Student Behavior: Internal Versus External Reinforcement, and Academic Performance

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Abstract

Human services professionals are increasingly integral to K-12 school environments, offering support for students' social, mental, and behavioral needs. As the involvement of these professionals grows, there is a pressing need for further research to deepen our understanding of the interplay between students' personalities, academic performance, and behavioral issues. This study explored the relationship between locus of control, academic functioning, and discipline issues among high school seniors. The analysis revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between academic test scores and discipline referrals, highlighting a link between academic performance and behavioral issues. Contrary to initial hypotheses, no significant relationships were found between locus of control and either discipline referrals or academic performance. These findings underscore the critical role of reducing behavioral referrals to enhance academic instructional time. They also highlight the complex nature of student behavior and academic achievement, suggesting that factors beyond locus of control contribute to these dynamics.

Keywords: academic achievement, school discipline, locus of control, internal versus external reinforcement

Assessing the relationship between locus of control, academic functioning, and discipline issues among high school seniors is crucial for promoting a positive learning environment and supporting students' overall social, mental, and behavioral development (Kumaravelu, 2018; Suraj et al., 2023). Understanding how students perceive their ability to influence outcomes, whether they attribute success or failure to internal factors or external circumstances, can help identify specific elements that impact factors associated with student learning and the learning environment (Kumaravelu, 2018; Miller et al., 2003; Suraj et al., 2023). By examining this relationship, human services professionals can implement targeted interventions that foster a sense of personal responsibility, resilience, and motivation, ultimately leading to improved interventions focused on students' personalities, academic performance, and behavioral issues.

Many school systems face financial challenges in hiring and retaining school counselors and other mental health support staff (Langreo, 2023; Murphy & Kim, 2023). To address these gaps, numerous school districts collaborate with local mental health agencies to provide comprehensive counseling, emotional support, and social services to students grappling with mental health issues (Hollingsworth, 2024; Laird, 2024; Langreo, 2023). Funded by grants (U.S. Department of Education, 2022) or through billing insurance, these agencies alleviate financial pressures on school districts, allowing them to reallocate resources to other critical areas (Hollingsworth, 2024; Laird, 2024). Such partnerships not only augment the resources available to school districts but have also enriched the roles of human services professionals, who are now better equipped to understand and meet their clients' diverse and dynamic needs.

The school environment, with its myriad pressures, including peer interactions, academic demands, and social challenges, can be particularly daunting for students struggling to adapt (Broderick & Blewitt, 2019; Lambie et al., 2019; Murphy & Kim, 2023). These struggles manifest in various forms of academic distress (Gargiulo & Bouck, 2018), with some students internalizing their stress, leading to anxiety, depression, or even suicidal ideation (Feldman, 2021). Such students might withdraw, becoming less visible to support staff or seek help through social networks or formal counseling services (Demaray et al., 2005; Suldo et al., 2014). Conversely, students who externalize their distress often engage in aggressive behaviors, bullying, or argumentativeness. Often, these students find themselves being disciplined, which may include losing privileges at school, receiving a referral to the office, being suspended, or being expelled (Gargiulo & Bouck, 2018; Murphy & Kim, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Recent trends also indicate a troubling increase in such disciplinary measures among high school students, which not only impacts their academic success but also correlates with heightened risks of future legal entanglements (Flaherty & Weist, 1999; Murphy & Kim, 2023). These trends underscore the critical need for a deeper understanding of the factors influencing student behavior and academic outcomes.

Review of Literature

Behavior Problems in Schools

Discipline and behavior problems in America's public schools represent a significant challenge, being both widespread and detrimental to the educational environment. Such issues not only compromise student learning but may also escalate into more severe behavioral

problems (Lambie et al., 2019; Marchant, 2004). The United States Department of Education (n.d.) reported that, out of the 49 million students enrolled in public schools, 3.5 million were subjected to in-school suspensions, another 3.45 million faced out-of-school suspensions, and 130,000 were expelled. Furthermore, the National Education Association (NEA) has highlighted the extensive impact of these disciplinary actions, noting that students in the United States lose approximately 18 million days of instruction annually due to suspensions (Kiema, 2016). It is critical to acknowledge that poor academic performance is not a direct cause of problematic behaviors. Instead, there is a complex interplay where students exhibiting behavioral issues and receiving discipline referrals are more likely to experience academic deficits (Kremer et al., 2016; Putnam et al., 2005). Recent studies have begun to unpack the multifaceted nature of this issue, exploring how factors such as school climate, teacher-student relationships, and access to mental health services influence student behavior and disciplinary outcomes (Cornelius-White, 2007; Thapa et al., 2013). For instance, research indicates that positive school climates and strong, supportive teacher-student relationships are inversely related to the occurrence of disciplinary actions (Cornelius-White, 2007). Moreover, access to comprehensive mental health services within schools has been shown to mitigate behavior problems, thereby reducing the need for disciplinary actions (Anyon et al., 2016).

The 2020-2021 *Civil Rights Data Collection* report offered compelling statistics on school discipline; the report revealed that 786,000 total K-12 students received an in-school suspension, and 638,700 received an out-of-school suspension at least once (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2023). These students exhibited a significantly higher likelihood of involvement with the juvenile justice system in the subsequent year. Alarmingly, 75% of students identified with an educational disability experienced suspension or expulsion at least once. Research underscores the gravity of these disciplinary actions: just one suspension in ninth grade markedly elevates the risk of high school dropout, with each additional suspension amplifying that risk by 20% (Balfanz et al., 2014). While suspensions might be seen as mere correlates rather than causative factors in student outcomes, the American Psychological Association (2014) has found no evidence that suspension, expulsion, or zero-tolerance policies lead to improved student behavior or heightened school safety. On the contrary, such punitive measures are associated with an increased likelihood of future behavioral issues, academic struggles, student detachment, and dropout rates.

Schools routinely collect data on office referrals for student discipline problems, yet this information often lacks the detail necessary for understanding and improving individual student behavior or reducing disruptive incidents effectively. The early identification of behavioral issues and subsequent intervention are crucial for preventing the escalation of such problems (Eklund et al., 2009; Glascoe, 2000; Pas et al., 2011). Children who exhibit disruptive behaviors upon school entry, including oppositional and aggressive tendencies, face a heightened risk of enduring social and academic challenges. These early behavioral difficulties, coupled with failures in developing positive peer relationships, are linked to a spectrum of later social adjustment issues, including school dropout, delinquency, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, violence, and criminal activities (Ali

et al., 2019; Eklund et al., 2009; Murphy & Kim, 2023; Rusby et al., 2007).

Statewide Testing/High Stakes Testing

High-stakes testing is a pivotal element in today's educational system, utilized to make critical decisions about students, educators, schools, and districts (Burchbuckler, 2013; Croft et al., 2016). These tests serve as a mechanism for accountability, aiming to ensure that students are part of effective educational environments and are instructed by competent teachers (Marchant, 2004; Munoz, 2024). The term "high-stakes" refers to the significant consequences linked to test outcomes, including sanctions, penalties, funding adjustments, and crucial academic decisions like college admissions, grade promotion, or graduation for students, as well as financial incentives for educators (Marchant, 2004; Munoz, 2024). One such high-stakes test is the ACT, which is widely utilized for college admissions decisions. In 2023, 1,386,000 students took the ACT making it the most widely used high-stakes test utilized in the U.S. (Adams, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). The high-stakes testing movement can be traced back to the 1980s, following the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, which criticized the lack of rigorous standards in public schools across the United States. This led to a concerted effort to reinforce curriculum fundamentals, set high standards, and implement accountability measures (Munoz, 2024). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) marked a significant milestone in this journey, aiming to provide all children, irrespective of their backgrounds or challenges, with the opportunity to receive a high-quality education. NCLB introduced mandatory annual testing from grades three through eight with state achievement tests. This act was later succeeded by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which continued to link student performance on standardized tests to sanctions for schools failing to achieve adequate yearly progress.

The role of testing in education is multifaceted. According to the American Psychological Association (2014), measuring student learning is a fundamental process in enhancing the nation's educational standards. Tests should be integrated into a broader system that promotes equitable educational opportunities and advancement for all students. When utilized appropriately, tests represent one of the most reliable and objective methods to assess student performance, offering valuable insights to educators about individual student progress and the effectiveness of teaching strategies and curriculum materials (Neukrug & Fawcett, 2020). Under ESSA, school districts are mandated to measure student performance rigorously and hold schools and educational systems accountable for these outcomes.

To navigate the complexities of high-stakes testing, it is essential to consider the broader implications of these assessments on educational equity and student well-being. Research suggests that while high stakes testing aims to improve educational outcomes, it may also exacerbate stress among students and teachers and contribute to narrowing the curriculum to focus primarily on testable subjects (Au, 2007; Berliner, 2011). Furthermore, the emphasis on standardized testing has raised concerns about its impact on teaching practices and the marginalization of students from diverse backgrounds (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kozol, 2005).

In light of these challenges, there is a growing call for a more holistic approach to assessment that includes multiple measures of student learning and development (Popham, 2011; Schneider & Hutt, 2014).

Such an approach would not only provide a more comprehensive picture of student achievement but also foster an educational environment that supports all aspects of student growth and development.

Locus of Control

Understanding behavior necessitates considering both individual dispositions and environmental contexts (Rotter, 1966). Rotter's social learning theory posits four primary components that shape behavior: behavior potential, expectancy, reinforcement value, and the psychological situation. This theory underscores the significant influence of social context or environmental factors on behavior rather than attributing behavior solely to individual psychological factors (Rotter, 1966). A notable strength of Rotter's framework is its integration of specific and general constructs, thereby leveraging the advantages of each. In this model, every general construct is mirrored by a specific counterpart, ensuring that a corresponding cross-situational generalized expectancy exists for each situation-specific expectancy. Within the ambit of social learning, locus of control is conceptualized as an individual's overarching belief about the sources of reinforcement in life, whether these are internal or external to oneself (Bandura, 1986; Haggbloom et al., 2002; Rotter, 1966). Individuals with a pronounced internal locus of control perceive their own actions as the primary determinant of reinforcement, attributing success or failure to personal efforts. Conversely, those with an external locus of control attribute outcomes to factors beyond their control, such as luck, chance, or other influential individuals, perceiving little correlation between their efforts and the outcomes. Historical research has indicated gender differences in locus of control, with men typically exhibiting a higher internal locus of control than women. However, subsequent studies have observed a shift towards a stronger external locus of control across genders since the initial research into this construct (Sherman et al., 1997).

Locus of control remains a critical element in student self-development, influencing academic outcomes and personal growth. Interventions designed to enhance internal locus of control can significantly benefit students (Kumaravelu, 2018; Suraj et al., 2023). Students who attribute success to internal factors are more likely to anticipate future successes, whereas those who attribute failure to internal factors may foresee future failures unless they believe in their capacity to effect change (Mali, 2013; Shepherd et al., 2006). This attribution style influences not only academic achievement but also students' general approach to challenges and opportunities.

Empirical studies have consistently found an internal locus of control to be a positive predictor of academic achievement, while an external locus of control tends to predict poorer academic outcomes (Kremer et al., 2016; Kutanis et al., 2011; Mali, 2013; Shepherd et al., 2006). For instance, Miller et al. (2003) explored the perceptions of control among adolescents with chronic behavior problems, comparing the locus of control between students in regular and alternative schools. Their findings revealed that students in alternative settings exhibited a stronger external locus of control, suggesting that behavioral issues may be linked to how students perceive their ability to influence their environment. Furthermore, Bartel (1971) investigated the relationship between locus of control and academic achievement among children from varying socioeconomic backgrounds. The study found no initial differences in locus of control between lower and middle-class children in early grades. However, by the sixth grade, significant disparities emerged, indicating that school experiences and

interactions play a crucial role in shaping children's locus of control over time. This evolution suggests that educational environments significantly influence the development of locus of control, impacting students' responses to and interactions with their surroundings.

This study further explores the intricate relationship between academic achievement, school discipline referrals, and students' locus of control. By identifying these dynamics, the research seeks to contribute to the development of more effective strategies for supporting at-risk students, thereby enhancing educational outcomes and reducing disciplinary incidents.

Methodology

Hypotheses

This study tested the following hypotheses: (1) ACT scores are inversely correlated with discipline referrals; (2) ACT scores are inversely correlated with Rotter scores, with internalizers having statistically higher ACT scores; (3) The number of discipline referrals is inversely correlated with Rotter scores, with internalizers having fewer discipline referrals.

Participants

Participants for this study included 84 high school seniors from a rural high school in southern Illinois. The convenience sample included 46 males (55%) and 38 females (45%) in the sample. The age of the participants ranged from 17 to 18. The average ACT score for the sample was 21.27, with a standard deviation (*SD*) of 5.14. ACT scores ranged from 12 to 24. The average number of discipline referrals was 5.76 (*SD* = 8.94). The average locus of control score (described below) for the sample was 11.29 (*SD* = 3.7) and ranged from 3 to 19, which is consistent with earlier research (Rotter, 1966).

Instrumentation

Rotter's locus of control instrument, known as the Internal-External Scale, served as the locus of control measure. This measure is comprised of 29 questions in which the participant circles the statement with which they agree. Each question contained only two statements to choose from; respondents selected either A or B. Of the 29 questions, 23 items are scored. The total is then tallied with a high score indicating an external locus of control and a low score indicating an internal locus of control (Rotter, 1966; Kurt et al., 2012).

Rotter provided information on the initial reliability and validity of the locus of control scale. Rotter reported corrected split-half reliabilities of .65 for males and .79 for females (Rotter, 1966). Rotter felt that the nature of the scale resulted in underestimates of its internal consistency. Test-retest reliability in various samples with one- and two-month intervals ranged from .49 to .83 (Rotter, 1966). Rotter's scale has been broadly used in American contexts as well as in other cultures around the world (Domino & Domino, 2006; Lange & Tiggemann 1981; Huizing, 2015). Based on research, the locus of control scale transitions into other cultures. Cross-cultural research estimates of internal consistency had a mean of .66 and a median of .69, with results as high as .93 and as low as -.40. Test-retest reliability estimates ranged from .53 to .86 with a mean of .66 and a median of .64 (Huizing, 2015).

Procedures

The study was reviewed and approved by the IRB as exempt based on the use of preexisting data. The data for the sample were part of a prior larger study conducted by the school district. All data were collected by school personnel and archived for additional analysis. Permission to utilize this archived data was obtained from the school district, teachers, and school

principal. The researcher explained the nature and purpose of the project as well as the benefits, risks, and voluntariness of the study. No personally identifying information was maintained for this study. All data were uploaded to SPSS for further analysis.

Results

Pearson correlations were used to measure the relationship among all three variables of interest (locus of control, ACT scores, and discipline referrals). This analysis was followed by point-biserial correlations after dichotomizing each of the variables into a high group (above the mean) and a low group (below the mean) or quartiles. The common .05 level of probability was adopted as an indication of statistical significance.

To test the first hypothesis, a Pearson correlation was computed, which resulted in a statistically significant moderate negative correlation of r (82) = -.38, p = .001. This statistically significant association means that, as ACT scores increase the number of discipline referrals decreases and vice versa. To test the second hypothesis, a Pearson correlation was computed, which resulted in no significant association between ACT scores and the Rotter locus of control scale, r (82) = -.09, p = .864. To test the third hypothesis, a Pearson correlation was computed, which resulted in no significant association between the Rotter locus of control scale and discipline referrals, r (82) = .04, p = .718. These results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Correlation matrix for ACT, Rotter, and Discipline Referrals

	ACT	Rotter	Discipline
ACT	---	-.09*	-.38**
Rotter		---	.04***

*p = .864. **p = .001. ***p = .718

In an effort to further analyze any possible associations among the three variables, the ACT, Rotter, and discipline referrals were split at the mean or into quartiles, thus creating dichotomous variables from the continuous variables. Chi-Square analyses were then computed to test for proportionality. However, no statistically significant results were discovered. Specifically, when analyzing proportionality between the ACT (above the mean and below the mean for the sample) and the locus of control raw score (also split at the mean), the resulting chi-square was insignificant, χ^2 (1, N = 84) = .310, p = .577). Similarly, when splitting the locus of control scale into quartiles, the resulting chi-square was not significant, χ^2 (3, N=84) = .807, p = .848). Lastly, a chi-square of proportionality between the number of discipline referrals and the locus of control scale was similarly not significant, χ^2 (1, N = 84) = .040, p = .842). Overall, only the first hypothesis was supported.

Discussion

This study's findings reveal a significant inverse relationship between ACT scores and discipline referrals among high school seniors, aligning with prior research that underscores the link between academic performance and behavioral issues (Kiema, 2016; Whisman & Hammer, 2014).

This correlation suggests that behavioral problems may detract from educational engagement, subsequently impacting academic achievement. However, it's crucial to note that the correlational nature of this study precludes definitive conclusions about causality between academic achievement and behavioral issues.

Unexpectedly, our analysis did not find a significant association between locus of control and either academic performance or discipline referrals. This outcome diverges from previous studies that identified locus of control as a predictor of academic functioning and behavior (Kutanis et al., 2011; Shepherd et al., 2006). The lack of correlation in our study suggests that locus of control may not consistently influence academic and behavioral outcomes across different populations or settings. This inconsistency raises questions about the stability of locus of control as a construct for predicting academic and behavioral outcomes, suggesting the need for further research to explore alternative personality constructs that might more reliably predict these outcomes. The absence of expected correlations between locus of control and academic or behavioral measures in this study could be influenced by several factors. For instance, the effectiveness of academic programming, tutoring, and instructional strategies at the participating school might have contributed to relatively uniform academic performance among students, thereby reducing the variability needed to detect significant correlations. Similarly, effective classroom interventions or a low incidence of behavior warranting disciplinary referrals could explain the lack of association between locus of control and behavior problems.

Implications for Human Services Professionals in K-12 Schools

The correlation between decreased academic performance and increased behavioral issues underscores the importance of early intervention strategies to mitigate behavior problems, supporting the body of research linking behavioral issues to academic challenges (Ali et al., 2019; Lambie et al., 2019; Murphy & Kim, 2023). Given the growing role of human services professionals in schools, there is a unique opportunity to implement systematic screening and intervention processes. By identifying students at risk of maladaptive behaviors at strategic points throughout the academic year, schools can provide targeted support, such as counseling or group interventions, to address potential issues before they worsen.

The findings of this study also highlight an imperative for human services professionals to delve into alternative theoretical frameworks and personality constructs beyond locus of control. Variability in the predictive value of locus of control across different studies signals a need to adopt a broader lens when examining the psychological underpinnings of student success. It suggests that a singular focus on locus of control may not suffice to fully understand or influence the academic and behavioral trajectories of students. Adopting a multi-construct approach allows for the development of more nuanced and adaptable intervention systems. For example, interventions based on resilience theory could focus on strengthening students' ability to bounce back from setbacks (Masten, 2001), while those grounded in theories of motivation could aim to enhance students' intrinsic desire to learn and succeed (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Similarly, incorporating emotional intelligence into intervention strategies could help students better manage their emotions and navigate social challenges, potentially reducing behavioral issues and improving academic engagement (Brackett et al., 2011). This approach not only

broadens the scope of potential interventions but also aligns with the increasingly recognized importance of addressing the whole child in education, encompassing emotional, social, and cognitive development alongside academic achievement.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study is subject to several limitations that affect its generalizability. Primarily, the constrained sample size poses a significant limitation. Expanding the sample would not only enhance statistical power but also allow for a broader examination of behavior and academic functioning across a more diverse set of participants. Additionally, there was variability in how teachers interpreted and applied policies regarding office referrals for disciplinary actions. For instance, some teachers exhibited a higher degree of classroom management, preferring to address behavioral issues internally, while others were more inclined to refer students for even minor infractions. This variability introduces a potential selection bias, as there is no standardized criterion for what constitutes an office referral.

Given these limitations, future research in this area should aim to replicate this study with a larger and more diverse sample to strengthen the findings and enhance their applicability. Moreover, it is crucial for future studies to seek ways to standardize the criteria for discipline referrals across teachers. Engaging school leadership in developing and implementing behavioral training programs, as well as clearly defining policies for office referrals, could mitigate some of the observed inconsistencies. Such initiatives could help align teachers' thresholds for behavioral infractions, ensuring that referrals are made more uniformly and only for significant issues, thereby reducing the potential for bias in disciplinary actions.

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