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Improving Behavior and Reading Levels: Students' Response to Two Years of Participation in a Teacher Administered Elementary Level School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Program

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Abstract

The purpose of this quasi-experimental within-group study was to determine the impact of a teacher administered All Children Experiencing Success, School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports program on students' measured externalizing behavior categories and reading instructional levels. Third-grade, fourth-grade, and fifth-grade students were identified at pretest with moderate (n = 18), mild (n = 22), and low (n = 46) disruptive externalizing behaviors. Students participated for two school years in this highly structured program designed to improve the culture, context, and curriculum of the research elementary school. The null hypothesis was rejected in the direction of student Universal Behavior Screen Category improvement at posttest where following two school years of program intervention students demonstrated moderate (n = 1), mild (n = 24), or low (n = 61) levels of externalizing behaviors with $X^2(2) = 17.40$, $p < .0001$. Furthermore, null hypotheses for improved reading instructional levels were rejected in the direction of significantly improved although below grade level performance reading scores over time for students with moderate externalizing behaviors where $t(17) = 2.38$, $p < .01$, and mild externalizing behaviors where $t(21) = 2.63$, $p < .01$. The null hypothesis for students with low externalizing behaviors reading instructional levels was also rejected in the direction of significantly improved meets grade level performance reading scores over time where $t(45) = 2.92$, $p < .003$. Establishing overarching behavior expectations that are clear, simple, easy to understand, and focused supported a safe, respectable, and responsible school wide core belief system. The goal was

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to reduce punishment and create a positive student self-regulated behavior replacement school environment. Student deportment, civility, and learning improvement may be expected when these proactive conditions are extant.

Keywords

School-Wide, Positive Behavioral, Interventions and Supports, Externalizing Behavior, Reading Instructional Level

1. Introduction

Students with challenging, threatening, and disruptive externalizing behaviors are at higher risk for not receiving a meaningful education as a direct result of their behavior (Durand, Hieneman, Clarke, & Zona, 2009). Dunlap and Fox (2009) reinforce this thinking by stating that challenging behaviors can interfere with social-emotional and intellectual development, can continue beyond early years of childhood, and will resist intervention that can last for periods into adulthood. In addition, administrators, teachers, and parents often feel overwhelmed by students' challenging and threatening externalizing behaviors with 39% of high school teachers reporting negative behaviors interfering with instruction (Arum, 2011; Crone & Horner, 2003). While students with externalizing behavior challenges comprise only 1% to 5% of enrollment in a typical school they account for on average 50% of office referrals, have a lower grade point average, are absent an average of 18 school days in a given year, and 50% of these students are likely to be arrested one year after graduating high school (SEELS, 2005). This observation coincides with the reported concern that parents have for the lack of discipline in schools due to challenging behaviors (Bergman, Powers, & Pullen, 2010).

Unfortunately, many in today's educational systems may ascribe students' disruptive problems solely to causes outside of school rather than taking a step back to see if the school environment is contributing to the challenging behavior, or more importantly working to develop positive interventions and support systems that can work to prevent the negative life course of students with disruptive externalizing behaviors (Crone & Horner, 2003). According to Crone and Horner (2003) frustrated educators keep delivering the same punishments that are ineffective—including punitive discipline and alternative placement—believing if these are administered often enough that the challenging disruptive behavior will subside. With the needs of students increasing, educators must become skilled in the delivery of positive behavioral supports for all students in a caring nurturing environment regardless of external contributing causes.

2. Review of Literature

The following elements of School-Wide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (SWPBIS) would be considered essential to providing students with the self-regulation and pro-social skills needed to succeed in school (Sugai & Horner, 2002) including:

1) Define three to five school-wide expectations for appropriate behaviors (e.g. Be Safe, Be Respectable, and Be Responsible).
2) Actively teach the school-wide behavioral expectations to all students.
3) Provide clear behavioral expectations and goals for students and staff.
4) Gather, analyze, and use data for making support decisions.
5) Use three "tiers" to target interventions to students.
6) Focus on teaching appropriate behaviors to replace inappropriate behaviors.
7) Place a constant emphasis on expanding and sustaining (reinforcing) positive student behavior.
8) Obtain committed district-level leadership and support for school-wide supports.

While violence and aggression to peers, adults, and property are all to often the dramatic reasons for referral to more restrictive placements and participation in intervention programs, SWPBIS programs capitalize on the capacity of all youth—even those with externalizing acting out behaviors—to produce desirable behaviors and engage in pro-social skill replacement activities. This construct serves as the theoretical as well as practical cornerstone of the SWPBIS behavior replacement paradigm. Behavioral programs balance administration of beha-

vior accelerative and behavior reductive procedures once stimulus control has been established. In this study the All Children Experiencing Success (ACES; Browning-Wright & Cook, 2011) system encompassing all of the elements essential for the benefit of student success served as the SWPBIS intervention. (*Note*. SWPBIS will be used throughout to denote ACES SWPBIS). A continuum of positive behavior supports in this SWPBIS program required a tiered intervention approach that encompassed required actions by staff for all students referred to as a three-tiered pyramid of behavioral supports (Chafouleas, Riley-Tillman, & Sugai, 2007). The intent of this model is to continue to increase and teach desired behaviors while decreasing undesirable behaviors that interfere with learning for all students. School-wide PBIS systems are developed and implemented to establish a positive approach to discipline, management, and the development of pro-social skills for students in our educational systems. Establishing a SWPBIS program and belief system is essential to the buy-in of all staff and students and the creation of a strong, solid response to intervention that resembles the beliefs of the school district, staff, and students. The SWPBIS program is essential in identifying behaviors that are acceptable, teaching alternate behaviors, and reinforcing positive behavior rather than focus on punitive consequences (Fowler, 2011). Establishing overarching behavior expectations that are clear, simple, easy to understand, and focused further support the schools' be safe, be respectable, and be responsible core belief system (Bergman et al., 2010; Westside Community Schools Mission Statement, 2011). The goal is always to reduce punishment and create a positive student self-regulated school environment (Chafouleas et al., 2007).

1) Tier 1 Behavioral Supports

In the three-tiered pyramid model utilized in this study Tier 1 behavioral supports were provided to all students (Chafouleas et al., 2007). Tier 1 behavioral supports are intended to establish academic and positive social development for all students (Gresham, 2004). Teachers provide students with pro-social skills, classroom management, effective instruction, school wide expectations for good behavior, and a token economy while establishing communication with parents. According to researchers, 75% to 90% of all students will respond to Tier 1 behavioral supports (Chafouleas et al., 2007; Browning-Wright & Cook, 2011; Crone & Horner, 2003). Depending on the level and number of behavior challenges, this percentage may be higher or lower than what is reported (Gresham, 2004). Furthermore, Tier 1 positive behaviors are meant to be proactive, by providing students with ways to behave—called replacement behaviors—that are incompatible with undesirable behaviors. All students receive the same amount of Tier 1 positive behavior instruction (Gresham, 2004).

2) Tier 2 Behavioral Supports

Tier 2 behavioral supports were established for students who do not respond to Tier 1 behavioral supports and require a greater diversity of intervention. According to researchers, 10% to 25% of students will be identified as needing Tier 2 behavioral supports and would therefore be considered students at-risk (Chafouleas et al., 2007; Browning-Wright & Cook, 2011; Crone & Horner, 2003). Tier 2 interventions are to be used only after teacher instruction and classroom management incompetence are ruled out as the source of student misbehavior. Tier 2 behavioral supports while delivered in smaller group settings are based upon behavior rating scales administered to determine the intensity, frequency, and duration of a student's specific disruptive behaviors and to further identify potential reinforcers that may be used to strengthen incompatible positive replacement behavioral alternatives to disruptive behaviors. Once students are placed on a behavior support plan, through data collection, students have the opportunity by improving their behavior to graduate from the behavior support plan back to Tier 1 behavioral supports intended to establish academic and positive social development for all students (Gresham, 2004).

3) Tier 3 Behavioral Supports

Tier 3 behavioral supports are implemented for students who do not respond to Tier 1 or Tier 2 interventions and require more restrictive placements. According to researchers, 3% to 5% of students will be identified in this category (Chafouleas et al., 2007; Browning-Wright & Cook, 2011; Crone & Horner, 2003). Students identified as possible Tier 3 students will need an intensive team-developed behavior plan intended to decrease the intensity, frequency, and duration of students' violent and aggressive behavior and implement acceptable replacement behaviors through intensive intervention. No students in this study were receiving Tier 3 behavioral supports.

2.1. Positive Behavioral Supports

Positive behavioral support strategies avoid interventions that are aversive and intrusive using instead functional assessment to identify student, externalizing acting out characteristics for prevention and instructional interven-

tion. These interventions are utilized because day-to-day group learning activities for behaviorally acting out youth have typically been characterized by high levels of external control and standard assignments have been interpreted as aversive stimuli that generated disruptive behavior as escape responding through the operations of negative reinforcement. Students with externalizing acting out behaviors even those who have been placed in special classes or separate school programs have been found to respond positively to instruction in social skills, self-evaluation, self-control, and academics (Hill & Coufal, 2005) within these school placements. Best practices for these interventions are based primarily on manipulation of positive antecedent stimuli, which historically incorporated elements of preference and provision for student choice-making in the selection of instructional tasks in order to promote adaptive behavior change. School wide positive behavior systems are being implemented to help students remain in the classroom instead of being removed from the classroom for special placements or special education.

Intervention goals for students with externalizing acting out behaviors include: 1) controlling behavioral excesses such as noncompliance and aggression, 2) remediating academic skill deficits, 3) remediating social skill deficits, and 4) teaching internal guides to behavior replacement. Intervention procedures used to accomplish these goals commonly incorporate positive reinforcement, manipulating antecedents, shaping and fading, combine token economies with hierarchies of self-management, behavior expectations or levels, and often include social skills, goal setting, and behavior replacement curricula (Browning-Wright & Cook, 2011). Behavioral expectations and rewards change as students demonstrate progress. Students who progress through intervention programs have more privileges while receiving fewer external rewards in increasingly less restrictive educational settings.

2.2. Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement is essential in modifying undesirable behavior by strengthening desirable behaviors. Positive reinforcement occurs immediately when the desired behavior is demonstrated (Scott, Anderson, Mancil, & Alter, 2011). Providing positive reinforcement immediately will increase the likelihood of the positive behavior occurring again in the future. Reinforcers for the positive behavior can be delivered differently when the positive behavior occurs such as verbal praise, non-verbal recognition, tokens, and positive name recognition in a weekly school newsletter. The more occurrences or interactions the student has with positive reinforcement the more likely the student will understand the function of the positive behavior. This is extremely effective when strategies are supported through a SWPBIS program. The goal is for the student to experience success reducing the need for external positive reinforcement (Scott et al., 2011).

2.3. Manipulation of Positive Antecedent Stimuli

Manipulating antecedents is important to modifying negative behavior and eliciting positive behavior from a student. When determining antecedents for possible negative behaviors, schools need to look at a positive school environment, a well-managed classroom, and environmental factors outside of the student's regular school day. One of the most important ways to effect, improve, and maintain a positive school climate is to have deliberate preventive discipline procedures (Bergman et al., 2010). In a positive school climate, students and adults who enter the building have an inviting feeling where students and adults are valued and respected. Moreover, school staff, maintain high standards and establish organization where students understand routines and know what is expected of them (Bergman et al., 2010). Chafouleas and colleagues (2007) assert that in order to support teaching and to maximize achievement, "schools must maintain learning environments that foster effective self-management, promote supportive and proactive social relations, maximize academic and instructional engagement and in so doing create a proactive learning environment also helps prevent the development of antisocial aggressive behavior" (p. 11).

2.4. Building Positive Relationships

Consistent with this research project, SWPBIS found in Tier 1 interventions emphasizes the importance of building positive relationships between students and staff in a positive school climate. In so doing students are able to view adults in the building as caring individuals when they receive positive praise for good behavior associated with positive attention. According to Arum (2011) school disciplinary climates are the organizational

context in which education functions and authority relationships between students and educators are embedded. Positive school environments can remove negative stimuli that can be antecedents for a student displaying a negative behavior. Teachers must always keep the dignity of a child intact and view them through the lens of respect. Seeing a child's potential and learning about the child's learning style will create satisfied learners, help the child feel respected, and contribute to a positive school culture (Senge et al., 2000).

2.5. Pro-Social Behavior Replacement Intervention

Personal growth pro-social behavior replacement skill programs often include instruction in impulse control, identifying feelings, and problem solving. Impulse control steps such as, 1) stop and think, and 2) keeping your cool, give youths cognitive alternatives to aggression and violence when they have angry feelings. Through role-playing and real-world practice youth realize that while they may feel angry and feel like hitting someone they do not have to act on those feelings. These impulse control steps are made more meaningful when youth incorporate their own elements of creative expression. All behaviors have a function and they are presented when a change in the environment needs to occur (Hill & Coufal, 2005; Tyrone, Hall, & Hill, 1998).

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of a teacher administered SWPBIS program on the measured externalizing behavior categories and instructional reading level scores of third-grade, fourth-grade, and fifth-grade students identified with moderate, mild, and low disruptive externalizing behaviors who participated for two school years in a highly structured SWPBIS program designed to improve the culture, context, and curriculum of the research elementary school.

4. Methodology

4.1. Description of Student Participants

Student participants were identified during the 2010 winter Universal Behavior Screen of their third-grade through fifth-grade school year, as having moderate, mild, or low externalizing behavior summative scores by classroom teachers' observations for 1) stealing, 2) lying, 3) cheating, 4) sneaking, 5) behavior problems, 6) peer rejection, 7) low academic achievement, 8) negative attitude, and 9) aggressive behavior frequencies. Students' gender and ethnicity demographics are displayed in **Table 1**. The age range of the students was nine years to 13 years of age.

Table 1. Demographic information.

Sources of data	Students' pretest measured universal behavior screen category		
	Moderate	Mild	Low
Gender			
Girls	3	11	32
Boys	15	11	14
Ethnicity			
White	11	11	29
Black	6	6	12
Hispanic	1	4	3
American Indian		1	1
Middle Eastern			1

Note. Fifty-five (64%) of the study total participants $N = 86$ were eligible for participation in the free and/or reduced price lunch program.

4.2. Independent Variables and Instrumentation

In this study all student participants were enrolled in the same research school for two consecutive years 2010-2011 following Universal Behavior Screen assessment indicating the need for moderate, mild, and low behavioral support for externalizing behavior. Students measured Universal Behavior Screen Category (Browning-Wright & Cook, 2011) at pretest served as the independent variable with three conditions of observed externalizing behavior classified as 1) moderate, 2) mild, and 3) low. Students pretest and posttest Universal Behavior Screen Category (Browning-Wright & Cook, 2011) served as the study's behavioral dependent measure and Fountas and Pinnell (2011) instructional reading level scores before and following two school years of SWPBIS program participation served as the reading instructional level dependent measure.

4.3. Research Questions

The following two research questions guided the study.

1) Did students identified with moderate (n = 18), mild (n = 22), and low (n = 46) levels of observed externalizing behaviors at pretest who participated in the required SWPBIS program have improved posttest externalizing behavior categories following two school years of program participation?

2) Did students identified with moderate (n = 18), mild (n = 22), and low (n = 46) levels of observed externalizing behaviors at pretest who participated in the required SWPBIS program have improved posttest instructional reading level scores following two school years of program participation?

4.4. Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

This quasi-experimental within-group pretest-posttest study had many strong features including: 1) a consistently administered positive behavioral interventions and supports program directly addressing and meeting students behavioral and academic needs, 2) school-wide teacher, principal, and counselor participation, 3) ongoing staff development and training, and 4) explicitly differentiated reading instruction based on best practices, teaching theory, and assessment. However, it must be noted that the small sample size and single school example may limit the utility and generalizability of the study results and findings. Permission from the appropriate school research personnel and University of Nebraska Medical Center/University of Nebraska at Omaha Joint Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects approval was granted for the study before data were collected and analyzed.

5. Results

5.1. Research Question One

Although teachers, administrators, and support staff used the externalizing behavior summative scores by classroom teachers' observations of students for 1) stealing, 2) lying, 3) cheating, 4) sneaking, 5) behavior problems, 6) peer rejection, 7) low academic achievement, 8) negative attitude, and 9) aggressive behavior frequencies differentially to guide individual student interventions and supports, for the purposes of statistical analysis the study data were aggregated across observations. **Table 2** displays students identified with moderate, mild, and low externalizing behaviors pretest universal behavior screen category compared to posttest universal behavior screen category change over time. As found in **Table 2** the null hypothesis was rejected indicating significant student Universal Behavior Screen Category change towards measured externalizing behavior improvement. At pretest before implementation of the SWPBIS Intervention students demonstrated moderate (n = 18), mild (n = 22), or low (n = 46) levels of externalizing behaviors as rated by teachers trained to administer the Universal Behavior Screen. At posttest following two school years of participation in the SWPBIS program students demonstrated moderate (n = 1), mild (n = 24), or low (n = 61) levels of externalizing behaviors with a significant category change over time where $X^2(2, N = 172) = 17.40$, $p < .0001$.

5.2. Research Question Two

Students identified with moderate, mild, and low externalizing behaviors pretest compared to posttest Fountas and Pinnell (2011) instructional reading level scores are found in **Table 3**. The null hypothesis was rejected in the direction of significantly improved instructional reading level scores over time for students with moderate

Table 2. Students' identified with moderate, mild, and low externalizing behaviors pretest compared to posttest universal behavior screen category change.

Students' measured universal behavior screen category	Students in category		Category change		X^2	p
	Pretest *N*	Posttest *N*	*N*	(%)[a]		
Moderate	18	1	−17	(−94.44)		
Mild	22	24	+2	(+9.09)		
Low	46	61	+15	(+32.60)	17.40	.0000

[a]Percentage change = $((y_2 - y_1)/y_1)*100$. $df = 2$.

Table 3. Students' identified with moderate, mild, and low externalizing behaviors pretest compared to posttest fountas and pinnell instructional reading level scores.

Students' measured universal behavior screen category	Instructional reading level scores				ES	*t*	*p*
	Pretest		Posttest				
	M	(*SD*)	*M*	(*SD*)			
Moderate	1.50	(0.51)	1.83	(0.71)	0.54	2.38	.01
Mild	1.45	(0.51)	1.77	(0.68)	0.53	2.63	.01
Low	1.91	(0.69)	2.20	(0.66)	0.47	2.92	.003

Note. Instructional Reading Level Score Conversions: 1 = Below Grade Level Performance; 2 = Meets Grade Level Performance; and 3 = Exceeds Grade Level Performance.

externalizing behaviors where pretest $M = 1.50$, $SD = 0.51$, posttest $M = 1.83$, $SD = 0.71$, and $t(17) = 2.38$, $p < .01$, $ES = 0.54$. The null hypothesis was also rejected in the direction of significantly improved instructional reading level scores over time for students with mild externalizing behaviors where pretest $M = 1.45$, $SD = 0.51$, posttest $M = 1.77$, $SD = 0.68$, and $t(21) = 2.63$, $p < .01$, $ES = 0.53$. Finally, the null hypothesis was rejected in the direction of significantly improved instructional reading level scores over time for students with low externalizing behaviors where pretest $M = 1.91$, $SD = 0.69$, posttest $M = 2.20$, $SD = 0.66$, and $t(45) = 2.92$, $p < .003$, $ES = 0.47$. However, it should be noted that despite statistical improvement over time for all three groups only students with low externalizing behavior at posttest had a mean instructional level greater than the specified performance standard threshold of two required to meet grade level performance.

6. Conclusions

At pretest before implementation of the SWPBIS program students demonstrated moderate ($n = 18$), mild ($n = 22$), or low ($n = 46$) levels of externalizing behaviors as rated by teachers trained to administer the Universal Behavior Screen. At posttest following two school years of participation in the SWPBIS program 17 fewer students demonstrated moderate levels of externalizing behaviors a −94.44 percentage, category decrease and two more students demonstrated mild levels of externalizing behaviors a +9.09, percentage, category increase. Finally, at posttest following two school years of implementation of the SWPBIS program 15 more students demonstrated low levels of externalizing behaviors a +32.60, percentage, category increase. These category changes, although not directly attributable to student participation in the SWPBIS program, indicated a positive trend towards measured externalizing behavior improvement over time.

Furthermore, improved instructional reading levels consistent with improved behavior were also observed over time. It is important to note that many of the students attending the research school who participated in this study were from lower socioeconomic homes. Studies show that students from families with fewer economic advantages perform less well than their peers from more socioeconomically advantaged homes (Baharudin & Luster, 1998; Jeynes, 2002; Eamon, 2005). School districts must continue to be proactive in their approach (Marzano, 2007) to meeting the needs of all students especially students who are risk and are more likely to not graduate from high school. Clearly, therefore, SWPBIS program approaches must be considered for implemen-

tation in preschool and elementary schools but most critically in schools located within economically challenged neighborhoods (Grice, Hill, & Hayes, 2012). In the research school all students were required to participate in the SWPBIS program as an integral function of the school's culture, context, and curriculum. School leaders need to recognize the importance of SWPBIS programs where teachers, administrators, staff, and critically parents may with one voice cultivate the importance of academic achievement, promote active participation, and teach the social skills students need to be successful school citizens and in anticipation of future success in their future studies and society. Given the overall positive findings of this research project it is recommended that the study school continue implementation of the SWPBIS program and perhaps even more importantly continue providing ongoing teacher training on positive support for all students.

7. Discussion

The intent of a SWPBIS program is to continue to increase and teach desired behaviors while decreasing undesirable behaviors that interfere with learning for all students. School wide PBIS programs are developed and implemented to establish a positive approach to discipline, management, and the development of pro-social skills for students in our educational systems. Establishing a SWPBIS program and belief system is essential to the buy-in of all staff and students and the creation of a strong, solid response to intervention that resembles the beliefs of the school district, staff, and students. School-wide PBIS systems and programs are essential in identifying behaviors that are acceptable, teaching alternate positive replacement behaviors, and reinforcing good behavior rather than focusing on punitive consequences (Fowler, 2011). Establishing overarching behavior expectations that are clear, simple, easy to understand, and focused further support a safe, respectable, and responsible school wide core belief system (Bergman et al., 2010; Westside Community Schools Mission Statement, 2011). The goal is always to reduce punishment and create a positive student self-regulated behavior replacement school environment (Chafouleas et al., 2007). Student deportment, civility, and learning improvement may be expected when these proactive conditions are extant.

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