior issues escalate as well.	*Kids go to Mexico and don't come back from the holidays	*October – November H.S. experiences low morale		Instruction becomes more rigorous and students begin to "hide" behind bad behavior.
Researcher 2		Long stretch to any break. New students arrive after holidays.	Behavioral issues arise in the middle of the year.	Middle of the year is good. Near holidays tougher. Days become chopped up. New students arrive after holidays.	Do-Over after the break for some discipline issues.	Lower morale time. Late Oct-Early November.		

3. Researcher 1			Pulling "better" teachers to complete test administration which decreases instructional time for other students.	*Baseball season with testing season *Games are late *Longer stretch of instructional time between January and Testing..	Students have completed state testing and feel like school is really over. Students have already "checked out"	*Administering the high number of EOC's that have to be delivered. *Students think the year is over once they have taken all finals. *New student enrollment during testing season *Keeping staff motivated at the end of the year.		
Researcher 3		Field Trips,. Activities remove kids from class. Maintaining focus.	Field Trips,. Activities remove kids from class.	Testing. HB 5 – testing break.	Testing. Testing Interruptions.	Ball Games. Testing. Motivating Teachers, APs		
4. Researcher 1	*Getting students to class on time	*Attendance causes interruption in instruction. *Students leaving early	*Attendance causes interruption in instruction. Positive, is that parents are less likely to withdraw students early from school		*5th & 6th period is in the middle of the day and is divided by lunch schedule. *Transitions from class to class			
Researcher 3	Taking Attendance. Feeding early. Kids being picked up early.	Schedules – some with fewer breaks	Behavior issues after lunch.	Behavior issues following Lunch.				
5. Researcher 1	*Being in the classroom *The last day of school when students are loaded on the bus and	*Being in the classroom *Watching students progression with			*Participating in the Science Lab with students	*Problem solving with parents and students and finding an actual solution for them	*Working with teachers and students	

	wave goodbye. (Sense of fulfillment in knowing that they learned the basics of school from Primary)	technology						
Researcher 3	Technology hands on. In the classroom.			In the classroom.	Hands on Lab activities. Technology hands on.	Interactions with parents/students to help.		
6. Researcher 1	*Worrying about kids over the holidays (food and safety)	*Working with students who have a hard home life.			*Testing *Handling discipline problems.	*Management of Testing		
Researcher 3	After school – child not picked up. Home life problems affecting students.					Testing. Management.		Holidays – students go home without food.
7. Researcher 1					*Thursday seems to be the worst day for discipline (Thursdays are pep rally days). *Students seem to "get going" by 10 a.m.	*Tuesdays through Thursdays are good. *Mondays are difficult because students are recovering from the weekend and *Fridays are difficult because students are ready for the weekend. *students are working hard between the times of 12 – 3 p.m.		*February – March seem to be good for Secondary.

Researcher 3	Tuesday-Thursday.	Tuesday-Thursday.	Tuesday-Thursday.	Tuesday-Thursday. 10 AM +	Tuesday-Thursday.	12-3 PM		
8. Researcher 1								
Researcher 3	By early October. Lull after holidays. Worst-prior to breaks.			Feb-Mar. Routines established. Discipline down. Learning up. Worst=Thurs day (game day)	Feb-Mar. Routines established. Discipline down. Learning up Worst=Thurs day (game day)	Feb-Mar. Routines established. Discipline down. Learning up Worst=Full Moon, Weather change, 3 Rainy Days.		
9. Researcher 1			Overall production seems to be better with 90 minute planning time (once a week – Wacky Wednesday)					* House Bill 5 - Campus involvement in community events tends to settle things down. (i.e. Coats for Kids) Students begin to look beyond themselves.
Researcher 3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Researcher 1 – Participant Quotes: Wonder – How much time is spent each year with set up and close down…… Seems to be a waste of human energy.

Researcher 3 – Participant Quotes: Campus Involvement with community important; HB 5 Issues; PLC – sustained 90 minute planning time important; Start Year/End Year important; School Wide Discipline Plan; Champs PK-6

Researcher 2 Data Collection

Q-1. Safety; “Just get them home safely”; “reteach and relearn systems and processes”

Q-2. “Middle of the year is really good for us”; routines have been re-established; Any holiday time, students and teachers are off task; in October morale is low after the hard work of beginning the year; Thursdays are difficult times in JH because of sports activities; “keep the teachers from eating the kids”; difficult time for students also; holidays are approaching and all begin to get excited; still have new student enrollment; lose some students after the winter break; At the district level there are more hearings about discipline and other student issues; Teachers are accustomed to students and their needs and routines; “Full Moon”; “weather change”, “Rainy Days”; “anytime you have a long break”

Q-3. Testing; Athletics; They compete for student time and energy; Long stretch of instruction time after the holidays; The end of course tests take away one month of instruction time (upper grades); Once these tests are over students act as if school is over (even though there is instruction time left); Teachers need a “bag of tricks” to keep students motivated. Things seem to change every week; PEIMS audit – attendance is taken twice a day. Takes quite a bit of time from instruction; (the superintendent commented “specific, intentional plans need to be made”).

Q-4. BOD - Morning – attendance; MOD – dip in interest in school after eating lunch; EOD – disruptions of instruction especially Fridays

Q-5. Going into the classroom and observing learning; I love my job-hands on with students; Watch technology integration into teaching; End of school…last day…waving goodbye…knowing that they started first day of school with us and we send them on their way…I almost cry now thinking about it.

Q-6. Testing-EOC STAAR; Transportation, transitions; Holidays, students can go home to no food, no activities and may not be safe (neglect and abuse)

Q-7. Not Monday; Not Friday (assessments); #1 Tuesdays; Wednesdays and Thursdays also good; Best times of day – 10 until 3pm.

Q-8. Q-9. (answers to 8 and nine blended): October referrals bottom-out; Routines are set; Expectations are aligned

Researcher 2 Open Comments: JH – collective activities draw the entire community together; Community events create synergy; CHAMPS PK-6 focused effort; Regular sacred planning time 90 minutes a week; Consistent school wide discipline plan