

# Managing Classrooms and Challenging Behavior: Theoretical Considerations and Critical Issues

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classroom management, social dynamics, evidence-based practice, coaching, challenging behavior

In the past two decades, the development of schoolwide positive behavior intervention support (SWPBIS) programs has made a significant impact on efforts to address challenging behavior in schools, including the reduction of students' discipline referrals and suspensions (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010) and an increase in teachers' efficacy to address problem behavior in the classroom (Ross, Romer, & Horner, 2012). Building from the principles of applied behavior analysis, a multi-tiered model of prevention, rigorous universal screening, and the integration of behavioral and education practices, SWPBIS is an organizational framework and set of intervention approaches designed to enhance a school's capacity to promote positive behavior in all students (Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010). Although SWPBIS provides an invaluable foundation for effective classroom management, there continues to be a critical need for research that focuses on the interplay between strategies teachers use to manage the general classroom context and more intensive intervention approaches to promote productive classroom behaviors in students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD; Farmer, Farmer, & Brooks, 2010; Lewis, Jones, Horner, & Sugai, 2010).

Accordingly, the goal of this special issue is to highlight ongoing programs of research that provide new insights into how teachers manage the classroom context as well as innovative approaches for working across universal, selected, and targeted approaches to support students with or at risk of EBD. In this introduction, we provide a synthesis of behavioral, ecological, and social interactional perspectives to outline a conceptual framework for the management of classrooms within the SWPBIS era. Building from this theoretical foundation, research on the management of behavior at both the classroom and individual student levels is discussed and critical issues are identified. From this lens, the five articles in this special

issue are briefly reviewed and implications for future intervention research are considered.

## Theoretical Foundations of Managing the Individual Within the Context

With the growth of SWPBIS, schools are better positioned to manage the behavior of students with EBD in various contexts including general education classes. Three components of SWPBIS help facilitate teachers' capacities to address challenging behavior. First, SWPBIS involves the establishment of explicit schoolwide rules and expectations for general classroom activities as well as settings and situations throughout the school where there is an increased probability for behavior problems. Second, SWPBIS provides a framework to promote both consistency and collaboration across teachers, administrators, and related services personnel. Third, SWPBIS programs emphasize teaching and reinforcing positive behavior rather than punishing problem behavior (Horner et al., 2010; Lewis et al., 2010).

Although SWPBIS provides a strong operational structure from which to organize classroom management, it does not provide general guides for how teachers go about managing individual students with challenging behavior within the broader context of managing the entire class. Accordingly, the aim of this section is to integrate behavioral, ecological, and social interactional perspectives to

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outline a conceptual framework that should help guide teachers as they manage the behavior of students with EBD in daily classroom activities.

Behavioral principles are at the core of effective classroom management. From a behavioral psychology perspective, classroom behavior is evoked, maintained, and shaped by its antecedents and consequences (Lane et al., 2012). More specifically, behaviors are strengthened when a stimulus (antecedent) is followed by a response (behavior) that results in an outcome (consequence) that increases the likelihood of the future occurrence of the behavior in similar conditions (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007). This process of strengthening the probability of the behavior is known as reinforcement. Behaviors are positively reinforced when they serve to obtain or achieve a desired consequence, and they are negatively reinforced when they serve to avoid or escape a negative outcome (Umbreit, Ferro, Liaupsin, & Lane, 2006). From this perspective, to manage a student's behavior in the classroom, it is necessary for the teacher to be aware of both the antecedent conditions that elicit the targeted behavior and the consequences that support its continuing occurrence. If the goal is to replace a challenging behavior, it is necessary for the teacher to carefully manage both the antecedents and the consequences of this contingency such that the desired behavior will be evoked by the antecedent condition and will be followed by a consequence that strengthens its future occurrence whenever the antecedent condition is presented (Lane et al., 2012).

An ecological perspective is also critical for understanding the management of individual students within the context of the classroom. From an ecological framework, youth develop and function within a complex system of contexts that include the peer group, classroom, and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). An important aspect of developmental adjustment involves coordinating the attributes, capacities, and skills of the individual with the demands, roles, and expectations of the ecology (Cairns & Cairns, 1994). Reflecting this vantage, a central tenet of an ecological approach for the treatment of EBD posits that challenging behavior does not rest within the child or the ecology but in the interaction between the two (Hobbs, 1966). Therefore, from an ecological approach to intervention, it is necessary for teachers to manage and structure the classroom environment in a way that promotes the successes and strengths of the student and that reduces contextual factors that contribute to her or his challenging behaviors (Farmer et al., 2010; Reinke & Herman, 2002).

A social interactional perspective of behavioral development is a third framework that can serve as a central guide for promoting effective classroom management (Farmer, Lane, Lee, Hamm, & Lambert, 2012). Operating as a bridge between behavioral and ecological frameworks, social interactional theory focuses on how individuals coordinate their actions with each other in ways that support, sustain,

and transform their own behaviors (Farmer, Xie, Cairns, & Hutchins, 2007). Based on social learning theory, a social interactional approach helps clarify how daily interactions between two individuals elicit mutually reinforcing patterns that consolidate the expression of specific behaviors (Patterson, 1979). There are three distinct ways that individuals synchronize their behavior in social interactions: imitation, reciprocity, and complementarity (Cairns & Cairns, 1994). With imitation, one individual engages in a behavior and the other uses that behavior as a model for the performance of her or his own behavior. In the case of reciprocity, the two individuals involved in the interaction respond to each other in similar ways that elicit and reinforce common behaviors. In contrast, in complementary interactions the two individuals have different levels of status and forms of behaviors, but the behavior of each is necessary for the behavior of the other (i.e., bully–victim; leader–follower). The different forms of social synchrony can promote productive behavior in the classroom; however, these peer processes can also elicit and reinforce challenging behaviors (Farmer et al., 2007). From a social interactional perspective, it is necessary for teachers not only to focus on the challenging behavior of a specific student but also to be aware of how other students may contribute to the behavior through processes of imitation, reciprocity, and complementarity.

The behavioral, ecological, and social interactional perspectives come together to yield a comprehensive framework to guide the simultaneous management of students with challenging behavior and the classroom context in which they are embedded. First, teachers should be aware that classroom activities and events may serve as antecedents that evoke challenging behavior for some students. Thus, while it is important to have consistent structures and strategies to make the environment predictable and understandable for students, it may be necessary to identify how some activities serve as a catalyst for challenging behavior for specific students and to adapt the activity or context in a way that promotes such students' productive behavior while reducing the occurrence of their problem behavior. This may involve modifying both instructional and non-instructional activities, as well as changing aspects of the classroom context that may contribute to the problem behavior. Second, in addition to managing antecedent conditions that may trigger problem behavior, it is necessary for teachers to also be aware of consequences that reinforce specific behaviors. Although it is important to understand how a problem behavior is being reinforced, it is also critical to determine responses that reinforce the desired behavior. On this count, rather than focusing exclusively on removing the reinforcement for the problem behavior, a positive approach to behavior management involves structuring the context to promote the student's successful performance of the desired behavior and ensuring that the consequences of this

behavior reinforce the future performance of the behavior. Third, in addition to managing the academic and behavioral context, teachers must be aware of peer influences in the classroom. As suggested by a social interactional perspective, classmates can both elicit and reinforce each other's behavior. Working across behavioral, ecological, and social interactional perspectives, teachers can structure the classroom social ecology to use peers to model and reinforce productive classroom behavior in targeted students. To do this, it is necessary to understand classroom social dynamics and to use this knowledge to guide behavioral and ecologically focused management strategies.

### **Critical Issues in Behavior Management**

The synthesis of behavioral, ecological, and social interactional perspectives underscores the complexity of managing the general classroom context while also supporting the classroom adaptation of individual students with challenging behavior. There are a range of implications of this perspective for managing the daily activities of the classroom. However, for the purposes of this special issue, the current discussion will center on three issues that we believe are critical for understanding how to support teachers as they work to effectively manage both the classroom and individual students who present challenging behaviors. These critical issues are as follows: multiple domains of functioning in the classroom; professional development activities to support the use of evidence-based practices in "real world" conditions; and the management of classroom social dynamics. Each of these issues is outlined below.

#### *Managing Across Multiple Domains of Classroom Functioning*

Youth develop as an integrated whole, and it is not appropriate to consider one domain of functioning without a corresponding focus on how other relevant domains impact the domain of interest (Cairns & Cairns, 1994). The importance of this point for the current discussion is that students experience three distinct but interrelated tasks that impact their overall functioning in the classroom. First, they are expected to be engaged in instructional activities and to learn new academic concepts and skills. Second, students are expected to follow classroom rules and expectations and to regulate their own behavior in a way that does not disrupt the instructional process. Third, students are aggregated with other children, and they are expected to negotiate social interactions with peers and to get along with each other. When a student has difficulty in one of these domains, her or his functioning in other domains is likely to be negatively impacted. Therefore, to effectively manage both the classroom and individual students, teachers must coordinate

strategies across the academic (see Conroy, Sutherland, Snyder, & Marsh, 2008), behavioral (see Farmer et al., 2006; Reinke & Herman, 2002), and social (see Farmer, Lines, & Hamm, 2011) domains.

#### *Professional Development and Classroom Management in "Real World" Conditions*

In recent years, there has been a strong emphasis on promoting the use of interventions that have been shown to be effective in controlled research studies (Stormont, Reinke, & Herman, 2011). Although randomized control trials can demonstrate the efficacy of interventions and effectiveness research can provide information about issues in taking such interventions to scale, there is often a tremendous lag between the development of interventions, efficacy and effectiveness research, and the diffusion and translation of evidence-based interventions into standard daily classroom practices (Cappella, Reinke, & Hoagwood, 2011; Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, & Goel, 2011). In addition, teachers may not perceive that their preferred practices are ineffective, and they may believe that a specific evidence-based practice is not relevant to their own circumstances or responsive to the types of issues they experience in the classroom (Truscott et al., 2012). These views can be compounded by the prescriptive nature and strict focus on implementation fidelity that is often associated with evidenced-based professional development, and teachers may approach such training with skepticism and resistance.

To complicate matters further, in response to federal and state education reform initiatives, school districts often adopt multiple academic curricular, social/behavioral support, school safety, and discipline programs and practices. As a result, teachers may feel overloaded with professional development training that they are not sure is applicable to their classroom, and they may experience confusion as they are presented with information and strategies that seem contradictory or incompatible. Within this context, it is understandable when teachers approach evidenced-based practices with apprehension and become overwhelmed and unresponsive to training they perceive as being inconsistent with their own experiences and the needs of students.

Therefore, it is critical that evidence-based interventions and corresponding professional development programs are "real world" centered and are designed to be individualized and adapted to teachers' specific circumstances. To do this, professional development training and classroom management consultation should focus on contextual responsiveness and general implementation criteria rather than on lockstep approaches (see Cappella et al., 2011; Farmer et al., 2013; Truscott et al., 2012). Contextually responsive approaches involve consultation strategies that begin by assessing teachers' current practices and capabilities, the available resources and needs in the classroom and school,

a determination of what works and what does not, and the identification of how evidence-based approaches can best be integrated into the daily classroom management structure. Building from this information, professional development training and consultation can be adapted to the unique strengths, weaknesses, and needs of specific teachers and the school in general. In addition to adapting training and consultation approaches to the context of the classroom and school, it is helpful to focus on the general implementation criteria of the evidence-based practice that is being trained. Unlike instructional tasks that tend to focus on very contained activities that are typically responsive to a highly structured and prescriptive format, classrooms are fluid entities that involve the ongoing interactions of many students who have diverse needs and abilities, and who influence one another's behavior. Thus, while it is necessary to have clear routines and structures for guiding the management of the classroom, it is also important to recognize that the management of specific events and behaviors of students is necessarily a dynamic process that cannot be easily scripted or prescribed. Consequently, efforts to train teachers in evidence-based classroom management techniques should emphasize the general and essential core components of the strategy and should center on working through how the practice can be used in relation to other practices and characteristics of the classroom.

### *Managing Classroom Social Dynamics*

In the classroom and school ecology, children develop preferences for specific classmates, and they tend to organize their social interactions around peers with whom they share common behaviors, interests, and values (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). As children's affiliative choices consolidate, a social structure is established that is composed of distinct peer groups or cliques (Cairns & Cairns, 1994). Often, these social structures and peer groups become hierarchically organized with some students having higher status and influence than others. Within this context, students develop distinct social roles and social interactional patterns and may engage in a variety of problematic behaviors to protect their social position or to gain favor with high status peers (Adler & Adler, 1998; Evans & Eder, 1993). These social dynamics may promote social aggression, bullying, and disruptive behavior (Rodkin, 2011) and may also foster a normative peer culture in which academic engagement and effort are not valued and are perceived to be a social risk (Hamm, Schmid, Farmer, & Locke, 2011). However, such dynamics can vary greatly from classroom to classroom (Garandau, Ahn, & Rodkin, 2011), and teachers can take an active role in managing these social processes and peer group cultures (Gest & Rodkin, 2011; Hamm, Hoffman, & Farmer, 2012). Specifically, teachers are responsible for managing the classroom environment at two distinct levels. First, teachers

serve as an authority to guide and enforce rules and expectations to support the effective functioning of the classroom. Second, teachers can also serve as a manager of the classroom peer ecology by carefully monitoring and facilitating children's social interactions and opportunities and by setting the tone for the emergent social system and peer culture by the relationships that he or she establishes with students (see Bierman, 2011; Farmer et al., 2011; Kindermann, 2011; Rodkin & Gest, 2011).

### **The Current Studies**

This special issue brings together five articles that build on behavioral, ecological, and social interactional frameworks to address key issues in managing problem behavior including the management of multiple domains of classroom functioning, the delivery of professional development to promote the implementation of evidenced based practices, and the management of classroom social dynamics. Each of these articles is briefly described below with a focus on their distinctive contributions for research and practice.

In the first article, Reinke and colleagues (2014) describe the coaching model embedded within the Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management program. The goal of this selected approach is to support teachers in the effective use of universal strategies and in the development and implementation of behavior support plans for students with challenging behaviors who are not responsive to universal strategies alone. The coach conducted direct observations in classrooms, provided guidance on the use of universal strategies, and engaged in action planning and performance feedback on behavior support plans for challenging students. Results indicated that as compared with students with challenging behavior who did not receive behavior support plans, targeted students who received behavioral support demonstrated decreased rates of disruptive behavior, increased prosocial behavior, and a trend toward improved on-task behavior.

With an emphasis on implementation and sustainability in real world conditions, the second article uses a coaching model to support teachers in the use of the Good Behavior Game (GBG). In this mixed-methods design, Poduska and Kurki (2014) conducted a capacity building study that involved training local professional development staff in the GBG coaching model. The focus of this study centered on the level of support teachers received from coaches across the year, differences in patterns and needs of support across coaches and teachers, and teachers' and coaches' perceptions of training and intervention implementation. Results suggest that coaches and teachers were generally able to follow the expected delivery schedule for training, but there was considerable variability in documentation, scheduling and keeping coaching visits, and maintaining adherence to key aspects of implementation of the GBG (i.e., check, comment, redirect,

and conducting probes). Teachers reported favorable impressions of the GBG and also indicated that they developed strong relationships with coaches. Coaches reported that flexibility of scheduling was important and that teachers were less motivated when their principal did not demonstrate support for the GBG. Furthermore, coaches indicated a need for the scope and sequence of training to be fully aligned with the implementation schedule and for coach/trainer telephone conferences to focus on specific topics at the time that they are most relevant to implementation.

Woodbridge and colleagues (2014) address the research to practice gap in the third article by examining factors that impact the scale-up of the *First Step to Success* program, a school-home evidence-based practice that involves a coaching model to support parents and teachers in the use of effective behavioral interventions with challenging students. These investigators used the Practical, Robust Implementation and Sustainability Model (PRISM) to assess how the *First Step* intervention interacts with participants to influence the reach, adoption, implementation, efficacy, and sustainability of the program. Using the Chicago site as a “lessons learned” case study of this national investigation, five factors were identified as critical in the implementation and sustainability process. First, clear evidence of an intervention’s effectiveness is necessary for teachers and administrators to sustain the implementation of a program in their school. Second, it is necessary to have a training and support infrastructure that is accessible and flexible to be responsive to the circumstances of the program’s participants and implementers. Third, activities and relationships between teachers and coaches must be supported by school administrators who should provide leadership to ensure that the intervention program complements other programs and policies that impact the context of teachers’ classroom management practices. Fourth, for teachers to buy into a secondary level intervention such as *First Step*, they must be willing to invest in an approach that focuses on one student while enlisting and managing the support of both parents and peers to reinforce and help sustain the student’s appropriate behaviors. Fifth, program implementers must continuously document, examine, and communicate about the adherence, quality, and dosage of the intervention implementation.

The fourth article examines teachers’ practices and beliefs pertaining to the management of social dynamics in elementary classrooms. In a longitudinal study involving observational and survey assessments at three time points across a school year, Gest, Madill, Zadzora, Miller, and Rodkin (2014) collected peer nominations of students’ social roles, students’ self-reported perceptions of the peer community and sense of bonding to school, teacher ratings of students’ social behavior, and observations of *Responsive Teaching* (i.e., Positive Climate, Teacher Sensitivity, Quality of Feedback, and Instructional Learning Formats). In addition, at the end of the school year, teachers rated how often they used various strategies to manage classroom

social dynamics on three pre-defined domains (i.e., Social Status Patterns, Friendship, and Aggressive/Mean behavior). They also rated the importance of the management of these domains for promoting effective instruction and the management of classroom behavior. Results indicated that in classrooms where teachers reported more use of social dynamics management strategies, students tended to display more positive patterns of social, behavioral, and academic adjustment across the school year. Furthermore, teachers reported they were most concerned about aggressive/mean behavior and tended to endorse both behavioral and peer group management strategies to address problems of aggression. In classrooms where teachers reported using these strategies less frequently, students reported greater peer aggression by the end of the school year.

In the final article, Motoca and colleagues (2014) investigate the use of directed consultation as a professional development delivery framework for process-oriented and context-focused manualized interventions. Reflecting the goal of promoting the adoption of evidence-based practices into the daily management of the classroom, directed consultation consists of four components: pre-intervention observations and interviews with school staff, professional development workshops, online training modules, and team-level implementation meetings. In this pilot study, directed consultation was used to train teachers in the Supporting Early Adolescent Learning and Social Support (SEALS) model—a multiple component intervention program that involved training teachers in the simultaneous management of the academic, behavioral, and social contexts students experience as they transition to middle school. Observations were conducted in seven intervention and seven control schools. Compared with teachers in control schools, intervention teachers used more positive feedback and less negative feedback and redirection. Furthermore, teachers in intervention classrooms provided more effective use of classroom structure, feedback to students, behavior management, communication with students, group and social dynamics management, and motivation strategies.

Collectively, these articles yield a valuable synthesis of core aspects for training teachers in the management of classrooms that include students with challenging behaviors. Across most of these articles, there is an emphasis on training activities that go beyond traditional workshop formats and include a focus on some type of coaching and ongoing support for implementation and sustainability. Furthermore, these studies stress the need to link the relevance of intervention strategies to the experiences of teachers and their students. Likewise, these articles demonstrate the need for ecologically sensitive training approaches and highlight the need to tailor training activities and/or intervention strategies to fit with the classroom and school culture.

Although these articles share a common vision and have similar core components, when considered together, these

studies underscore the perspective that manualized classroom and behavior management strategies are not a “one-size fits all” or lock-step process. There is a need for dynamic training and intervention support approaches that meet core implementation criteria of evidence-based interventions while simultaneously being responsive to the skills and competencies of the teacher, the policies and practices of the school, and the characteristics of the classroom and school peer context as well as targeted students with challenging behavior.

The implications of this final point for research are quite daunting. In addition to efficacy studies to validate the impact of specific strategies and implementation studies that focus on fidelity of evidence-based practice in typical conditions, it is necessary to recognize that behavior management is a moving target that requires matching and adapting strategies to the context and circumstances in which they are used. This suggests that trained specialists are an integral part of the process. Such specialists must be able to support schools in the delivery of universal programs, understand a range of evidence-based classroom and individually focused behavior management strategies, and be trained to systemically direct a dynamic intervention process that is customized but that maintains the integrity of active components of the intervention. To do this, it is necessary to have research-to-practice translational studies that not only focus on factors that enhance fidelity of implementation but also identify the essential or core components of evidence-based practices, the parameters for adapting the strategies to the circumstances of the student and the ecology, and the manualization of dynamic training processes that guide how intervention specialists not only support the general uptake of the intervention but also direct how to modify the program delivery to optimize its effectiveness within the given context. While such an approach in some ways seems antithetical to the concept of evidence-based intervention, the current studies demonstrate the need and promise of research that bridges the research to practice gap and promotes the use of scientifically supported behavior management interventions in “real world” settings.

### Authors' Note

The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

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