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Behavior Management in the Classroom

One of the biggest hurdles to creating an environment conducive to learning is effective classroom management, and for substitute teaching, a well-managed classroom is essential to having a successful subbing experience. My research began as a result of spending a lot of time substitute teaching in third grade classrooms where the Positive Behavior Interventions and Strategies (PBIS) formed the foundation of classroom management. Like Pavlov's dog (McCormick & Pressley, 1997), the class had been conditioned to understand a set system of cues, prompts and rewards in order to address both desirable and undesirable behaviors. Holding a hand up with three fingers in the air would result in the class becoming quiet and gain their focused attention. They received HOT (homework on time) tickets for passing in homework on the due date or earlier, and TAB (totally awesome behavior) tickets for helping complete someone else's classroom job, tracking during their cast-a-spells (spelling lesson), and for making it through the day without a turned foot.

The classroom teacher, Anne*, used colored paper feet on the chart during the wall as one of the responses to undesirable behavior. First the student would receive a verbal warning, followed by turning the foot so the white side was showing, then the foot would be dropped down a level for the second warning, and finally the foot would be put in the row "in for recess" and the child would lose recess. The tickets could be redeemed for rewards, such as a chance at the weekly drawing and selection from the prize box, free popcorn on Friday, and the opportunity to invite another student from a different class over for snack. After spending time in this class, I began to wonder how PBIS was being implemented in higher grades, as it was difficult for me to see older students taking these strategies as seriously.

*All names have been changed.

Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) is a classroom management program and philosophy that has been implemented to varying degrees within many of the schools within school districts within in my region and throughout the state of New Hampshire. In most schools, including K-12 schools, it is supposed to be a school-wide initiative. The main tenet of the program, “proactive strategies for defining, teaching, and supporting appropriate student behaviors to create positive school environments” (US Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], n.d.) makes the program seem like something that would be welcome in classrooms at all levels.

In practice PBIS has been fairly effective at the elementary and middle school levels in both classroom management and community building. The program is not as evident within secondary school classrooms that I have spent time in, including schools in which “We are a PBIS school” banners are prominently displayed and schools which have endorsed and signed onto the PBIS initiative. Most secondary level classrooms display aspects of this behavior modification program, through brightly colored, centrally located social contracts but it is unclear the degree of implementation these contracts experience. My initial research question was how this program was implemented within these classrooms, but as I began to examine the program further, I realized I needed to look at how the teachers perceived it, the consistency of its implementation, and how the program functions within the curriculum.

Classroom management is not a new issue, especially for beginning and substitute teachers, two groupings to which I claim membership. There have been a lot of theories and programs proposed through the years on the most effective ways to manage a classroom and to promote a learning environment, based on various philosophies and psychological theories. PBIS is firmly rooted in Skinner’s behaviorist

theory of behavior modification. “The main idea of behavior modification is to reinforce behaviors that are valued” (McCormick & Pressley, 1997, p, 168), and relies on token reinforcements, such as TAB and HOT tickets, to reinforce good behavior. PBIS grew out of the body of “evidence [that] suggests...the adoption of district-wide, zero-tolerance policies resulting in suspensions and expulsions from school do not improve student behavior or make a positive contribution to school safety” (Skiba, 2000 as cited in Muscott, Mann, Benjamin, Gately, Bell, Muscott, 2004, p. 454). PBIS takes a more pro-active approach by looking to emphasize and encourage positive behavior through recognition and rewards rather than relying solely on punitive measures to bring behavior reform. The goal of the program is to teach appropriate behaviors and match the level of intervention resources to the level of behavioral challenge presented by students while designing and integrating multiple systems to deal with the full range of discipline challenges schools face (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995 as cited in Muscott, et al.).

Some of the more concrete goals of the program include less out of class and school referrals, an understanding of why a student is responding in the manner he/she has, and to create and foster a sense of community and respect for both students and faculty. Respect is a key component of this program and a necessary consideration in the classroom management aspect. It is believed that there will be less maladaptive behavior within a classroom that has both students and staff respecting the other.

PBIS initiatives in New Hampshire began in 2002 when 28 schools applied and agreed to commit to a three-year process of implementing PBIS within their school system (Muscott, 2004). This initial group of PBIS schools has since increased and currently there are 145 schools in NH that have implemented PBIS, including “Head

Start agencies, child care centers, elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, multi-level schools and alternative schools. Approximately 20% of the students who attend public school are being reached through the state's current PBIS initiative” (NH Center for Effective Behavioral Interventions and Supports [NH CEBIS], 2007, What is PBIS?).

PBIS at the secondary school level has different challenges and strategies than those offered at the elementary level or below. Some studies have indicated that PBIS at the high school level may need to be adapted “to accommodate their unique organizational and structural features, the progressive social and developmental aspects of adolescence, and variations in how problem behaviors and social responsibility are defined and considered at the secondary level” (Bohan-Edmonson, Flannery, Eber & Sugai, 2005, p. 3). Bohan-Edmonson, et al. also cited research from the National Center for Educational Statistics (2003), that “school size... [has] a direct impact on discipline” (p.4). These factors seem to indicate that PBIS not only should look different in secondary schools as opposed to primary schools, but also that it may vary based on local, regional or school characteristics.

Besides the differences in curriculum demands, secondary school students are often ...assumed to be able to self-manage and organize, motivated by and responsible for their own learning, and ready to accommodate new personal responsibilities...from a discipline perspective, students are considered responsible for their own behaviors...[and] if they do not assume responsibility for changing/improving their behaviors, they are excluded from the classroom...[with] the assumption... that if the student “decides” not to

improve his or her behavior then the privilege of being at school is removed.

(Bohan-Edmonson, et al., 2005, p. 5-7)

PBIS works in the reverse of traditional discipline programs, seeking to help students learn appropriate behaviors along with the expected curriculum. Successful programs tend to include: naturally occurring and appropriate forms of rewards (early release from class, pizza parties, homework passes, shirts, movies, etc.), the inclusion of faculty and students in implementing the program, encouraging and rewarding faculty and staff to use the system, acknowledging and adjusting the school-wide system because it may not work for all students, and celebrating the successes and outcomes of the program (Bohan-Edmonson, et al., p. 64).

There are challenges to implementing the program, particularly if there is not adequate administration and/or faculty support. One aspect of this can be disagreement in how to teach behavioral expectations at the secondary school level because of concerns regarding limiting the development of an intrinsic desire to behave appropriately and the lack of desire to reward students for behaving appropriately, or doing as they are supposed to. Studies have shown that this can impact whether faculty and/or administration will buy in to the PBIS program and adhere to expectations, core values, and discipline procedures (Bohan-Edmonson, et al., 2005; Muscott, et al., 2004; Freeman, Eber, Anderson, Irvin, Horner, Bounds, et al., 2006).

I asked a middle school teacher, Claire, working in a K-12 school using PBIS about the level of participation by the faculty and she said that initially there was a lot of work done on the program, and protocols were established. As our conversation continued, Claire remarked that there are banners and classroom “contracts” posted, but the faculty is seeking out alternative methods. A lot of the high school faculty members

are currently unhappy with the program and she mentioned that part of the problem with the program is “rewarding students for something they should be doing anyway.” This has been noted as one of the challenges to this program’s implementation.

Faculty buy-in is a key component of PBIS. Leslie, an eighth grade English teacher, called it teaching that actions have consequences, and they can be good or bad. This is not a new concept for schools or programs. As an undergraduate, I became certified in the Choice program, an intervention for youth at risk for substance abuse. We would discuss how their choices had outcomes and how it might be hard to recognize the choices they had available or to make a “good” choice, but that it was important to know that by making their choice, they also helped to choose their outcome. PBIS seems to work the same way. If you behave well, you get rewarded by a small token, a compliment, or some other recognition. If you behave poorly, then there are consequences for that as well. The major difference between the Choice program and PBIS is self; in the Choice program, the emphasis is on one’s self being in charge, while PBIS relies on an authority figure to guide, regulate and modify behavior.

During the data collection, I observed a student, Tim, completing a two page essay on respect. This essay was assigned by Tim’s regular English teacher because of her class’ extremely poor behavior for the substitute teacher they had the previous day. The paper was in addition to two days of after school detention. This punishment was assigned to four students who managed to get their names recorded for excessive misbehavior by the substitute, although the entire class was unruly. He wrote the first page fairly quickly but was struggling to find a way to meet the two page requirement. Tim asked me for help, and I asked him about what he had done, and how he felt about

it. Then I asked him how he thought the substitute felt. He said he would be apologizing to her tomorrow when she subbed for another one of his instructors.

As a substitute, I have had occasion to sub for Tim's instructors. Their class does act up and is frequently disrespectful. I wonder about the assignment and if it will improve their behavior. I have trouble with rewarding students for behaving as they should, but I also understand that they are developing the skills they need to learn how to function in society. I think it is a fine line between relying on the reward for behavior and understanding that you also have to follow up with the bad behavior too. I think it might be easy to do the first, but the second is where the message might make it through. Others, like Wolk (2003), argue that when teachers bring moral issues into the classroom and "invite our students to think about them [it helps] them form their moral identities" (par. 3). This essay asking Tim and his peers to reflect on their actions is one way to encourage students to develop an understanding of empathy and compassion, without resorting to a rewards/punishment model.

Kohn (2006) stresses that "what students truly need...[is] the chance to make real decisions about what happens in the classroom" (p. 81) and that "misbehavior will diminish when children feel less controlled" (p. 81). Because of the program's structure, PBIS relies heavily on an external locus of control, where student behavior is rewarded or punished by an authority figure, not self-regulated. PBIS uses reinforcers to help encourage students to behave more responsibly and respectfully, but it can also be argued that offering students an opportunity to "grapple with complex moral issues [allows them to] develop their own sense of goodness and how they should behave both outside and inside the classroom" (Wolk, 2003, par. 4). Leslie says that most of the teachers do not use the system, only the ones that are involved in the program, or part

of the intensive team. She thinks that it is important to help students learn to be responsible members of society and that one part of it is “actions have consequences.” The school implemented good behavior field trips years ago, no pink slip (homework notices sent home to parents) parties, good behavior contracts, and academic awards every quarter for most improvement or helping hands (doing something to help the school community). These things were in place prior to the implementation of PBIS and it seems like PBIS just added key words (Respect, Opportunity, Citizenship, Kindness, and Safety – DBMS ROCKS). Leslie said that it is a superimposed language, where the idea is what matters, not necessarily the words that one uses.

She displays the ROCKS poster in her classroom, and admits that she should try to do a better job of incorporating the language into her classroom, to help the students connect more strongly to it metacognitively. Leslie said she could ask students: “Is that showing respect?” or question them “Are you using that opportunity?” more, but admits to paying little attention to these program keywords. As a result of the program, she had to give her mentoring class a presentation on kindness during their Good Works unit, which would not have been how she would have chosen to spend the time with the kids.

Leslie described the identification and intervention of students not responding to the behavioral program as one of the weaker aspects of the PBIS program, in her opinion, because when students are identified, there does not appear to be a lot of follow up on their problem behavior. Behavior issues are dealt with promptly, but the students who struggle with turning in homework in a timely manner, if at all, and achieving academic success are the ones who lack the intervention support. Some of these

students will not be able to succeed in a regular school and may end up referred to the Littleton Academy, an alternative school program.

She thinks that at the middle school level the program has a lot of possibilities and could be really positive, if it was not so focused on furthering the language of the program. She noted how many teachers use some gimmicks to prompt student participation, but the key was not to take the gimmick seriously, and to show this to the students as well, and not to rely on it for student participation or as an incentive tool. She sometimes gives out stickers as prizes, or students are able to ring a large bell for incorporating vocabulary words into their speech or discussions. She does not do this regularly, nor does she place a lot of emphasis on these “rewards”; she treats them as another way to encourage participation, but does not rely on these as a way to gain participation. She says that the students respond to it, but like most things, they are not meant to be a mainstay in the classroom, and as the school year progresses, and her classroom community is built, these are some of the things that phase out.

A community “is constructed over time by people with a common purpose who come to know and trust each other” (Kohn, p. 109) and community building is one of the precepts of the PBIS program, although its implementation stresses conforming to a norm through a system of rewards or consequences to develop it, rather than creating one based on trust. Many schools utilizing PBIS have acronyms or other symbols in place to remind students and faculty of the core values the school community is subscribing to, such as Littleton High School’s (LHS) and Daisy Bronson Middle School’s (DBMS) **ROCKS: Respect, Opportunity, Citizenship, Kindness, Safety** (DBMS and LHS Student Handbooks, 2006). These values are ones that most schools would

endorse. It is hard to argue with LHS's statement regarding their behavioral expectations for high school students:

As students approach high school age, they should exhibit mature behavior and, in turn, be more accountable for the consequences of their actions. The new rights and freedom acquired as the student approaches adulthood always carry with them the added measure of responsibility. Our students shall engage in conduct that fosters positive school atmosphere and does not disrupt the school purpose. (LHS)

Kohn (2006) is not a supporter of this type of program. He cautions against using rewards as an incentive because he sees the programs as “not really intended to help students become “responsible” or “good citizens””, saying that rewards function like punishments and are “only [to] manipulate someone’s actions” (Kohn, p.34). His argument is it is essential to “work *with* children to solve problems and promote community... [instead of trying] to make students behave in whatever ways the adults demand” (Kohn, p. 138). This is one of the central arguments made against PBIS implementation and this argument’s focus on partnering with students to foster student development makes it hard to disagree with.

I observed two teachers of different classes in differing grade levels and conducted an informal interview with one teacher at Lisbon Regional School (LRS), a small K-12 school located in a predominately Caucasian, rural region of northern New Hampshire. The school has under 400 students in the entire K-12 structure. This is a school where grades K-12 physically coexist, sharing not only physical space (including, but not limited to, gymnasium, and cafeteria), but administrative and support staff as well. A lot of senior high students serve as tutors or additional classroom supports

during various blocks or terms, and the high school National Honor Society has members acting in Big Brother/Sister roles to primary school students. These factors would make a school-wide behavior management/discipline plan seem natural, especially when the low staff turnover ratio, and low student body changes are added into the mix. Most students attending in primary grades remain in this school until graduation.

There are two influxes of students that feed into the school, one in grade 3 when students from Landaff's Blue School join the student body and again in 7th when one or two students from Bath Village School join. Other than these two "influxes" the student body remains relatively stable, many of the families are multiple generation residents of the community. Lisbon Regional was one of the first two cohorts of schools in the state to implement the program. Although the school is a K-12 school, the program was originally implemented only for grades 7-12; within the last few months the school has begun implementing the program at the K-6 level, making it a school-wide initiative. The K-6 grouping was part of a more recent cohort, and made the move to be more cohesive with the high school practices. I observed a sixth grade Language Arts/Science class, taught by a first year Language Arts teacher, John, although a veteran middle school teacher (with a concentration in science); and an eleventh grade college prep high school English class, taught by a veteran teacher who will be retiring in a year after over twenty years of teaching middle school and high school English, Alice.

The observations looked at how students behaved in class and how the teacher responded to disruptive and/or inappropriate student behaviors, as well as acceptable

and desired student behaviors. It also looked at how the students responded to the teacher's direction.

In the middle school classroom that I observed, there was a visible presence of rewards, Jolly Ranchers, but the teacher, John, did not offer these every day or every time. There were consequences for not being prepared or for being disruptive, including a loss of recess or a meeting in the hall with the teacher. John taught at a fairly high energy level, at times, reminiscent of an auctioneer, but the class responded to it well. They responded to his questions, and frequently added their own.

For another observation, I observed one of my former English teachers, Alice. I remember her classes being some of the ones in which I was most engaged, and learned the most. When I was in high school, there was no PBIS, yet, it was a class where behavior was rarely an issue, unlike some of my other high school classes, including other English classes. I found myself being drawn into her lesson during my observation. There were students who were disengaged, or would engage in side conversations, but most of the time the majority of the class was drawn into the discussion on first East of Eden, and then Gatsby. She managed her class very subtly, by passing out papers to check on how on task groups were staying, asking questions, pausing to gain attention in her lecture and redirecting them to the tasks she wanted them to accomplish. In the final minutes of the class, when they were moving onto some in-class silent reading time, she did remind them that they should be quiet by speaking quietly and shh'ing at them when some continued chatting. Within a couple of minutes, the class was completely silent and most appeared to be doing the reading as evidenced by occasional whispered questions. There was no talk of consequences, either good or bad: it was an environment where the teacher appeared to be respected, as well

as the students. Very few students raised their hands during the lecture or class discussion on the work, yet they found ways to respectfully interrupt to ask questions and participate in their discussions. It was an even give and take between the teacher and her class, and it made me wonder if programs are used to help teachers who do not feel comfortable offering students a portion of control within their class, or trusting that an environment in which students questions and thoughts are welcome and treated with respect will help create the results the programs are designed to do.

Leslie, a fifteen year veteran middle school English teacher, was interviewed at Daisy Bronson Middle School (DBMS) in Littleton, NH. This school has been the location of her entire teaching career. Littleton is one town away from Lisbon, but has the distinction of being the economic and business center for the North Country, while Lisbon's population is largely dependent on the two industrial companies in town and in the neighboring community, as well as being a financially poorer town. DBMS is a seventh and eighth grade school. It is currently part of the same School Administrative Unit (SAU) as LRS, but both schools are in separate districts and have different school boards. The Littleton school district, made up of three schools, Lakeway Elementary (K-6), DBMS (7-8), and Littleton High School (9-12) will be forming its own SAU at the end of this school year. DBMS adopted PBIS three years ago, with the other two district schools, Lakeway and Littleton High (LHS). There are approximately 140 students within the middle school, creating an average class size of 20 students. Other teachers who offered input included a math teacher who has been with the school for eight years, a paraprofessional, active in both DBMS and LHS, and a math special education instructor from LRS.

Leslie's interview was conducted at the completion of the school day in her classroom. I conducted it as an informal discussion exploring whether the program supported/detracted from her teaching, whether any aspects of the program were in place within their classroom prior to the program's implementation, how they feel it is functioning within their class, how it relates back to their own practice and philosophy, and the role of rewards within their classroom. I also asked about the perception of it within the school, in application, consistency and impact/effectiveness on student behavior. Additional questions included whether there has been any change in the number of students removed from the classroom for behavior and what steps the teacher takes to mediate/prevent this from occurring.

As I spent time in the classrooms and met with the teachers, as well as continued to substitute within the different schools, one common thread emerged. Since I started this research project, and before, I have been observing and taking notes, sometimes mental, on how teachers' manage their classes. Part of this is driven by my own experience in front of a classroom, both as the teacher and as a substitute, part as I develop my own classroom management skills, and also as I look at the programs that schools use to motivate or discipline students for acceptable or unacceptable behavior. Some teachers are wonderful to substitute for because they leave real lesson plans and clear expectations of how they manage their classes. Those substituting experiences are frequently my most enjoyable, despite the grade level or subject matter. Classroom management is not a big issue and it is easy to maintain the class routine.

The classes I dread are the ones that there are movies, no sub plans, or unclear expectations of what the teacher expects the students to work on. Those are the classes where class management becomes an issue and I walk out at the end of the day with a

pounding headache and resolved to leave good sub plans when I am absent from the classroom. They are frequently classes that have very low student expectations I find, as I talk to the students, become more familiar with the teachers, and attend these classes in paraprofessional or observational roles.

When I am in the classroom in one of these other roles, I observe how the students and teacher behave, how they stay on task, get prompted to return to task, etc. Often they don't behave that much better for the teacher than they did for me, no matter what my experience. It also allows me to use the prompts that they are used to in their class if I substitute for that teacher again. One teacher uses a follow my directions type of prompting, "if you can hear my voice" to resettle her class, while another teacher might clap twice and wait for the students to echo it. Others will wait quietly until students notice that class is paused until they reengage. Often how the teacher handles the material determines the level of student engagement and the frequency of off-task behavior.

I do not know if programs are the answer. I recognize that they are designed to treat a problem, but I find in a classroom where good teaching practices are established and where the student is recognized as a person that they aren't really helping impact the classroom environment that already exists. Perhaps I was erroneous in selecting engaging and responsive teachers as my subjects. Perhaps these are the teachers that have the least need for the program, because they recognize and have already adapted their teaching to foster the student attributes and behavior that they desire in their classrooms. Or maybe what I am discovering is that it isn't necessarily the name of the program that matters, but how the teacher views, treats, and responds to the students.

PBIS and other behaviorism programs reduce the focus on teacher modeling behaviors, relying more on obedience driven theories (McCormick & Pressley, 1997).

The answer to successful classroom management and school discipline does not lie solely in one program, because there are going to be students who do not respond to the one currently in use. As a teacher it is important to understand and adapt to programs that are mandated or implemented by administration and utilize them to ensure the best learning environment possible for our students. It is essential that we examine what our goals are and consider whether the program fosters student development that will encourage our students to maintain socially responsible and aware behaviors long after they leave our classrooms; with the focus on external controls rather than self reflection, it seems unlikely that PBIS really meets that need.

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