STUDENTS SEEKING ATTENTION

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Abstract

There are numerous reason’s to help explain why children behave the way they do. Sometimes they may be trying to selfishly get something, please an adult or are seeking praise and approval. Sometimes they may be trying to replace something that is absent from their life. Children are not adept at discussing their thoughts and feelings. Often times they communicate through their behavior. For elementary-aged students, the classroom becomes an early setting where disruptive behaviors can have them standing out from their same-aged peers. This Capstone Project will examine the possible correlation between students who disrupt their classrooms by way of seeking attention behaviors and those students who believe they do not have a nurturing relationship with their parent/caregiver(s). The belief is that these two types of students are one in the same (those who feel rejected/and those who seek attention). It makes sense that if a child is not getting their basic need for attention and nurturance; they may seek it out in a maladaptive way. If a School Counselor can first properly identify these students, and secondly, begin to deduce why they may be acting out in class. It becomes logical to devise an intervention strategy that can replace, to a degree, what these students are needing. One intervention proposal is to match these students with a mentor who will provide academic support and supportive, nurturing interactions. The predictive effect of this intervention strategy is that the student’s distress will lesson, boost their pro-social development, resulting in better peer relationships, improved academic performance, and increased harmony in the classroom.
Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................. 2

Introduction ............................................................ 4

Review of Literature ...................................................... 6

School Climate ........................................................... 6

History ................................................................. 7

Nature vs. Nurture ...................................................... 8

Effective Interventions .................................................. 11

Intervention: Mentor Relationship .................................... 12

Conclusion ............................................................. 15

Author’s Note ........................................................... 17

References ............................................................. 19

Appendix A ............................................................. 22
Introduction

As a School Counselor you will be asked to do lots of duties around the building you probably weren’t expecting to do. You may be asked to wash lunch tables, supervise recess, orchestrate a building lockdown and even physically restrain an out-of-control student. The duties are usually student centered; but just as important will be the support you provide for the teachers and building staff. Student misbehavior can be a primary target for a School Counselor because learning cannot occur if the classroom resembles a late night sleep over at Bart Simpson’s with endless Mountain Dew. Classroom teachers, overwhelmingly report that classroom management, particular to misbehavior has become the top consumer of their time, energy, and patience (Emmer & Hickman, 1991). In Scott A. Spauldings et al. (2010) study that tracked office discipline referrals for over 1500 American schools during the 2005-2006 school year found that the top three behaviors requiring teacher/administrator attention were:

1. Fighting, 2. Defiance, and 3. Disruptive Classroom Behavior. Students seeking attention in the classroom can drain the mental and physical resources of teachers and teacher aides quickly. These students constantly seek out ways to draw staff away from other children and monopolize the teachers time. These students seek to gain undivided attention from the teachers and sometimes from their peers. A number of variables come into play as to why children misbehave in class. Avoiding work, learning difficulties, developmental issues, family non-support, and stress induced incidences such as domestic violence at home, or parents separating/divorcing can all contribute to children acting out at school (Emmer & Hickman). Research has shown that children’s misbehavior is typically associated to some condition or unmet need (Emmer & Hickman). For this Capstone Project, data will be collected to identify those students who display disruptive/seeking attention behaviors in class. These students who seek attention
through misbehavior will then be assessed to determine if they may also feel like they are children absent of positive social interactions with adults; primarily from their parents. If a correlation can be made, between the “students seeking attention” and those who feel “rejected” this is an important distinction as it helps establish the course of action a School Counselor may take when developing an intervention strategy to lessen the disruptive classroom behaviors. The Counselor can devise an intervention that is very intentional about what it provides for these students. Counselors can support the needy student and also support the teacher’s classroom management through the same intervention. The proposed strategy for this project (particular to elementary-aged children) provides an after-school homework group that is staffed with a mentor for each student. The strategy provides academic support (for students who likely receive little academic help after 3PM). It also provides positive, nurturing interactions with the student by caring adults. It is hypothesized that if the students’ needs are properly identified, then fulfilling the missing need for support, guidance and acceptance will result in decreased disruptive attention-seeking behaviors in the classroom and beyond.
Review of Literature

School Climate

If you tune in regularly to the six-o’clock news, you might deduce that kids today are much worse off than kids just 20 years ago. School shootings, bullying, violence, and exploitation are consistently the lead stories pertaining to children in today’s society. Are kids more aggressive, more violent? Are they angry, lonely, and neglected? Do they present more significant behavior challenges than kids just 20 years previous? Shatin and Drinkard (2002) discovered that children prescribed psychotropic medications has grown by 26% (for stimulants: Ritalin, Adderall, Cylert) and by 62% for Serotonin inhibitors (Prozac, Paxil, Zoloft) from year 1995 to 1999. Frank Schultz cited a recent survey conducted by Wisconsin Alliance for Infant Mental Health that showed psychiatric hospitalization rates have increased for children ages 5 to 12, rising from 155 per 100k in 1996 to 283 per 100k children in 2007 (Schultz, 2012). It is estimated that one in five children has some type of mental health disorder (ADHD, Autism, Depression, Anxiety, etc.) according to the National Center for Children in Poverty. Up to 80% of children in need of mental health services does not receive them (Schultz). These statistics suggest that kids do come to school with more complex needs. They may also suggest that the “quick fix by way of a pill” approach is less concerned about assessing what’s missing for children. Assessment is typically only concerned about what behavior symptomology is present with less emphasis on examining children’s healthy or unhealthy relationships.

Societal factors also have a significant impact on children’s development. Teachers are dealing with a rise in class sizes, rise in Autism Disorders, more families of poverty, and more diverse populations (Schultz). Families experience stressors in the home which can have a significant impact on children’s basic functioning. In their 2002 study seeking to answer the
question: Is American Students Behavior Getting Worse?, Rescorla, Achenbach, & Dumenci concluded that many kinds of problems can potentially affect students learning, educator’s effectiveness, school climates, and the challenges confronting school counselors. Rescorla et al. (2002) listed examples: anxiety, distractibility, social withdrawal, poor peer relations, fatigue, and low motivation that can be common obstacles for the student and the teacher. Rescorla et al. recommended that it is essential for school counselor’s to assess a broad spectrum of possible student problems. Being able to spot disruptive behaviors in a classroom is not difficult. Proper assessment of possible causes of certain problem behaviors, and designing effective intervention programs becomes the true test for school counselors.

History

Previous research studies that focused on disruptive, attention-seeking behaviors and their source has been limited to nearly nonexistent. Mellor (2005) found that there has been no comprehensive review of “attention-seeking behavior” in research for over four decades. He first explained that part of the problem is that there has been no universally held definition of “attention seeking behavior”. Seventy-eight percent of the literature he reviewed since the 1960’s did not define “attention-seeking” and when they did, it did not always reflect consistently of earlier studies. Many times the investigators would list a wide range of behaviors that may constitute “attention-seeking” but there was no common criteria for what the behavior may look like. The beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of those doing the studies had as much of an influence on the outcomes as did the actual study variables, an obvious threat to internal validity. Mellor also found that there were no reliable estimates of its prevalence and that there was widespread disagreement over the origins of negative attention-seeking behavior. Measuring the behavior became even cloudier when there was no distinction between one type of attention-seeking behavior that
is desirable such as those behaviors that build secure attachments between parents and toddlers (“look at me mama”) and another type that is undesirable, such as disruptive behaviors that are displayed in class that is loud, disruptive and impedes learning. Much of the research appeared to miss-connect students with ADHD, those who have difficulty paying attention, with those whose purpose for disruptive behavior was to gain attention. Differentiating attention seeking from other childhood problems such as conduct disorder, ADHD, and oppositional-defiant disorder is necessary and much of the previous research failed to do so. The distinction between Nature vs. Nurture is necessary for this Capstone Project as a biological source of misbehavior is viewed quite differently than that with developmental deficit causation. Most of the literature calls for further clarification and systematic research pertaining to the potentially serious phenomenon of attention-seeking behaviors in children (Mellor).

**Nature vs. Nurture**

Taylor and Carr (1992) agreed with Saxena (1992) that looking at the function of the behavior (behavior analysis) is the most accurate way to draw conclusions about the behaviors origin. Taylor and Carr devised a three-category study of 5 to 10 year olds. The categories were: AS= attention seekers, SA= socially avoidant, and NP= no problem behaviors. Three experimental conditions were used in a lab setting to assess the effects of adult attention on children’s behavior. Their hypothesis was that there are ways adults can extinguish the negative behaviors; and can also inadvertently reinforce negative behaviors. Non-contingent high attention, non-contingent low attention, and contingent attention were manipulated for the three groups of subjects. The study concluded that the student’s personality type dictated which type of strategy adults need to employ to increase or decrease the student’s behaviors, not just looking at the behavior independently. Taylor and Carr used the Motivation Assessment Scale (MAS) to identify stimulus conditions that evoke problem behaviors. Their study cited several variables that
motivate children’s behavior. It would seem that children’s attention-seeking behavior is strongly connected to their social interactions with adults (primarily their parents) and the responses they are receiving from their peers (Taylor & Carr).

Both Saxena (1992) and Peretti, Clark, & Johnson (2001) studied how perceived parental rejection affected attention-seeking behaviors in a classroom setting. Parental rejection had a dramatic impact on negative behaviors displayed by the children. Peretti and colleagues (2001) found that parental rejection distorts and devalues self-concept in children. Children may feel helpless, insecure and inferior. These children attempt to gain acceptance and positive social relationships through a variety of attention-seeking behaviors. The results from the Peretti et al. studies showed a strong relationship between parental rejection scores and observed attention-seeking behaviors. The parental rejection measurement was obtained by surveying the children about their perspective on how they were treated by their caregiver(s), not by actual observed caregiver conduct. The validity of these results may have been hindered due to the method of gaining the information (feelings vs. data). Peratti et al. research showed that kids who misbehave have poor opinions of their parents. He cautioned that this could reflect as a way the subjects misdirect blame, and vice versa. The Peretti et al. study also found that males felt rejected much more than females and that fathers were more often to be the “rejecters” than the mothers. Schulman, Shoemaker & Moelis (1962) found that parents of children with conduct problems tended to be significantly more hostile and rejecting towards their children.

Traditional beliefs reinforce that moms are naturally better able to provide care, love, and acceptance for their children than do fathers (Victor & Michael, 1966); but what if they don’t? Saxena (1992) examined rejection by mothers and its influence on children’s attention-seeking misbehavior. Saxena used the Rohner Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ) (Appendix A) to gain the subjects perspective on their relationship with their mothers. This instrument was used due to the findings by
Victor and Michael (1966). They found that children’s self-evaluation was more strongly related to their own perception of parental behavior than parent’s self-reporting. One hundred 3rd- 5th graders from two different schools in India were studied. Fifty subjects were identified as “attention-seekers” who displayed behaviors that were disruptive to class. The other fifty were identified as “non-attention-seekers”. Saxena found a strong relationship between perceived maternal rejection and negative attention-seeking behaviors. Parental rejection, in general, and maternal rejection, in particular, is likely to jeopardize a child’s feelings of security, undermine self-esteem and result in feelings of being unloved, unwanted, and unprotected (Sexena).

Little research has explored what to do about the attention-seeking behaviors once they are identified and the cause examined. This Capstone Project hypothesizes that students who perceive parental rejection, and the negative behaviors that follow, can be reduced by way of cultivating other positive social interactions with the children. This Project will examine the correlation between those who perceive that they are being rejected by their parent and how frequently they act out in class. The second portion of the Project will examine if mentoring relationships, in and out of school, can somewhat fill the void these children feel. The end result this intervention is seeking to accomplish is a reduction of the acting out/seeking attention behaviors. Being valued, listened to, cared about, supported, and modeled pro-social behaviors can perhaps meet some of the unmet needs these rejected children so desire.
Effective Interventions

Academic interventions and behavior interventions have to be increasingly more creative in order to be more effective. Teachers and Counselors no longer are choosing strategies just because it is what they have always done. Teachers and administrators are using terminology like “research-based, best practices, and high effect strategies” to assess and choose intervention strategies for not only academic support but also to target disruptive behaviors. There are lots of intervention models to choose from. Kris Zorigian and Jennifer Job (2010), researchers from The University of North Carolina describe a couple of the more popular examples: Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) and Response to Intervention (Rti). Both models are structured such that as students’ needs vary and become more challenging, then the intensity and duration components of the strategies are increased. Zorigian and Job explain that all students are given clear behavior expectations and instruction, at-risk students are taught core skills more frequently (instead of 10 topics one time they get 1 topic 10 times and 10 ways). Struggling learners get reinforced social skills and behavior specific interventions. For high need kids, the approach is to target specific skill deficits and to reach them at a personal level that includes boosting their social and emotional needs. For this Capstone project, incorporating a mentoring relationship was specifically chosen to reach these students at a deeper level. Most text book interventions fail to incorporate building relationship into the strategy. For this Capstone Project, relationship is the primary foundation for the intervention to be built upon.
Intervention: Mentor Relationship

Mentoring is frequently discussed as a viable approach and a proven practical solution for students with academic and behavioral problems (Vannest et al., 2008). Mentoring would seem to fit well as students who are absent of frequent, positive, supportive adult contact would receive a mentoring intervention that is focused on relationship and guidance. What is unique about this particular mentor relationship is that it is slightly disguised as an after-school homework group but its targeted goal has several layers. Not only will it provide the students extra time with an adult to accomplish homework, it also will intentionally provide a caring relationship that will emphasize encouragement, praise, and target increasing the student’s motivation to do their best. When kids know someone is rooting for them and are tuned in to their academic success, they tend to try harder and spend more time on their academic tasks (Vannest et al.). Rachel Baldino (2009) listed several outcomes for students who have been in longstanding mentor/mentee relationships. Her studies found that students and mentors had: improved sense of well-being, enhanced self-image, a sense of feeling valued, and a sense of competence.

One of the critical pieces to having a successful mentoring program is to have committed and caring mentors who can maintain the relationship over time (Baldino). There are lots of possibilities pertaining to who is appropriate to recruit to be mentors. High school and college aged young adults are often mentors to younger children. Unfortunately, with their likelihood of jobs, schedule changes, and frequency of returning to their family of origin, they are not always the best candidates to really establish a longstanding relationship. Grandparents and seniors are also frequent recruits and research does support that they are good candidates for sustained relationships (Baldino).

For this particular project, the mentors will be college-aged student teachers who are mostly through their teaching program and seeking field experience hours with students. Student teachers
were chosen due to their availability and their strong desire to get their required experience hours. This is a school intervention so elementary students view the calendar as the “school calendar” which would match well with the college students availability. The School Counselor will coordinate the mentor program and provide skill building topics that can be implemented into the mentor relationship. For example: connecting with kids, motivating kids, seeing their strengths, raising self-esteem, and beginning to help the student to set goals for the future. Ideally, the college student would commit for the entire school year as constructing an intervention that includes another broken relationship for these elementary students would not be desirable.

The actual design of the mentoring group could be open to whatever best meets the needs and availability of that years particular members. An example of the group could be as follows: the mentor and student would meet afterschool each Tuesday and Thursday from 3PM until 4:30PM. The group would begin with a 15 minute snack and check-in time pertaining to what has gone well for the week and to discuss what school work needs to be accomplished that week. The next 40-50 minutes would be designated as work time to accomplish whatever the student needs to get done. It can be missed work, the daily work, or preparing for upcoming tests/quizzes, etc. The convenient part about having the group in the school building and right after school is that the mentor and student can access the classroom teacher to confirm and verify what is needing to be accomplished. This leaves no wiggle room for students to down play or “forget” what’s assigned or not have the necessary materials. If actual assigned work is not needing to be completed, then practice sheets, pre-reading upcoming stories from the texts or studying for end of the week spelling or math lessons can be tackled.

The final 20-30 minutes would be activity time. Games, crafts, drawing, Lego’s are examples for the activity time. The essential component for this time is to have the student help choose the activity
and to do it together with the mentor. These fun experiences build upon the “School is important, I care about you, I honor you as an individual with opinions and ideas, and I see your strengths and will help you be the best you can be” messages. This approach begins to look like a Person Centered approach where unconditional positive regard never wains. The final 5 minutes would be to wrap-up and get the kids ready to go home. Transportation is always a major barrier for these kids to do any after-school activity. Ideally it would be provided by the school or School Counselor. By accomplishing the daily work and whatever else needed to be completed, kids can now go home with a clean “to-do” list. This may lesson potential stress/conflicts at home with their parent(s).
Conclusion

Students who display disruptive behaviors in class may be doing so for a bevy of reasons. This project first identifies who are the acting out students; and then hypothesizes that some of the possible explanation behind the behaviors may be that the student feels that their relationship with their parent/caregiver is incomplete or distressing. Administering the PARQ Assessment Tool is the chosen method to determine the students view particular to their relationship with their caregiver. It is believed that the seeking attention/acting out students will likely also be the students who feel rejected by their caregiver. To help substitute for the inadequate nurturing relationship, one intervention could be to match the student with a mentor that not only supplies a close, caring connection but also is intentionally designed to boost a student’s academic success by using an afterschool homework group as the setting for the intervention. Kids may only believe they are receiving homework assistance but a nurturing, supportive relationship will be a required dynamic of this particular intervention.

It is logical to think that not all kids with unfulfilling connections with their caregiver(s) act out. In fact, many kids can turn inward, detach and prefer to be invisible. A possible shortcoming of this particular project is the “squeaky wheel gets the grease” design. To truly identify all students who could benefit from a mentor relationship, the school counselor would be required to administer the PARQ Assessment Tool to the entire grade level.

The students who are inclined to act out in class may only be trying to make up for what they are not getting from their caregiver(s). Students who feel rejected and uncared for will use any tactic to gain attention; even if it is negative attention from misbehavior. This need for positive, nurturing interactions can be fostered through a relationship with a mentor. With a mentor, these students’ maladaptive behaviors will be less necessary, and thus, less disruptive to the classroom teacher. This
study is just a beginning for researchers to truly identify what hinders some students from being happy, healthy, and productive. Most interventions focus on data improvement, test scores, or grades. For this Capstone intervention improved scores is a secondary result. A strong, positive, nurturing, relationship is the central focus and from it comes many layers of improved results for the student and the classroom. Mother Theresa said, “We think of poverty as only being hungry, naked, and homeless. The poverty of being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for is the greatest poverty mankind knows”. These students know their condition and they are trying to get basic needs fulfilled. Shouldn’t we do something to help?
Author’s Note

I currently am a school social worker at an Elementary School and have been there for 12+ years. I provide an afterschool homework group that is similar to the above described intervention. My group is far less sophisticated. I do not use student teachers as the mentors; I provide the assistance myself. The groups are small; usually 3-5 kids per group. Kids are candidates for the group if they chronically do not get their homework done. Homework completion is the primary focus for the group members. Usually these kids rarely have backpacks checked, homework completed, or get the required school assistance from their caregiver(s). These kids typically get zero support on school obligations after 3PM. During group time, homework gets completed, notebooks get signed, and reading logs get completed. Teachers use these mechanisms to not only boost academic support but they also have reward systems tied to them. Prior to joining the group, group members rarely have gotten to reap the rewards or got to look like the other 95% of the class who do complete the tasks and reap the benefits. I do not formally collect data pertaining to these kids’ classroom behavior changes after joining the group. My hope is to one day expand the data collection points for this intervention so that I can collect and monitor real data to prove its effectiveness. I would have classroom teachers mark tally marks when a student in their classroom displays seeking attention behaviors. The teacher would collect total number of tallies as my baseline data to compare after the students are in the mentoring group. Seeking Attention Behaviors would be defined as: negative behaviors such as blurting out, overt defiance, overt refusals, out of seat engaging others, emotional displays seeking an audience, and class clowning.

Once the seeking attention behaviors data is collected, I would then give the entire class the PARQ in order to see if there is a correlation between those students seeking attention and those who feel their relationship with their caregiver is incomplete. These students would then be participants
in the afterschool mentor/homework group. Data pertaining to seeking attention behaviors displayed in class would be collected at the 2 month, 4 month, and 6 month interval to examine any changes. Also academic scores would be compared from fall testing to spring testing to see if any academic improvement was shown.

The students who have been in my less formal group do appear to feel more competent, more capable, and academic grades are boosted. These kids feel more connected to school and tend to have better attendance after they start the group. I think one residual effect also is that these kids drag less work home so there are less opportunities for them to have conflicts about homework with their parents, who seem unwilling to help. In my mind, less conflict must lead to less stress and distress for both student and parent.

I find the greatest accomplishment for those in the group is that they can see and feel success (which for some has been quite rare) and boost their confidence and motivation to succeed. The relationship that develops is the real gem of the intervention. Kids learn they are worthy of someone’s time, attention, and effort. They get to work to their ability and start to see some proof that they have strengths and gifts. If I accomplish nothing else, I at least want to look them in the eye, sit shoulder to shoulder, listen to their story, giggle a little, and convey the message that I am rooting for them with all my might. I want them to believe in themselves and begin to see their strengths.
References


## Appendix A

Ronald P. Rohners Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ) – partial.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MY MOTHER</th>
<th>TRUE OF MY MOTHER</th>
<th>NOT TRUE OF MY MOTHER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Almost Always True</td>
<td>Rarely True</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sometimes True</td>
<td>Almost Never True</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.  Says nice things about me</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.  Nags or scolds me when I am bad</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.  Pays no attention to me</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.  Does not really love me</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.  Talks to me about our plans and listens to what I have to say</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.  Complains about me to others when I do not listen to her</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.  Takes a real interest in me</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.  Wants me to bring my friends home, and tries to make things pleasant</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.  Ridicules and makes fun of me</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Pays no attention to me as long as I do nothing to bother her</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Yells at me when she is angry</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Makes it easy for me to tell her things that are important to me</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Treats me harshly</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Enjoys having me around her</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Makes me feel proud when I do well</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Hits me, even when I do not deserve it</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Forgets things she is supposed to do for me</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Sees me as a big nuisance</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Praises me to others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Punishes me severely when she is angry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Makes sure I have the right kind of food to eat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Talks to me in a warm and loving way</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Gets angry at me easily</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The actual PARQ is 60 questions. I included the first 23 questions so you could see how it is constructed. The above example is particular to the student’s experience with their mother. Each question is scored from 1-4 points. The range of total PARQ scores is between 60 (completely accepting) and 240 (complete rejection). These extremes are rare. Rohner uses 150 as his midpoint beyond which parental rejection is quite apparent. Any score below 100 is heavy on the acceptance side. A partial PARQ could only be shared due to copy right rules.