

## **A Long-Lasting Disciplinary Morning Ritual: The “Wild Walk” at Sendak Middle School**

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### **Abstract**

*For decades, adults at Sendak Middle School (pseudonym) have relied on an institutional morning routine I call the Wild Walk to feel in control of the social environment in the hallways before the start of instruction. Students are expected to slowly walk in loops through their building, monitored by teachers who try to ensure that the teenagers do not stop or move against the prescribed walking direction. This field report is an ethnographic case study that illuminates students’ perspectives on the effects this disciplinary practice has had on their school social life. While the Wild Walk promotes social interactions between and with adults, it provides obstacles to social interactions between adolescent friends.*

**Keywords:** school culture, middle school, discipline, school building, peer culture

## **The Times and Spaces In-Between**

The positive effects that school breaks have on the social competence and academic performance of children have been well established in the literature (McNamara, Colley, & Franklin, 2015; Murray et al., 2013; Pellegrini & Holmes, 2006). At the same time, the hallways in which secondary school students interact between classes have been also characterized as hostile (Woods, 2001), as places to avoid (Vaillancourt et al., 2010), or as locations of harassment (Perkins, Perkins, & Craig, 2014). School discipline systems that are too expansive or punitive, however, can be counterproductive (Irby, 2014). While an interdisciplinary body of research illustrates the value of recess, institutional everyday practices still commonly work under the assumption that opportunities for student social interactions need to be minimized (Pellegrini, 2008). Scholars focused on young people's problems need to be careful not to construct adolescence itself as a problem (Maira & Soep, 2004; Reamer & Siegel, 2008). Teenage students alternatively can be understood as experts about their school's social environment and researchers who have conducted deep investigations into break times and spaces often advocate for listening to and trusting student perspectives on school social life and disciplinary practices (Childress, 1993; Wellenreiter, 2018). Students' school satisfaction is affected by school climate across demographic groups and academic performance levels (Zullig, Huebner, & Patton, 2011). A wide range of practices and programs developed to create positive school climates have shown to improve or co-occur with respect for diversity, participation, safety and positive disciplinary environments (Voight & Nation, 2016).

The current field report offers insights into the social affordances (Gibson, 1979) designers of contemporary school buildings strive to create, and into everyday school routines and their effects on the well-being of children and youth. My study investigated a puzzlingly rigid, yet extremely persistent, disciplinary morning ritual that I termed "Wild Walk" at "Sendak," a middle school in the U.S. Midwest. I was interested in understanding this social phenomenon, the quality and role of the physical spaces involved, and the students' perspectives on its meaning.

## **The School**

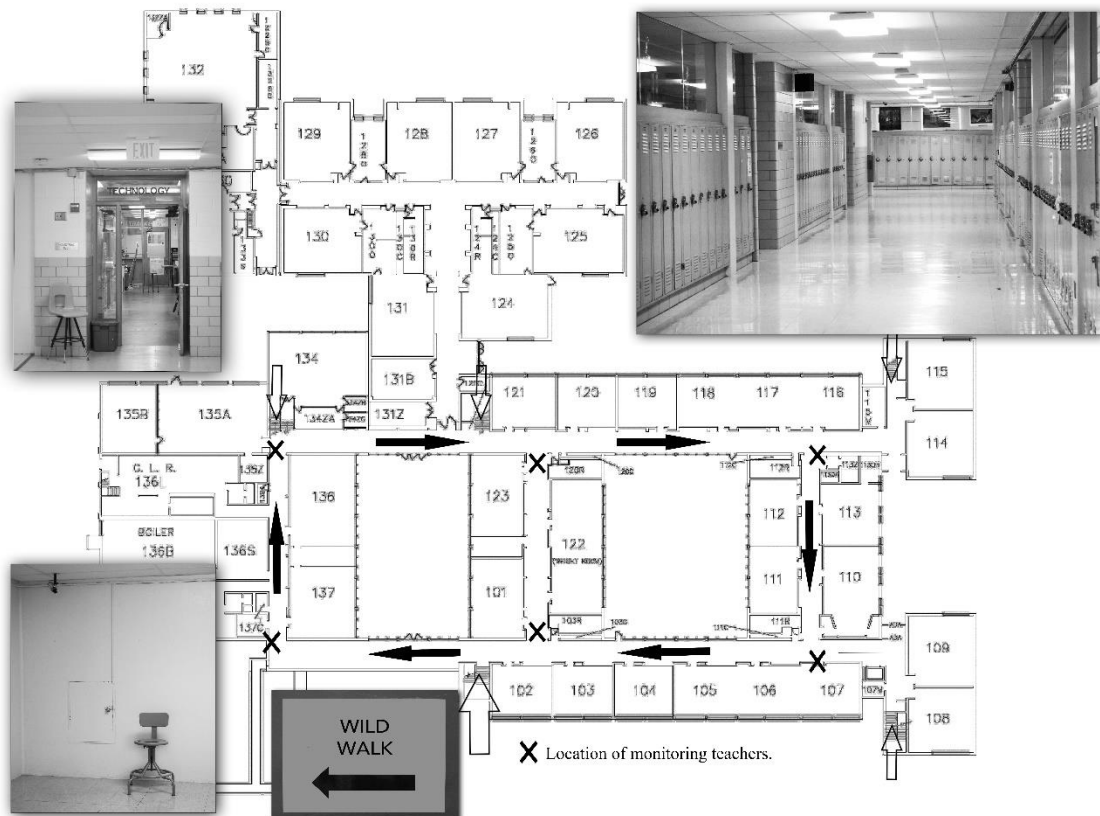
The routine had been part of the students' daily experiences at Sendak since the late 1980s. The school had been serving a lower middle-class neighborhood in a fast-growing university town in the Midwest since 1961. After a lengthy district boundary re-routing process, it was transformed from a public junior high school (grades eight and nine) into a middle school (grades six through eight) just before this inquiry started. Therefore, all 594 students were new to the building at the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year. While most of the teachers and administrators were experienced local educators, many of them, including the principal, were as new to Sendak as their students.

## **The Walk**

For 15 minutes each morning, students were expected to walk slowly through the hallways that created a figure-eight-shaped circulation path between the classrooms. Two important rules governed the everyday routine. 1) On each school level, they were only allowed to move in one predetermined direction, as indicated

by bold arrows displayed on signs. 2) The students were not supposed to stop walking and congregate in the hallways for more than 30 seconds. The Wild Walk was overseen by adult monitors sitting on chairs placed in the hallway corners (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Wild Walk mapped on the ground floor plan of Sendak Middle School**



### Why Was the Wild Walk Invented?

I asked this question repeatedly, but the walk had been part of the particular school environment for longer than anyone could recall, including the recently retired principal of 14 years. The new principal, Dr. Miller (pseudonym), had initially planned to stop the walk and allowed the students to freely use the hallways in the mornings. She had previously been employed at a middle school in which an alternative morning routine, the containment model, was practiced to supervise students before the start of classes. Students were held in the gym and supervised by only two teachers positioned at the doors. According to Dr. Miller, this "pressure cooker" environment made it hard for students to avoid peers with whom they did not get along. She wanted her students to be able to spend less structured time with their friends in the mornings. Some of her teachers, however, missed the efficient containment model previously experienced elsewhere and teachers who remembered the Wild Walk praised its advantages with their new colleagues. They

described it as a good fit for middle school students, who were perceived as developmentally too immature to handle 15 unstructured minutes in the hallways. Teachers and administrators reported that they thought of the Wild Walk as a practice that both allowed regular, casual interactions between adolescent friends and ensured sufficient supervision of the non-instructional times and spaces. At the beginning of the school year, in an informal staff survey, a vast majority voted for the routine and the Wild Walk was reinstated into Sendak's institutional practices.

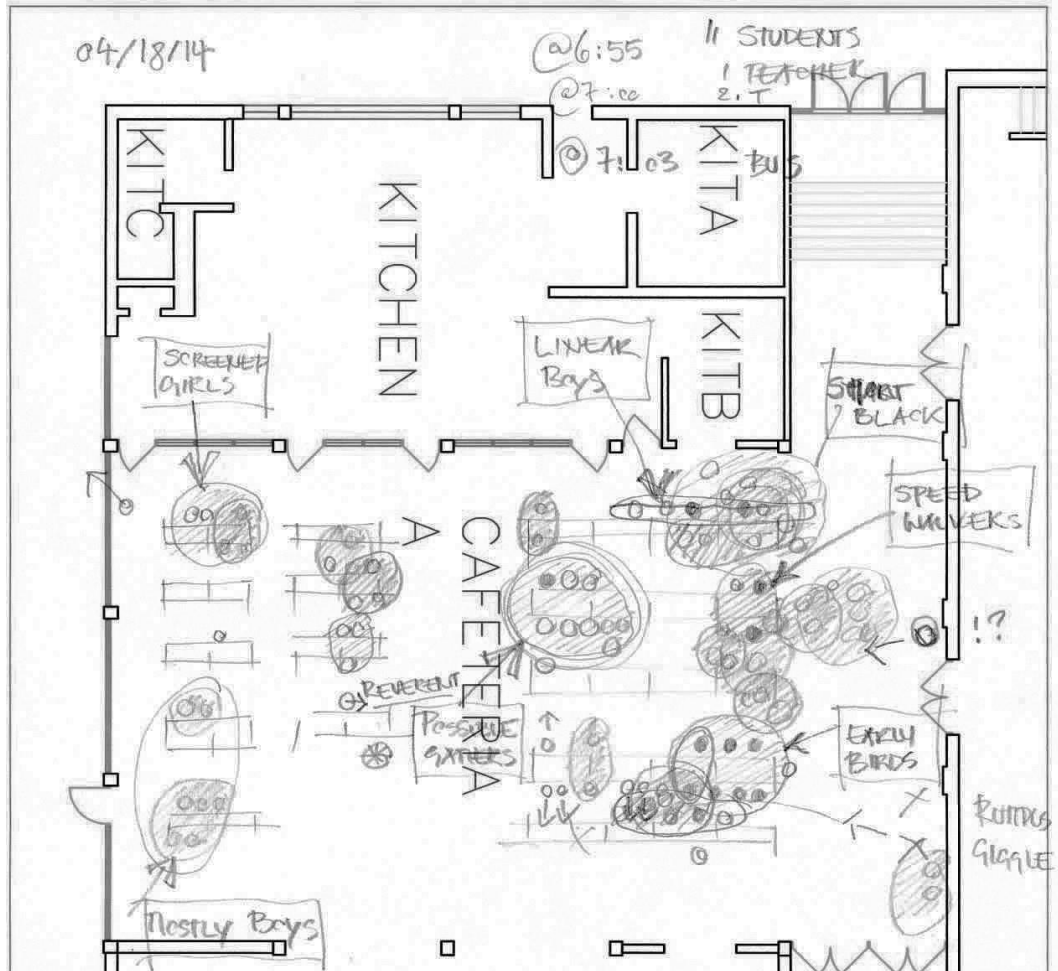
### **My Approach**

I considered this long-lasting disciplinary morning ritual as a characteristic example of the American school culture of control (Nolan, 2009) and approached the case study (Stake, 1995) as an ethnographic educational outsider (Wolcott, 1997). The underlying assumptions that ruled the place (Cresswell, 2004) were questioned on the foundation of my own cross-cultural experience within a European school context. Student perspectives on educational environments are under-represented because many school researchers are either teachers or administrators and consequently more likely to identify with insider adult perspectives. Teenagers' own accounts of their school social life are often dismissed by adults' "everyday understandings" (Comstock, 1982) of adolescents as too immature to know what is good for them. This field report illustrates the teenagers' perspectives on a disciplinary school routine and its effects on the quality of their social experiences during non-instructional times.

### **What I Did**

I attended the walk daily as a "student" for nine continuous weeks, writing field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) and creating behavioral maps of the cafeteria (see Figure 2) where students had to wait until 7:10 AM when they were permitted into the hallways. I purposefully invited eight students, five teachers, and three administrators to be interviewed, sought their experiences and responses to the Wild Walk, and conducted a two-phase coding process on the interview data that consisted of open and focused coding (Emerson et al., 1995). Some questions from the student interview protocol included:

1. Could you tell me what you did today after you arrived at school until the first class period started?
2. Do you participate in the Wild Walk? Tell me about it. What do you do during the Walk? How about friends?
3. What do the teachers do during the Wild Walk?
4. Which is your favorite place at school in the mornings? What do you do there?
5. If you could do anything you wanted at school before classes start what would it be? Where would it be?

**Figure 2. Behavioral map of Sendak's cafeteria, April 18, 2014**

### What I Found

The walk did appear to help teachers to feel in control in the mornings, but the strict rules prompted some students to demonstrate acts of resistance to the routine that the teenagers perceived as ridiculous and strange. The following paragraphs identify four key findings; note all participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

### From the Teachers' Perspective, the Wild Walk Was a Useful and Appropriate School Routine

Teachers understood the unique phenomenon very homogenously. Ms. Faust, a new science teacher, voiced it clearly: "I think the idea behind it was to be proactive in terms of discipline." Mr. Harley, a long-term math teacher at Sendak, had been "told that it is more of a safety issue than anything else." He believed that it "makes things quiet." Mr. Apple, a young, popular industrial tech teacher, thought "it keeps things from going crazy" in the mornings. They all saw the strong need for constant supervision of students during the time before instruction and shared understanding of the walk as an appropriate tool to embed supervision deeply into

the school's morning routine. Ms. Scott, for example, indicated that "kids thrive on routines" and considered the walk as "a strong routine." Ms. Smith added, "Some things are just really good, you just need to keep them, like the [Wild] Walk." I was unable to find adults at Sendak who did not think of this forced prescribed movement as a good environmental fit between their middle school students and the school building (Gallent & Shaw, 2007).

The rigid geometry of the hallways, the two rules, and a number of adult monitors placed in strategic positions, together successfully channeled most students' actions into what teachers referred to as "expected student behavior." As a result, a few hundred students between the ages of 12 and 14 spent 15 minutes of every school day walking slowly in circles through their school, trying to find their friends and attempting to talk to them while walking. Since every student had to do the same thing in this shared space, rule breakers became very visible; the relatively small number of monitors were able to easily spot breaches, minimize the number of undetected offences, and initiate the institution's usual consequence. "One thing that the Sendak teachers always told us, the reason that the Wild Walk worked so well was because since everybody had to be doing the same thing, it was really obvious when you weren't" (Ms. Scott). However, "It shouldn't feel like they are walking the yard at a prison" (Ms. Scott). The Wild Walk promoted teachers' perception of being in control of the social quality of the environment.

### **From the Teenagers' Perspective, the Nature of the Wild Walk Invited Resistance**

Even though "normally [the monitoring teachers] just stand there making sure nobody walks the wrong direction" (Edmund, seventh grade), most rule-breaking revolved around students' resistance to the predetermined walking direction. The teenagers "don't like walking in one direction and not being able to walk in other directions. It is stupid and [we] don't like doing stupid things" (Edmund). Edmund did report that he obediently looped through the hallways, but insisted on drawing a floor plan to make sure that I understood the strange effects this most important rule had on students' experiences at school. "Yeah, it's [his locker] about 20 feet north of that stairwell, and it was in the wrong direction and so I had to go all the way around the building to get to my locker."

Some teenagers who tried to participate in the walk with more than two friends walked backwards to see the faces of the rest of their peer group behind them while having a conversation. Others slowed down and walked in place, then stopped and carefully walked backwards to meet a friend they had heard behind them. And finally, some students walked demonstratively the wrong way; they did not seem to be on their way anywhere in particular, but kept moving along until detected, stopped, and redirected to restore the normal order. After listening to the students in the cafeteria and hallways for nine weeks, it was clear that many more students thought like Edmund and Clara. "Well, we all think that it is complete idiocy" (Clara, eighth grade). Students perceived the daily routine as annoying and ridiculous. Instead of fostering a supportive youth peer culture, the Wild Walk seemed to favor relationships that involved adults.

### **The Walk Worked as an Opportunity for Casual Interactions for Adults**

(T)hey just like monitor and have fun with their, well other teachers sometimes.” (Anika, sixth grade). The adults described how this time provided opportunities for casual collegial visits. “Other teachers will come out and talk to you, too. So, it is a nice chance for me to see teachers that I don’t normally get to see” (Ms. Faust). Time, space, and the institutional routine promoted informal social interactions between teachers. They were usually stationed right in front of their own classroom or close by, which made it easy to know where to expect them. To stand still or sit during the Wild Walk was acceptable only for adults and made it easier for them to have conversations. Teachers usually faced against the predetermined direction, which enabled them to engage in eye contact with the students who walked by.

### **For Students, the Walk Created a Substantial Obstacle to Connecting with Their Friends**

Without breaking the rules, one very basic aspect of a friendly social interaction, eye contact, was much harder to establish between students who mostly looked at backs, the backs of heads, backpacks, back pockets, and heels. Students saw everyone from behind except for their teachers. Teachers on the other hand, stood, chatted and sat, plus had drinks or food. They also walked the “wrong way” and used their small electronic devices—all pleasures that were denied to students.

Even within this regimented ritual, a “first positive contact” was important to the adults. Many had developed their individual novel ways to connect with the teenagers. A math teacher delighted his students by using an actual bullhorn to remind them to “MOVE ALONG!” Hensel, an eighth-grader, giggled after he commented, “He just likes to be loud.” One of the female teachers played music, danced through the hallways, and gave high fives while unsuccessfully encouraging students to join her. Olivia, a counselor, had the same little ironic exchanges with students every morning. The more unconventional the teachers appeared, the more their students seemed to appreciate it. “They watch and mess around with you” (Gretel, eighth grade).

Theoretically, the Wild Walk held similar potential for regular casual interactions between students. However, it was harder for them to connect. The Wild Walk routine discouraged friends from meeting at their lockers, the only building objects that belonged to them and that could have functioned as an address. But, many students did connect with their friends before the walk started while in the cafeteria, often meeting at the same table every day. To remain together after they entered the hallway routine required determination and likely some rule-breaking. Communal locker stops to drop off backpacks had to be avoided because they created undesirable “clogs” and dreaded “crowding” in the hallway. To maintain eye contact or a conversation between more than three students was hard because they were expected to walk simultaneously through the narrow hallway spaces.

### **Discussion: Conflicting Goals at Sendak Middle School**

David Canter argues that when places get too complex in nature, “the most likely consequence is for some aspects of a place to suffer and for a dominant quality to emerge” (1997, p. 121) and that for places with conflicting goals, individuals will

have to understand which is the dominant one. Every morning at Sendak Middle School, strict and elaborate disciplinary procedures created the mood of the place. For students to do nearly anything they wanted to do—for example, to stop walking and get into a circle to look at each other and talk, “horse around,” hang at somebody’s locker and wait until a friend was ready, or use their electronic devices—they had to break school rules. These rules were ostensibly created to keep them safe, but often seemed to make them feel guilty. This is true despite adults’ efforts to engage in friendly, informal, and fun interactions with students. The institutional routine was enforced to ensure disciplined behavior, but subtle acts of resistance were the dominant experiences for the teenagers during the Wild Walk.

Adult stakeholders relied on overly managed, yet ineffective institutional routines that communicated that they expected reckless student behavior. The Wild Walk and similar practices still reflect the original and obsolete understanding of public education institutions as places to control the poor. Students, in response, felt “guarded” (Clara). They experienced real obstacles trying to meet their friends during non-instructional times. They wished for opportunities to have unobstructed casual daily social interactions with their peers, not unlike the adults. The rules created to deter misbehavior unfortunately also built obstacles to the maintenance of healthy social interactions between the teenagers.

### **The Role of the Physical Environment on Students’ Well Being**

In the school context, it is important to consider the role of the physical environment in the health and well-being of children (Evans, Klierer, & Martin, 1991) in tandem with the institutional routines that govern these spaces. The spaces between classrooms are extremely important because they are the sites of teenagers’ school social life. The 1960s narrow locker-lined hallways at Sendak were not designed to support social interactions to begin with; they were designed to provide sufficient storage for jackets and book bags. The remaining social affordances (Gibson, 1979) of these particular non-instructional spaces were further restrained here by the strict disciplinary routine. The hallways’ rigid geometric layout both inspired and enabled the adults at Sendak to enforce the Wild Walk.

More recently designed school buildings usually try to blur the boundaries between spaces for instruction and break spaces, based on an interdisciplinary body of research from architectural psychology, environment and behavior, and education (Brooke et al., 2005; Pearlman, 2010; Reynolds, 2006; Uduku, 2015; Walden, 2009). One of the most prominent common goals for these contemporary schools is to support new, less formal learning styles in and outside classrooms (Dudek, 2000; Pearlman, 2010; Uduku, 2015). These school buildings also strive to foster social interactions and collaboration between students. Consequently, the hallways are regularly paired with open areas equipped with a variety of informal furniture layouts. These spaces between classrooms are intended to provide ample room for students to transition from one classroom to the next and serve as destinations for learning and casual social interactions between friends. Contemporary school buildings are more open and complex and less rigid in layout than previous ones.

They are not designed to maximize control over students, but to foster social interactions.

The physical school environment is only one dimension of school climate (Voight & Nation, 2016) and its role needs further investigation. Alongside the disciplinary environment and the social dimensions of the school climate concept, school buildings have the potential to promote student achievement and wellness (Voight & Nation, 2016). However, when educators rely on antiquated disciplinary routines like the Wild Walk, these new buildings are unlikely to turn into the meaningful educational tools they could become as part of a more optimistic school culture. The everyday practices that have been governing non-instructional times for decades need to be re-evaluated, re-envisioned, and replaced. Diversity needs to be embraced. Over the course of the last two decades educational scholars have developed numerous programs and practices that improve positive relationships, participation, safety and positive disciplinary environments (Voight & Nation, 2016). In tandem with the comprehensive implementation of these practices, the new learning spaces and their social affordances can contribute to a change of the current school culture of control into a school culture that fosters holistic well-being of diverse students.

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