Implementing RTI and PBIS in One Elementary School in Georgia

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**Implementing Positive Behavior Intervention and Support**

One of the most difficult aspects of a schoolteacher or school counselor’s duties is discipline (Algozzine & Algozzine, 2010). One or two students with behavior issues can consume a major portion of the school day for school personnel (Scott, 2001). National laws protect students in special education. Teachers and school counselors must manage the behavior of all students while abiding by the laws that govern punishment of students. Instructors first must understand why students exhibit behaviors not conducive to learning.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) and No Child Left Behind Act (2002) mandated that all students in a public K-12 school have access to an effective primary or core, also called tier 1, prevention. Therefore, most schools have adopted a tiered model for student with at-risk behavior or academic performance. Such models include Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) (Lane et al., 2009). Successful teachers and counselors implement methods from programs such as RTI or PBIS. Some of the strategies include creating clear expectations, frequently giving praise, allowing the student to respond often, and establishing a trusting relationship with the student (Drysdale, William, & Meaney, 2007; Partin, Maggin, Oliver, & Wehby, 2010).

**Response to Intervention (RTI)**

Johnston (2010) posited that IDEA mandated the use of RTI for two reasons: as a method to identify correctly students with learning disabilities, and as a method to eliminate the IQ discrepancy identification method as a way to eliminate the number of students who actually have disabilities. For a number of years, both educators and researchers questioned the discrepancy model as a method to identify students with learning disabilities; moreover, both groups expressed pleasure to see this method removed from the equation when deciding eligibility. Jiménez (2010) noted, “Prevention and more effective teaching in the context of regular education are key concepts associated with RTI” (p. 932).

No specific definition of RTI exists, according to the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY, 2011). “In general, RTI includes screening children within the general curriculum, progress monitoring, small group instruction, and comprehensive evaluation” (Fuchs & Mellard, 2007, as cited in NICHCY, 2011, para 15). According to the Georgia Department of Education (2014a), Georgia’s RTI process includes certain key components, which follow:

* “A 4-Tiered delivery model designed to provide support matched to student need through the implementation of standards-based classrooms
* Evidence-based instruction as the core of classroom pedagogy
* Evidence-based interventions of increasing levels of intensity based on progress monitoring
* The use of a variety of ongoing assessment data to determine which students are not meeting success academically and/or behaviorally
* Purposeful allocation of instructional resources based on student assessment data” (GDOE, 2014a, Introduction and Overview, para. 4).

One of the counties in Georgia defined RTI as a “flexible problem-solving model in which schools provide assistance to match the learner’s needs” (Cobb County School District, 2010, para 1). Cobb County provides parents with a brochure from Georgia Department of Education, which explains the levels or tiers that the Georgia adopted for use. In the brochure, parents are told that Cobb County School District adopted the model, which was developed by Georgia Department of Education. This model organizes school intervention services into four levels, or tiers.

**Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS)**

Similar to RTI, PBIS is a preventative structure for teaching students behavioral expectations through a tiered model in an effort to improve academic and social behavior results for all students (PBIS.Org, 2012). PBIS does not provide schools with a written curriculum with scripts to produce improved results for students (PBIS.org, 2012). The goal of PBIS is to provide structures and processes for school personnel to identify research based practices and improve on interventions through data analysis to improve academic and social learning for all students (PBIS.org, 2012). The differences between RTI and PBIS are the focus is on behavior, and it is offered to all students in the school, not just those in need. Georgia Department of Education (2014b) lists the key features of PBIS:

* Social skills instruction
* Positive and proactive discipline
* Social behavior expectations
* Active supervision and monitoring
* Positive acknowledgement
* Fair and corrective discipline
* Parent training and collaboration (p. 2)

PBIS’s main website informs that this tiered approach is a prevention-oriented way for school personnel to (a) organize evidence-based practices, (b) improve their implementation of those practices, and (c) maximize academic and social behavior outcomes for students (PBIS.Org, 2012). According to Nelson and Sugai (1999), “The basic premise of PBIS is that problem behaviors occur due to deficiencies in the behavioral repertoires of the individual and/or deficiencies in the environment” (as cited in Sullivan, Long, & Kucera, 2011, p. 972). When discussing the tiers, Beard (2013) explained the following:

The three-tiered model provides a continuum of support where the intensity of interventions gradually increases: 1) the first tier provides universal supports/instruction for all students; 2) the second tier provides more intense interventions for students not responding to universals; and 3) the third tier, the most intense, provides individualized interventions for students not responding to tier one and tier two supports. (p. 8)

**Major Stakeholders**

The major stakeholders of this program implementation are parents, students, and the school staff, which includes administration, teachers, counselors, and paraprofessionals. The school under study is an elementary school in a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia. For purposes of this study, the school will be known by the alias, B. Street School. In the beginning of the 2014-2015 year, the student population was 462 students in grades K through 5. Minority enrollment was 43%, which was lower than Georgia’s average of 56% for the same year. The teacher to student ratio was 14:1, which was lower than the Georgia average of 15:1 (Public School Review, 2014).

Student behavior problems became a major concern for the staff and parents of B. Street School within the past 18 months. Although Scott (2001) warned that discipline problems could take up 80% of the school day for some school staff, this was not the typical case for B. Street School until recently. However, behavior problems have escalated to the degree that school counselors are implementing training for PBIS and re-training for RTI to all school staff. Moreover, parent meetings have been arranged to help those concerned parents, grandparents, and guardians with the issue. The counselors are training the teachers on ways to help students become active members in resolving this issue through role-play, assemblies, classroom guidance lessons, and workshops designed by the counselors specifically for the young students.

**Purpose of Program Implementation**

With discipline issues escalating to where they can take up 80% or more of a school day for some staff members, something must be done to improve the situation**.** After speaking with the school administration, it was agreed that PBIS should be implemented; however, it was also agreed that RTI should be re-introduced. Although B. Street School has technically used RTI for a number of years, some staff members have become lackadaisical about using this tiered approach for all students. When used, it is typically used for academic deficits, not behavioral issues. PBIS has not been introduced to the staff at his school. It is hoped that by re-training the staff of the benefits of RTI and introducing PBIS, they will be able to gain back control of the behaviors, which are currently dominating the school.

**Proposed Methodology**

**Participants**

Participants for this descriptive case study will include the staff at B. Street School. Because students under the age of 18 are considered a vulnerable, protected group, no questions will be directly asked of any student. Students will be observed and incidences of behavior referrals will be closely scrutinized. An informed consent form will be sent to all 35 teachers at B. Street School. Those who sign informed consent forms will be asked participate in one-on-one or focus group interviews and surveys regarding the number of behavior incidents they encounter each day and how they manage them. The survey will be used to ascertain staff’s knowledge of RTI and PBIS approaches (see Appendix A). This information will be used to arrange inservice training for the teachers.

**Design and Methodology**

Researchers may select from qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods when designing their studies. A quantitative approach would be appropriate if the aim of the research was to measure the number of occurrences or events; however, this has been done. The number of behavioral incidents has been established. We know how many discipline referrals have been made; we need know why they are increasing and what the staff is doing to help the situation. Therefore, a mixed methods approach, which uses both qualitative and quantitative data, was also deemed not applicable.

A descriptive qualitative case study was deemed appropriate for this proposed study. Qualitative approaches are appropriate to explore complex issues and to explore a deep understanding of the individuals who has experienced the phenomena (Smith, Bekker, & Cheater, 2011). The design of qualitative research in education is to provide rich descriptions of what occurs in schools and classrooms, not to determine conclusively if practices work (Cook & Cook, 2008). Typically, according to Palmquist (2012), case study research employs a variety of methods, which include interviews, protocol analyses, field studies, surveys, and participant-observations. Yin (2013) explained that case studies should be *data rich*. For the proposed study, surveys, observations, participant observations, one-on-one and focus group interviews, and extensive data analysis will be used.

According to Palmquist (2012), four approaches to case study research exist: Critical Instance Case Studies, Exploratory, Cumulative, and Illustrative or Descriptive Studies. Critical instance case studies “examine one or more sites for either the purpose of examining a situation of unique interest with little to no interest in generalizability, or to call into question or challenge a highly generalized or universal assertion” (Palmquist, 2012, para. 5). This is not applicable for this proposed study. The main purpose of an exploratory (or pilot) case study is “to help identify questions and select types of measurement prior to the main investigation” (Palmquist, 2012, para. 4). Although the proposed study will seek answers to questions, this is not the primary goal of the proposed study. In a cumulative case study, the researcher studies a collection of past studies; this is not the goal of this study. This study will apply the illustrative or descriptive approach, which is primarily a descriptive study and will use “one or two instances of an event to show what a situation is like. Illustrative case studies serve primarily to make the unfamiliar familiar and to give readers a common language about the topic in question” (Palmquist, 2012, para. 5). However, the goal in every study, regardless of research paradigm, is to obtain data that have one or more of the following characteristics: trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, legitimating, validity, plausibility, applicability, consistency, neutrality, reliability, objectivity, confirmability, or transferability (Collins, Onwuegbuzie, & Jiao, 2010).

**Data Collection**

After permission to proceed has been received from the Institutional Review Board of the University of West Georgia, permission letters will be generated to the district office of B. Street School. Because this study is being conducted with the encouragement of the administration, permission to query staff will not be problematic. However, the administration at the district office will be asked to sign a permission letter as well. After these letters have been signed and received by the researcher, an email will be sent to the entire staff explaining the nature of the study and asking volunteers to participate in the interview and survey portions of the study. The email will explain that inclusion is voluntary, and there will be no repercussion for withdrawing or not participating. The potential participants will be told that they will remain anonymous and pseudonyms will be used at all time. Potential participants will be told there will be not personal benefit from participating except in the event the discipline rate decreases. Potential participants will be told that all data will be securely stored for no less than five years in a safety deposit box at a local bank. Only the researcher will have a key. The potential participants will be told that risk is minimal, no more than they should expect to experience in a typical workday.

Once signed informed consent forms are received from staff, the researcher will schedule a convenient time to interview those participants who indicated they would sit for an interview. Both one-on-one and focus group interviews will be offered to potential participants. It is not expected that more than 20 teachers will volunteer to be interviewed; however, it is expected that more will consent to complete the survey. The surveys will be administered using SurveyMonkey, an online professional instrument administrator company. Participants will be emaileda link to the survey where they can answer anonymously at their convenience.

**Proposed Analysis**

Descriptive statistics will be used to calculate the mean, mode, frequency, and standard deviation of all files retrieved, including discipline referral statistics (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2007). The researcher will compile all narrative data gained from observations and present them in an anecdotal accounting. Descriptive statistics will be used to analyze the Likert-type survey. A frequency count for each answer will give the researcher the desired information. After each interview is transcribed, it will be hand coded. According to Creswell (2007), a qualitative analysis framework must remain flexible enough to be responsive to new information gained as the process evolves. Data will be coded using the conceptual approach. The focus in conceptual content analysis is based on looking at the occurrence of selected terms within a text or texts.

According to Creswell (2009), three activities constitute data analysis; exploring the data, coding the data, and reporting the findings through the review and explanation of (a) the research question, (b) interview questions, (c) data analysis, and (d) data interpretation. It is important that during the data collection process the researcher does not discount seemingly irrelevant statements made by research participants. The main emphasis of a qualitative researcher is to portray an accurate, honest, and equitable assessment of the social experiences of participants in a study (Creswell, 2007).

**Conclusions**

Disruptive student behavior can monopolize a teacher, administrator, or counselor’s time and disallow the learning of other students. Scott (2001) noted that often teachers and counselors spend as much as 80% of their time dealing with behavior issues. This is time taken away from learning and other productive endeavors. Inappropriate behavior “adversely affects instruction, the learning environment, and the overall school climate for all learners within the school” (Martens, & Andreen, 2013, p. 313). If implementing RTI and PBIS can reduce disruptive incidences, these tiered approaches must be taught and their policies enforced.

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Appendix

Teacher Survey: Assessing Behavioral Support in an Early Childhood Setting

1. Estimate the number of students with chronic problem behaviors in your classroom/caseload (i.e., those students who require extensive individualized support):

One

Two

Three or more

2. Rules and expected behaviors for the classroom are clearly defined.

Current level of implementation

In Place Partially in Place Not in Place

Support available from school/district

In Place Partially in Place Not in Place

3. Procedures for encouraging expected behavior are implemented consistently by all staff.

Current level of implementation

In Place Partially in Place Not in Place

Support available from school/district

In Place Partially in Place Not in Place

4. Procedures for discouraging/ correcting problem behavior are implemented consistently by all staff.

Current level of implementation

In Place Partially in Place Not in Place

Support available from school/district

In Place Partially in Place Not in Place

5. Teachers have clear options that allow classroom instruction to continue when a student is disruptive.

Current level of implementation

In Place Partially in Place Not in Place

Support available from school/district

In Place Partially in Place Not in Place

6. Assistance from the school is available to manage difficult student behavior during emergency or crisis situations.

Current level of implementation

In Place Partially in Place Not in Place

7. Regular opportunities for teacher assistance for behavioral support in the classroom (e.g., observations, instructional strategies, & coaching)

Current level of implementation

In Place Partially in Place Not in Place

Support available from school/district

In Place Partially in Place Not in Place

8. Strategies are in-place to identify students who do not respond to common behavior management strategies.

Current level of implementation

In Place Partially in Place Not in Place

Support available from school/district

In Place Partially in Place Not in Place

9. A range of small group strategies are available to meet the needs of students with chronic problem behavior (e.g., social skills, self-management).

Current level of implementation

In Place Partially in Place Not in Place

Support available from school/district

In Place Partially in Place Not in Place

10. Someone with expertise to conduct functional behavioral assessments & design individualized support plans is available within or to the district (approx. 2 hours per week per student).

Current level of implementation

In place Partially in place Not in place