

# Action research: Description of perceptions and attitudes toward cafeteria rules and their effects on consistent adherence

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**Abstract:** Reason: Lunchroom population density and limited opportunity to provide lunch services require a high rate of throughput; even minor disruptions create a cascade delays resulting in insufficient time for student nourishment, or infringement upon academic instruction time. Action research helps educators identify problems, formulate questions, collect and analyze data, then develop plans of action. Problem: This study describes perceptions and attitudes toward the cafeteria rules that may contribute to or detract from consistent adherence. It seeks to answer the following questions: What are students' and adults' perceptions of the rules, rule compliance, and impact of compliance/non-compliance? How do the perceptions of students, monitors, and intervening supervisors compare and contrast? Methodology: This is a non-randomized, cross-sectional, mixed methods sequential assessment of perceptions and attitudes toward published behavior rules for the cafeteria. A convenience sample of three data sources: students, lunchroom monitors, and intervening support staff (adults) were data sources. Quantitative data collection was followed by qualitative data collection from interviews with key intervening supervisory staff. Results: The questionnaire response rate for students (n=78) was 86.5%, and for adults (n=16) was 84.4%. Statistically significant differences between students and adults in perception of rule utility and adherence were observed. Interviews of seven intervening supervisory adults were obtained to explore strategies for closing perception gaps. Implications: Results indicate adults hold high expectations that students may not perceive themselves capable of meeting. Interview provided triangulation to strengthen analysis of findings, and suggest strategies for designing intervention to increase future compliance.

**Keywords:** Perception, Compliance, Cafeteria, Rules, Action Research

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## 1. Introduction

An action research project can foster a deepened sense of professional community, prompt internal accountability, and renew professional growth [1]. During an action research project cycle, educators identify a problem, formulate questions for inquiry related to the problem, review relevant literature, select methods for obtaining answers to the questions, collect and analyze data, and develop a plan of action.

The length of the school day requires that students eat their lunch while at school. Current lunch procedure requires students to file into the cafeteria, or all purpose room to eat lunch. Over 800 students attend this school and the time allotted for food service for all students is

approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes, which includes recess. Students enter the cafeteria from recess or leave the cafeteria to go to recess. Each grade level files into the lunchroom with one to two grade levels overlapping, so that at any given point, there may be two or more grade levels in the cafeteria at one time. Students sit at one of thirteen long tables with their classes grouped by grade level. There are approximately 20-25 students per class and 10-12 tables are used during each lunch period. There are 4 adults assigned to lunch duty during each lunch rotation. Depending upon the stage of student movement into and out of the cafeteria, as many as 240 students may be in the cafeteria at one time, with 4-6 adults providing supervision. There is a lot of activity; students are eating, preparing to be served, or preparing to leave, and socializing.

Five rules of expected behavior are posted on the cafeteria walls and on table tents. The five rules are: 1) We sit quietly (inside voices on & outside voices off), 2) We stay with our lunch at our table, 3) Do not share; because of allergies, 4) We raise our hand for permission, questions, and/or requests, 5) We wait quietly for dismissal to throw away trash, then quietly wait for our classroom or recess staff leader. At the beginning of the school year the lunchroom procedures are practiced prior to lunch and readressed after any breaks, such as long holidays. Paraprofessionals are assigned to monitor cafeteria behavior and additional monitors have been hired to provide support during this time period. Additional volitional staff members, such as, the food service employees, janitors, as well as, parent volunteers also contribute to lunchtime monitoring, as they are available. Even so, administrators and staff members assigned to assist with behavior incidents are often called to the cafeteria to handle behavioral issues such as, inappropriate noise level, disrespect and bullying.

The density of the lunchroom population, and the short window of opportunity to provide lunch services require a high rate of throughput in order to balance the students' nutritional needs and the schedule of academic instruction. Even minor disruptions create a cascade that can delay the orderly flow of students; thus, creating: 1) insufficient time for students to secure proper nourishment, or 2) infringement upon time for academic instruction.

### ***1.1. Research Purpose***

The purpose of this project was to describe an area identified for improvement that impacts social growth of students and overall climate of an elementary school in Maryland.

### ***1.2. Problems Statement and Description of Setting***

The problem identified for this research project was to describe perceptions and attitudes toward the cafeteria rules that may contribute to or detract from consistent adherence. Three associated questions were: 1) What are the students' perceptions of the rules, rule compliance and the impact of compliance/non-compliance? 2) What are the lunchroom monitors' and other supervising adults' perceptions of the rules, rule compliance, and the impact of compliance/non-compliance? 3) How do the perceptions of students, monitors and intervening supervisors compare and contrast?

## **2. Literature Review**

Both students and adults are impacted by behavior problems in school lunchrooms. A survey by Samuels, Swerdlik [2] found that students reported confusion, messiness, students yelling and running about, high noise levels, and adults shouting at students to be issues of concern for them. MacPherson, Candee [3] state that

talking while the aide is talking, quarreling and being out-of-seat are historical issues defined as inappropriate behaviors consistently reported as problematic for school cafeterias/or lunchrooms.

Contributing factors to behavior issues in school lunchrooms and other common areas may be: 1) large numbers of students, 2) large amount of space to be monitored, 3) too few trained adults to effectively manage behavior problems, 4) frequency of transitions between highly structured and unstructured environments, and 5) shifting expectations of behavior. An additional contributing factor may be that classroom management receives substantive resources, while behavior management in the non-classroom environment behavior issues do not receive adequate emphasis needed to prevent behavior problems, traditional behavior management models may be effective in the classroom, yet may not readily address misbehavior in common areas, such as lunchrooms [4, 5].

Consideration has been given to methods for improving student behavior in large unstructured common areas. For example, Crothers and Kolbert [6] suggest that educators use assessment to categorize behavioral descriptors by observing students over a long term in a variety of settings, collaborate with other professional observers and provide re-teaching and retraining as needed to prevent undesirable behaviors. Hershfeldt, Pell [7] indicate that collaboration is key to producing effective results in behavior management and support the idea of utilizing peer coaching as an effective way to train staff and create buy-in for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Shared leadership and responsibility, as well as public, proactive administrative support are key to successful PBS systems. Additionally, Korinek [8] identifies three components of Positive Behavior Support: 1) prevention, 2) consistent support, and 3) data-based decision making, which can be consistently measured and tracked by anyone who monitors student behavior.

Johanson, Oswald [5] suggest that effective behavior management programs include the following four systems of concentrated efforts to impact behavior: 1) a school-wide focus on universal prevention, 2) specific classroom focus on teaching, re-teaching and behavioral reinforcement 3) provision of intensive support for individuals to prevent unwanted behavior, and 4) provision of non-classroom active supervision and teaching of pro-social behavior. In addition to program considerations, more specific suggested research-based strategies for improving behavior are: 1) clear expectations, 2) common language, and 3) consistent delivery of verbal and written praise, 4) active supervision, 5) token economies, and 6) differential reinforcement of incompatible behaviors, which includes recognizing on-target behaviors and rewarding those behaviors with positive reinforcements [4, 9].

## **3. Methodology**

This study was a non-randomized cross-sectional, mixed

methods sequential assessment of perceptions and attitudes toward the published behavior rules for the cafeteria. A convenience sample of three data sources: students, lunchroom monitors and intervening support staff (adults) were used in data collection. Quantitative data was collected through questionnaires, and then the data analyzed to assess three dimensions of rule perception and impressions of rule usefulness. The questionnaires were specifically related to the five currently established rules. Participants answered three questions about each of the five rules on a Likert-type scale with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. The questions were grouped into the following categories: 1) Dimension A questions pertain perceptions of understanding, 2) Dimension B questions pertain to perceptions of ability to follow, 3) Dimension C questions pertain to perceptions of whether the rule is good. Another section of the questionnaire addressed: perceptions of overall compliance, perceptions of the impact of compliance, and perceptions of the impact of non-compliance. Additionally, qualitative data was collected from interviews with the staff members who intervene for disruptive behavior management during lunchtime, or intervening support staff, to determine their perspective regarding inconsistent adherence to the rules.

A convenience sample of 10 students from each grade level (kindergarten through fifth grade) was sought to complete the rule perception and satisfaction questionnaire for a total of 50 students. No personally identifiable information was collected from questionnaire respondents; rather, they were identified only by grade level. For each of the five lunchroom rules, students responded to the following three questions/agreement statements: 1) This rule is easy to understand, 2) This rule is easy to follow, 3) This is a good rule. Additional questions were added to determine overall perceptions and attitudes toward rule adherence: 1) Students follow these rules every day, 2) Following the rules make lunchtime better, 3) Following rules make lunchtime worse.

The rule perception and satisfaction questionnaires were administered to a convenience sample of 10 ancillary lunchroom monitoring staff and full-time staff who provide intervention during lunchtime. No personally identifiable information was collected from staff questionnaire respondents; they were simply identified by position. For each of the five lunchroom rules, adults responded to the following three questions/agreement statements: 1) This rule is easy to understand, 2) This rule is easy to follow, 3) This is a good rule. Additional questions were added to determine overall perceptions and attitudes toward rule adherence: 1) Students follow these rules every day, 2) Following the rules make lunchtime better, 3) Following rules make lunchtime worse. The next phase of study involved qualitative data collection in the form of interviews with intervening support staff to determine their perspective regarding inconsistent adherence to the rules.

The interviewees discussed the questionnaire surveys with more detail.

The data from the students, monitors, and intervening support staff questionnaires were collated and analyzed. A content analysis was conducted on data obtained from the interviewees to identify common themes and repeat phrases. This may help resolve the questions of why rule adherence is inconsistent, whether this is problematic for the school, as well as indicate a direction for future research to solve this problem.

## 4. Data Analysis

**Student sample.** This is an analysis of preliminary data collected from students' questionnaires assessing dimensional perceptions of cafeteria rules, compliance, and impact of compliance. Data were analyzed with Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 22.

The target for the first data collection was 10 questionnaires per grade level, however the students' responses to participation in the questionnaire were overwhelming. If students requested to be allowed to fill out the questionnaire, they were not denied, as the researcher presumed that more data would provide more information. Seventy-eight students in Kindergarten through 5th grade responded to the questionnaire. Ten Kindergarteners, ten 1st graders, ten 2nd graders, ten 3rd graders, twenty-one 4th graders, and seventeen 5th graders answered questionnaires. Students did not always fill out the questionnaire completely. Fifteen students failed to complete at least one Dimension A question, thirteen students failed to complete at least one Dimension B question, and fourteen students failed to complete at least one Dimension C question. Because incomplete responses do not accurately assess each Dimension as intended, those results were excluded. For question 6 (students follow the rules everyday) eight responses were missing, for question 7 (following rules makes lunchtime better) six responses were missing, for question 8 (following rules makes lunchtime worse) eight responses were missing. For specific details refer to Table 1.

Most student respondents endorsed "strongly agree" for all combined dimensions with a mode of 5. Perceptions that students follow the cafeteria rules every day were evenly distributed. Most respondents endorsed "strongly agree" that compliance improves lunchtime, and "strongly disagree" that compliance makes lunchtime worse.

**Adult sample.** This is an analysis of preliminary data collected from monitors' and intervention supervisors' (adults) questionnaires assessing dimensional perceptions of cafeteria rules, compliance, and impact of compliance. Data were analyzed with Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 22.

*Table 1. Student Questionnaire Responses*

Question Category Rule Perceptions	Number of Respondents	Mean	Standard Deviation
Dimension A (easy to understand)	64 out of 78	3.9	1.2
Dimension B (easy to follow)	65 out of 78	3.8	1.1
Dimension C (good)	64 out of 78	3.9	1.2
Question 6 (Compliance)	70 out of 78	2.8	1.6
Question 7 (Improved impact)	72 out of 78	3.8	1.5
Question 8 (Worsened impact )	70 out of 78	2.5	1.7

This table contains the mean and standard deviation for student responses to a questionnaire that measures perceptions of rules, rule compliance, and attitudes toward lunchtime rules.

*Table 2. Adult Questionnaire Responses*

Question Category Rule Perceptions	Number of Respondents	Mean	Standard Deviation
Dimension A (easy to understand)	14 out of 16	4.6	.51
Dimension B (easy to follow)	14 out of 16 adults	4.2	1.0
Dimension C (good)	14 out of 16	4.8	.31
Question 6 (Compliance)	13 out of 16	2.31	1.3
Question 7 (Improved impact)	14 out of 16	4.57	.75
Question 8 (Worsened impact )	12 out of 16	2.5	1.5

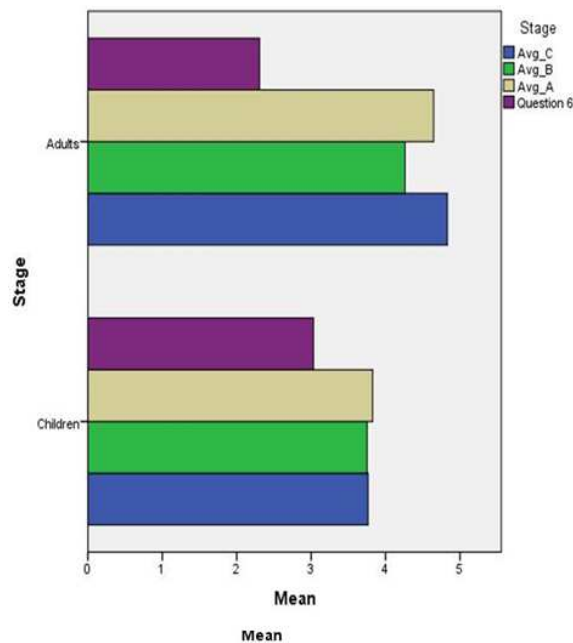
This table contains the mean and standard deviation for adult responses to a questionnaire that measures perceptions of rules, rule compliance, and attitudes toward lunchtime rules.

Sixteen adults responded to the questionnaire. Two adults failed to complete at least one Dimension A question, two adults failed to complete at least one Dimension B question, and two adults failed to complete at least one Dimension C question. Because incomplete responses do not accurately assess each Dimension as intended, those results were excluded. For question 6 (students follow the rules everyday) three responses were missing, for question 7 (following rules makes lunchtime better) two responses were missing, for question 8 (following rules makes lunchtime worse) four responses were missing. See Table 2 for more specific details.

Most adult respondents endorsed “strongly agree” for all combined dimensions with a mode of 5. Perceptions that students follow the cafeteria rules every day were not significantly skewed. Most respondents indicated “strongly agree” that compliance improves lunchtime, and “strongly disagree” that compliance makes lunchtime worse.

Interviews. This is an analysis of qualitative data collected during individual interviews with seven adults who participated in the questionnaire and were identified as those who provide or have provided intervening supervision during lunchtime. Interviewees were shown a separate bar graph for data collected from all respondents for each question 6, 7, and 8 to illustrate the following conclusions: 1) data from all respondents, both students and adults, indicates that most strongly agree that rules make lunch time better, 2) most strongly disagree that rules make lunchtime worse, and 3) opinions varied as to whether students follow the rules every day; preliminary data seems to indicate that everyone values the benefit of having rules, yet adherence is less recognizable.

For the purpose of discussion, mean outcomes for Dimension A, B, C and question 6 were separated into two groups, response from adults and responses from students (children). Interviewees were shown side-by-side comparison bar graphs illustrating mean responses of each of the two groups. Comparison of these two groups statically shows a significant difference in adult and student perceptions. Students responded slightly higher than adults to question 6 that rules were followed every day and slightly lower than adults for Dimensions A, B, and C, pertaining to perceptions that the rules are easily understood, the rules easily followed, and the rules are good (Figure 1). This indicated that adults held high expectations for the students, yet students did not always perceive themselves as capable of meeting those expectations. The following question was posed for discussion: “Do you have any suggestions for how we might close the gap between adult expectations and student’s perceptions of whether they are capable of meeting those expectations?” The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Common themes and phrases were highlighted and listed. The following words and phrases were common themes and phrases identified in this process: student ownership, developmental appropriateness, grade level responsiveness, explicit teaching, reinforce, consistency, model, relationship building, adult ownership, framing, adult training to de-escalate behaviors, safety, positive feedback versus negative, lunchroom size, reduce procedures, supervisory tolerance, collaboration.



**Fig 1.** Comparison of distribution of average Dimension A, distribution of average Dimension B, distribution of Dimension C, distribution of average question 6 for adults and children (students).

## 5. Conclusions

Collection of student data provided insight into students' perceptions of the rules and their abilities to comply with the rules. Data indicated that most students recognized rules as having value, but opinions varied as to whether rules were followed every day. Collection of adult data provided insight into adults' perceptions of the rules and students' abilities to comply with the rules. Data indicated that most adults recognized rules as having value, but opinions varied as to whether rules were followed every day. Collection of these data combined with the data collected from students allowed for comparison of the perceptions between students and adults. Comparison of these two groups statically shows a significant difference in adult and student perceptions. Data indicated that adults held high expectations for the students, yet students did not always perceive themselves as capable of meeting those expectations (Figure 5).

The data collected from interviews with intervening supervisors provided triangulation needed to strengthen data analysis and findings. The interviewees regularly observe the cafeteria during lunchtime, which affords them unique opportunities to formulate ideas, thoughts and perceptions. Observational statements of the interviewees most often included the term inconsistent when commenting upon rule adherence and reinforcement, which seems to be relevant to questionnaire results from question 6 (students follow the rules every day), in that neither students nor adults perceived that rules were consistently followed. Because these individuals have dealt with issues stemming from non-compliance with the cafeteria rules, they were able to identify their perceptions of barriers

and/or contributing factors. In addition to brainstorming possible barriers to compliance, interviewees made suggestions for increasing compliance with rules in the future, such as, but not limited to: 1) provision of opportunities for greater collaboration between staff, 2) greater collaboration between staff and students, 3) explicit teaching and modeling of expectations to students, 4) framing rules as necessary and beneficial for social order and safety, 5) focusing on positives, 6) adult training, and 7) parent involvement.

### Limitations

The same tool was used for all grade levels. Because many Kindergarten and first grade students possess limited literacy skills, the questionnaires were read to them. This makes the data collection different than for all other grade levels.

The amount of data collected for each grade level varied. Fourth grade students were eager to participate, so they turned in more questionnaires than any other grade level. As result fourth grade opinion may be over represented among all children.

Additional considerations that were not part of this analysis were age, gender, race, cultural experiences, and whether students go to lunch either before or after recess. These factors may have impacted the students' responses to the questionnaires. In future studies, this data should be collected and considered for analysis. While these limitations have been acknowledged, the data retrieved during this study is valuable in providing guidance to develop interventions that may lead to improved lunchtime experiences for all.

## 6. Future Actions

The action research project indicated a gap between adult expectations and students' perceptions of their capacity to meet those expectations. The next steps might be to investigate the variables that contribute to this gap. Interviewees offered suggestions for increasing compliance with rules in the future, such as, but not limited to: 1) provision of opportunities for greater collaboration between staff, 2) greater collaboration between staff and students, 3) explicit teaching and modeling of expectations to students, 4) framing rules as necessary and beneficial for social order and safety, 5) focusing on positives, 6) adult training, and 7) parent involvement. Of these suggestions, greater communication between staff and students seems the next logical step in this investigation. This could be in a form of a small focus group or multiple small focus groups, as well as during student grade level meetings.

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