

The “Problem” of Behavior

Positive Behavior and Intervention Support (PBIS) is a behaviorist system focused on teaching the right behavior for the educational setting. To work effectively, the PBIS system must be implemented consistently in the classroom, which puts behavior management on teachers. “PBIS is a proactive approach to support prosocial behavior in school. The implementation of PBIS involves building the capacity of teachers to embed the teaching and monitoring of social skills into the curriculum” (Yeung et al, 2016) Yeung et al. also states that tier one interventions; the teaching of expectations and behavior at the classroom level is effective for 80% of the school's population.

The school I work for uses PBIS systems to manage behavior and improve and increase the instances of academic behavior throughout the school system. The PBIS system relies on the fidelity of teacher reinforcement, which is inconsistent in this school and throughout the school system. Teachers I have observed rely on doling out consequences to shape behavior rather than using instructional time to teach behavior and correct off-task behavior. Much of the time the consequences given are write-ups or referrals to the principal’s office or other administration. Once a certain level of referrals is reached, suspension and even expulsion are recommended. From my observation, students who receive one suspension are more likely to be suspended again, thus reducing the students’ access to academic instruction. This is undermining what PBIS is set up to improve: instructional time and access to students.

Analyzing the system

PBIS is meant to solve the problem of increasing academic achievement by creating an environment conducive to learning. Outcomes tend to be better for students on average than at the local Public Schools due to lower class size and more individualized attention from teachers. Being a public charter school that reserves the right to expel students who do not behave or perform. Improving overall achievement amongst students is the largest priority. The impetus for PBIS implementation is therefore to increase academic achievement through improving academic and on-task behavior in the student body.

The system set into place by PBIS requires community, student, and teacher involvement to set the behavior guidelines. The student body comes from the inner city of Akron, which has a majority minority population. This is also a Title I school, meaning that the whole student body is eligible for free lunch given their families economic status. This is quite different from the teaching staff and administration, which is of the majority population and has a middle-class economic standing. The disparity between the student community's lived experience and that of the staff requires collaboration for making behavioral guidelines. When the school has buy-in from student families, students, and the community it can equal better behavioral outcomes. Rules become less of an edict and more of a community standard set by and for the learning community. The school system relies on PBIS and the only collaboration between staff and community are notes home to parents through an electronic communication system used to share information with parents. The lack of community and student involvement in setting and agreeing to

behavioral guidelines can be seen as oppressive which leads to several feedback loops but none as disenfranchising as the writeup- suspension feedback loop.

Feedback Loop Analysis

A main feedback loop that disenfranchises at least twenty percent of the student body; increasing writeups lead to increasing suspensions. This escalation of consequences or feedback loop reinforces missing academic time leading to poor academic performance and outcomes for students at this school. The PBIS system, as implemented misses the mark it aims for. This unending feedback loop can end in the mental model that these students cannot be helped, cannot achieve, or inner-city kids need to be controlled.

Double Loop Learning with Restorative Justice

As a teacher myself, I consider anything beyond tier one supports unsustainable in the classroom. The pressure on teachers to deal with behavior beyond teaching what is expected and dealing with minor behavioral infractions is too much. There must be another option, or approach to behavior. With the intervention of Restorative Justice (RJ) through a trauma-informed lens, the feedback loop of increasing writeups and increasing suspensions can be mitigated. “You cannot learn from those you do not like,” Rite Pearson says in an inspirational TED Talk highlighting the relational aspects of learning. This goes against the do not smile until second semester attitudes that is still mistakenly carried by educators dealing with tough populations. Every student needs an advocate and someone, preferably a teacher, who believes in them.

RJ revolves around restoring the health and healing of communities and is adapted from indigenous practices. The effects of trauma cultural, social, economic do not stop at the entrance to the school (Parameswaran et al., 2023) RJ can start a process of healing the escalation of consequences and reducing the effects of the school-to-prison pipeline on underserved and underrepresented populations. The problem is a system of injustice that has been perpetuated from the top-down but should be healed from the bottom-up. “A Nation at Risk, together with Reagan’s war on drugs, set in motion the merging of prisons and schools under the guise of “getting tough” on education... A euphemism for “punishment,” sold to the public as high stakes testing, school choice, vouchers, charter schools, and school safety.” (Love, 2023)

Stakeholders

There have been many mentions of community, students, and staff throughout this analysis of the PBIS system. How do they all get onboard to start mitigating the escalation feedback loop? It must be shown through the data that the escalation of consequences and the behaviorist system of behavioral intervention is lacking the support that the other twenty percent of students need. The twenty percent that struggle even with PBIS Tier I supports. The data does not lie, and it can be leveraged to tell a new story.

Engaging Teachers, Staff, and Administration

Staff and administration need to see the data and be supported in changing to a hybrid PBIS/RJ system. Teaching staff, staff, and administration should be offered the chance to engage in open dialogue regarding bias and policy. The book ‘Punished for

Dreaming' by Bettina L. Love would be a great interventional support for teachers, staff, and administration who have lived experiences outside of their students' lived experiences. This book coupled with data, could be a turning point in empathy for employees.

Engaging Students, Families, and the Community

Students and their families should be included in setting expectations. The data should be shared with the community along with ideas for the path forward with RJ and PBIS. At every step in the implementation process the community should be referenced and checked with.

Data for Continued Evaluation

Data should be collected on the prevalence of suspensions and expulsions amongst students and the precipitating events. Qualitative and quantitative data should be collected to inform further decision making in RJ practices and reinforcing the double learning loop. Student and community sentiment about behavioral practices at school should also be gauged via surveys at regular intervals.

Further Investigation Needed

The best part of systems are the people in them. When relationships are highly valued in a system, collaborations and problem solving become easier. The “problem” of on-task academic behavior and resulting system was explored, but there are many questions and ideas left to be uncovered. The PBIS system is a result of a series of national policies and viewpoints that victimized black and brown students across the nation and

our attempt to correct the academic gaps created. As educators, we need to do more and go further into correcting the educational trauma inflicted on so many in the era of “reform.”

References

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