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An analysis of the use of evidence-based practices for handling aggressive behavior in special education classrooms

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**An Analysis of the use of Evidence-Based Practices for Handling Aggressive
Behavior in Special Education Classrooms**

By

Megan Lavengood

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Education

The College of Professional Studies
School of Education
California State University Monterey Bay

May 2007

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Action Thesis Signature Page

AN ANALYSIS OF THE USE OF EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR HANDLING
AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR IN SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSROOMS

BY

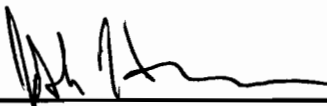
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Abstract

This thesis is a qualitative study designed to identify interventions that teachers are currently using in their classrooms to support students who are exhibiting aggressive behaviors, and to determine the reported effectiveness of these interventions. The interventions that teachers reported using were then evaluated in order to determine whether or not they are considered to be evidence-based as cited in the literature review. Interviews were conducted with ten special education teachers presently working with aggressive students. Participants were asked about which interventions they were using in the classroom and which interventions they had found to be successful and unsuccessful, as well as, whether or not they were aware of those that had been identified as evidence-based. The results showed that while most teachers reported using interventions which can be considered evidence-based, only half of the participants had chosen these strategies after completing a functional assessment. The results of this investigation indicate a need for additional training in conducting functional assessments and in linking evidence-based strategies to the results of a functional assessment.

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Chapter 1: Problem Statement

Introduction

Over the past twenty years student behavior has been one of the public's greatest concerns about schools and education (Korinek, 1993). Having to intervene with behavior problems consumes a great deal of the energy of teachers' and other school staff. The time consumed by handling even just one disruptive student often takes valuable teaching time away from not only that student, but sometimes the entire class. According to a poll of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), seventeen percent of teachers reported that they lost more than four hours per day due to problem behaviors, while nineteen percent claimed that they lost two to three hours each day (Walker, Ramsey & Gresham, 2003-2004).

Students with special needs, especially those with severe disabilities, are at increased risk of exhibiting problem behaviors, including those that involve aggression (Westling & Fox 2000). As a result, teachers who work with these students are in need of training and as much information as possible to effectively support students with these difficult behaviors. Although there are numerous resources devoted to behavior support, many teachers and other educational staff are still relying on traditional and punitive forms of disciplining students. The effectiveness of these methods of behavior support is questionable (Korinek, 1993). Classroom management plans based on students' needs are necessary for teachers to minimize the amount of teaching time they lose each day while dealing with behavior problems.

Background

The identification of effective behavior management interventions which have been identified as best practices for students with moderate to severe disabilities may be difficult for many teachers, since not all of the techniques work consistently in each unique situation. Often times several interventions must be tried before teachers are able to identify the one that is successful for the specific student (Reavis, Sweeten, Jenson, Morgan, Andrews & Fister, 1996). This is especially so for those in special education classrooms where teachers are often supporting students with a variety of disabilities, as well as with many different disruptive behaviors. While there is a great deal of literature and numerous programs which outline behavior management techniques, very little is known about which intervention strategies are actually being successfully used in classrooms to reduce aggressive behavior either on their own or in combination with others (Goldstein, Glick & Gibbs, 1998).

Most of the behavior problems facing special education teachers serving the moderate/severe population should be dealt with on an individual basis using the functional assessment process to develop behavior supports that target a behavior in a specific student. It is however, also important to have a classroom-wide system of behavior management in which all students participate. According to the Positive Behavior Support framework, there are three different levels of support (Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), 2007). These are: primary prevention, secondary prevention and tertiary prevention. Primary prevention includes school-wide or classroom-wide efforts to prevent problem behaviors from developing in the classroom. Secondary prevention involves providing more intensive support for students who are not responding to Primary Prevention strategies and need more targeted supports. The third level is called the tertiary level and involves using individualized strategies such as functional

behavioral assessments and support plans to focus on the needs of a student who is exhibiting challenging behaviors such as aggression (OSEP, 2007). This third level of support is the most intense and personalized of the three. My study will explore how each of these levels of support is used in special education classrooms which have aggressive students.

Statement of Problem and Purpose

The purpose of my research is to identify interventions that special education teachers report using in supporting students with aggressive behaviors and to evaluate their reported effectiveness. Additionally, these interventions will be evaluated in order to discern whether or not they are evidence-based. As a result of my research, I hope to be able to direct co-workers who are not using practices with successful outcomes to seek further training/information, thus resulting in more effective management of students and classrooms and fewer instances of aggressive behavior.

Personal Experience

This subject is of particular interest to me because I have been working in Special Education for ten years as both an instructional assistant and a teacher. During this time, I have worked with students exhibiting a variety of aggressive behaviors. In my own classroom I experience these types of behaviors on a daily basis. Often when severely aggressive behaviors occur, adults in the classroom have to engage in physically restraining the student. In addition to being a safety issue for both the students and classroom staff, having to restrain a student for anywhere from ten minutes to one hour takes time away from instruction. At times my entire classroom is at a standstill because four out of five staff members have to restrain a student.

Experiencing these issues has given me an interest in learning about different kinds of behavior supports, and also discovering which of these are actually being used successfully in classrooms similar to mine with actual students. It is possible that none of the teachers will be using evidence-based strategies. If this is the case, I will then focus on why these teachers are not using strategies which are supported by research and whether or not they perceive that their adapted strategies are working for them. Through my research I am hoping to expand my knowledge base of interventions and strategies that are actually being used and to improve my ability to better support students with aggressive behaviors in my own classroom. I hope to also be able to offer support to other teachers as a result of my research. I believe that this will help my students to be successful both in my classroom and in their future lives.

Definition of Key Terms

For the purpose of this study, certain key terms will be defined as follows:

Behavior – “Any observable and measurable act of an individual.” (Alberto & Troutman, 2003)

Functional Analysis – Documenting a functional relationship between the occurrence of problem behavior, antecedent, and consequence events through direct observation and the systematic manipulation of environmental events (Alberto & Troutman, 2003).

Functional Assessment: Also known as Functional Behavioral Assessment. The process of collecting information in order to develop hypothesis statements regarding the variables that maintain and predict problem behavior. Functional assessment strategies include indirect

assessment methods such as interviews and checklists, direct observation, and functional analysis (Alberto & Troutman 2003).

Aggression – “an act whose goal response is injury to an organism” (Alberto, Troutman, 2003)

Traditional/punitive forms of punishment – These forms of discipline include: corporal punishment, reprimands, school suspension, etc. (Goldstein, et. al., 1998)

Best practices –Best Practice is a management idea which asserts that there is a technique, method, process, activity, incentive or reward that is more effective at delivering a particular outcome than any other technique, method, process, etc. The idea is that with proper processes, checks, and testing, a project can be rolled out and completed with fewer problems and unforeseen complication (Wikipedia, 2007).

Moderate to Severe disability –A condition affecting a small percentage of the population, in which an individual who is in need of highly specialized education, social, psychological, and/or medical services because of the intensity or multiplicity of their physical, mental, or emotional problems (University of San Francisco, 2007)

Positive behavior supports – “A comprehensive set of strategies that are meant to redesign environments in such a way that problem behaviors are prevented or inconsequential, and to teach students new skills, making problem behaviors unnecessary” (University of San Francisco, 2007)

Problem Behavior - Behavior such as aggression, self-injury, property destruction, apathy, disruption, and screaming, which impede the learning of the student or the education of other students (University of San Francisco, 2007).

Reinforcer - A consequent stimulus that increases the probability a behavior will occur, or maintains the future rate of that behavior (University of San Francisco, 2007).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Special Education teachers are faced with students who exhibit a range of disabilities and problem behaviors on a daily basis. Although there are numerous behavior intervention strategies available, it may be difficult to determine which strategies will work best for their particular students. In evaluating different strategies it is important to look at what the function of the students' behaviors are (escape, attention getting, etc.) using empirically supported techniques such as direct observation, data collection and antecedents and consequences, etc. It is also important to then look at what strategies for supporting aggressive behaviors are considered to be best practices and have empirical support.

Problem behaviors such as aggression have been an important concern of researchers due to the serious impact these behaviors have on the lives of individuals who exhibit them (Pelios, Morren, Tesch & Axelrod, 1999). According to Pelios et. al., (1999) aggressive behaviors are not only problematic for the persons engaging in them, but also for society. These individuals, as both children and adults, are often placed in institutions where they are isolated from society due to their aggressive behaviors (Pelios, et. al., 1999). In addition to wanting to stop noncompliance and keep students on task, a teacher's use of effective behavior management strategies can improve student performance and improve their own positive interactions with students (Reavis, et. al., 1996).

The 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), required that behavior plans based on positive behavior supports be developed for students who exhibit behaviors that impede their learning or that of others around them. IEP teams must now consider strategies, including positive behavior supports and interventions in order to address

these types of problem behaviors for students with disabilities. To determine whether or not a student's behavior should be addressed, the IEP team must ask questions including: does the student need to learn new behaviors, skills or strategies, does the student exhibit behaviors that are unsafe or interfere with their learning environment, does the student require a behavior intervention plan (BIP), is the student's behavior related to their disability and does the student's behavior cause them to be routinely removed from the current classroom placement? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, the team must assess the present level of performance in this area and then develop goals and objectives for the IEP. If a student's behavior interferes with their own education, or that of others, a functional behavioral assessment must be conducted and a BIP must be developed for the student (Warger, 1999).

Even though there has been research determining evidence-based treatments for supporting students with aggressive behavior, very little is actually known about which of these strategies, used either on their own or in combination with others, actually decrease aggressive behavior (Goldstein, et. al., 1998). Most interventions are developed via the insight and experience of applied practitioners like teachers, school administrators or delinquency workers (Goldstein, et. al., 1998).

The purpose of my research is to review and identify behavior management interventions that are reportedly being used by teachers and which are considered to be best practices for addressing aggressive behaviors. This information was gathered through one-on-one interviews with special education teachers. Additionally, evidence-based interventions identified in the literature as being effective and appropriate for implementation in special education settings with students exhibiting aggressive behaviors were reviewed. The particular focus of this

investigation is on interventions suited for students with moderate to severe disabilities, specifically those in the middle school, high school and postsecondary age levels.

In researching behavior management and aggressive behaviors, I mainly used the Google search engine, and the ERIC database. In searching for journal articles and other information on my topic, I used terms such as Behavior Management, Classroom Behavior Supports, and Aggressive Behavior Supports. I also researched behavior assessments. Also included in my searches were terms such as best practices and evidence-based practices which I included to make sure that I was getting citations which had a scientific basis.

Determining the Factors That Contribute or Lead to Problem Behaviors Such as Aggression

Most researchers in the field of behavior analysis agree that behavior serves a purpose (Durand, 1990). Students of all ages in both regular and special education engage in behaviors which allow them to either gain access to something or to escape or avoid something. Additional reasons that these behaviors occur include communicating a need or some other message (Gable, Quinn, Rutherford, Howell & Hoffman, 2000). Other characteristics of problem behaviors are that they may occur within specific contexts or during certain types of activities. Since behavior serves a purpose, students' behaviors are most likely to change when they learn that another behavior or skill is more effective and/or efficient at obtaining the same outcomes (Gable, et al., 2000). Many researchers have suggested that some ways to make reinforcement-based procedures more successful is to begin by identifying events in the environment that maintain difficult behaviors and to then directly alter these factors (Carr, 1977; Iwata et. al., 1982/1994; Johnson & Baumeister, 1978). In light of this, pinpointing the causes of an individual's behavior, such as what they are trying to get, escape, avoid, or trying to communicate, can

provide the required information for developing effective strategies which are able to address the behaviors which are interfering with the individual's learning or safety (Gable, et al., 2000). This process, called functional assessment, has been identified in the literature as an evidence-based procedure for identifying the function of behavior and linking strategies to effectively address a multitude of problem behaviors (Carr, Horner, Turnbull, Marquis, McLaughlin, Magito, McAtee, Smith, Anderson, Ruef, Doolabh & Braddock, 1999). Furthermore, research indicates that reinforcement-based measures can be extremely effective when the functional characteristics of a treatment are coordinated with them, which in turn reduces the need for procedures which are punishment-based (Neef & Iwata, 1994). Functional assessment is a set of strategies and instruments used to gather information. This information is used to form a hypotheses based on what precedes the behavior and what happens after the behavior (Alberto & Troutman, 2003) This information and data will later help teachers determine what kinds of interventions they should use in order to deal with problem behaviors. When trying to determine which assessment to use with students exhibiting problem behaviors, it is important to take into consideration which assessments have been researched as being effective and having empirical support. Not having this theoretical framework often means that applied technology will become a blind process without long-term goals (Pelios, et. al., 1999).

Assessments can tell us several things about the students being observed. Functional assessment instruments can take into account factors such as biophysical, developmental, cognitive, and the physical-environmental variables, in order to facilitate an understanding of the problem behavior and then in guiding the development of behavior plans which are comprehensive (Sugai, Horner, Dunlap, Hieneman, Lewis, Nelson, Scott, Liaupsin, Sailor, Turnbull, Turnbull, Wickham, Reuf & Wilcox, 1999). According to Pelios (1999), by

conducting a functional analysis before treatment, we can often pinpoint the existing causes of the problem behavior. This allows for the design of a treatment plan that is tailored specifically to treat the problem behavior by withholding reinforcing consequences for problem behavior and at the same time teaching a behavior that has the same function and allows the individual access to the same reinforcer (Pelios, et.al., 1999). According to Pelios et. al. (1999), being able to identify the variables that maintain behaviors such as aggression increases the probability that treatment strategies will target these reinforcers.

Assessments for Determining the Functions of Problem Behaviors Such as Aggression

There are three different methods for conducting a functional assessment. These include: indirect methods, direct methods and functional analysis. Indirect methods involve the use of assessment strategies in which individuals provide their own impressions about student problem behavior, its antecedents and its consequences. This information is gathered through interviews, questionnaires, ratings scales, and setting-event inventories that look at a range of contextual variables. Additionally, daily schedules, the state of the individual's health and other anecdotal observations may also be examined (Carr, et. al., 1999).

Direct methods consist primarily of the direct observation of student behavior in the natural context. Direct or formal observations involve directly measuring behaviors through the use of A-B-C (Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence) sheets and scatter plots. These document sequential correlations between problem behaviors and specific situations and may also include time sampling and/or frequency counts (Carr, et al., 1999).

The third type of assessment is functional analysis. This kind of assessment

“...involves the systematic manipulations of the variables thought to control problem behavior and is carried out to test hypothesis about motivation” (Carr et al., 1999, p. 25). A functional analysis involves exposing the student to various environmental conditions, and then observing the levels of student behavior across conditions (Salend & Sylvestre). This allows for the collection of scientific evidence to confirm the function of student behavior.

While each of these methods of assessment is useful in determining an intervention for problem behaviors, the use of indirect and direct methods are more likely than functional analyses to be used in applied settings, such as the classroom (Lewis, 1995). The use of functional assessment has a promising database that supports its use in the selection of interventions for addressing problem behaviors (Lewis, 1995). It appears as though the use of a functional assessment prior to intervention increases the chances that reinforcement-based interventions for dealing with aggression will be selected, instead of those which are punishment-based (Pelios, 1999). Starting in the latter part of the 1970's and continuing today, the theory of functional assessment has been transformed into practical technology for guiding the development of interventions (Carr, et al., 1999). Functional Behavioral Assessment is considered best practice not only for behaviors which result in suspension and disciplinary action, but all other difficult behaviors (Sugai, et al., 1999).

Although many assessment tools have been developed to assess problem behavior, functional assessment is the only one which looks at the actual function that the behavior serves for the student, thus increasing the likelihood that successful interventions will be selected and implemented for that individual. In fact, research continues to show that the success of an intervention depends on two things: (1) an understanding of why the individual is behaving a certain way, and (2) the teaching of a replacement behavior that serves the same purpose or

function as the inappropriate one (Gable, et al., 2000). Understanding what drives a student to engage in a particular behavior is essential in the development of an effective positive behavior support plan individualized for that student (Gable, et al., 2000).

Evidence Based Behavior Strategies for Moderately & Severely Disabled Special Education Students Exhibiting Problem Behavior such as Aggression

Positive Behavior Support.

While there is limited evidence to support the use of behavior management techniques that are punishment-based, there is a great deal of evidence supporting the use of strategies which are proactive (Lewis, 1995). These strategies include: social skill instruction, differential reinforcement, and instructional modification to increase behavior that is appropriate (Lewis, 1995). Positive behavioral support is not a new intervention strategy, or a new theory of behavior. Instead it is an application of behaviorally-based systems for enhancing the ability of schools, families, and communities to design effective environments which will improve the fit or connection between research-validated practices and the environments in which teaching and learning occurs (Sugai, et al., 1999).

Research has shown that Positive Behavioral Support (PBS) is the most effective strategy for promoting and teaching appropriate behavior. While PBS may initially require more work and take longer to produce results in the long run, positive behavior support systems promote better teaching, learning, decision making and critical thinking in addition to encouraging more appropriate behavior (Korinek, 1993). The basis of PBS is that individuals who are having their needs met and who feel safe, accepted, recognized, cared for and involved in school are more likely to exhibit more appropriate behaviors (Korinek, 1993). Negative behavior on the other

hand, is often the result of not having one's needs met in the environment in which the inappropriate behaviors are occurring, or not having the skills to appropriately react to the events in the environment (Korinek, 1993). Many authors and theorists, such as Glasser (1985), have stressed the basic needs that must be met in order for students to maintain positive behavior (c.f. Korinek, 1993).

There are numerous compelling reasons to take a more positive approach to behavior management in the classroom. Some of these reasons include: less student isolation, less alienation, decreased hostility, decreased frustration, fewer suspension and expulsions, reduced violent behavior, less disruptive behavior in the classroom, less vandalism, improved self-esteem among both students and staff, improved attendance, greater student achievement, and better development of students' pro-social skills and being accountable for their own behavior (Korinek, 1993).

One of the most effective components of positive behavioral support is providing students with praise for appropriate behaviors. For example, students who are non-compliant often receive a great deal of attention for these behaviors. Oftentimes, some type of non-verbal or verbal attention from teachers or classroom staff follows non-compliance (Cipani, 1993). Additionally it is apparent that teacher attention when students are compliant is often times low, meaning that students receive more teacher attention for non-compliant behavior than for compliance (Cipani, 1993). Instead of this negative attention, experts suggest considering praising students for compliance. Giving students this enthusiastic, vigorous praise and even additional tangible rewards for compliant behavior are a vital part of this strategy (Cipani, 1993). If teachers do not give students this praise when they are complying with requests, their plan for lessening the amount of non-compliance will be less effective (Cipani, 1993). Many teachers

may feel that stopping their lessons to give students all of this praise may take up too much time. It is true that in the beginning it may feel like this is happening. Learning to consistently praise appropriate behavior may be a new skill for some teachers, and therefore it may feel as though it is taking a great deal of time (Cipani, 1993). The truth is that oftentimes children who are non-compliant do not receive any more attention using this strategy than they had been getting before the teacher began praising compliant and appropriate behavior. When this is done, the attention and energy of the teacher is simply shifted from the student's non-compliant behaviors to their compliant acts (Cipani, 1993).

Social Skill Instruction involves directly teaching students social behavioral skills. This is usually done through teacher instruction, role playing and demonstrations. There is a great deal of information that demonstrates the effectiveness of being able to create new behaviors and make them fluent, but only limited data that shows generalization and maintenance of these behaviors with direct intervention (Lewis, 1995).

Another strategy called Differential Reinforcement involves delivering positive reinforcement when students display appropriate behaviors and is then withholding it when students exhibit inappropriate behavior. This strategy also has empirical support showing that it is effective in diminishing inappropriate behaviors and increasing alternate pro-social behaviors, however the teacher must have the ability to control the source of reinforcement in order for this method to be effective (Lewis, 1995).

Another approach is Functional Communication Training. After determining the reasons behind, or functions, of a student's behavior problem, a new appropriate behavior, called a "replacement" behavior is taught. This new replacement behavior serves the same function for the student as the problem behavior (Lewis, 1995). Research has shown many effective

demonstrations which show the success of increasing the use of pro-social alternative behaviors (Lewis, 1995). This tactic has proven especially effective when used with individuals with developmental disabilities.

Instructional modifications involve making changes in the general education curriculum in order to increase success, amount of time students are engaged, and completion of tasks (Lewis, 1995). When Instructional modifications are paired with direct teaching (e.g., social skills, functional communication training) there is empirical evidence supporting its effectiveness in reduction of problem behaviors and increasing appropriate behaviors.

Using Self-Management, students are taught self-monitoring, self-instruction and self-reinforcement. These strategies are especially useful to teach students because they actively engage students in self-monitoring and making changes to their own behavior (Salend & Sylvestre, 2005). Students are taught self-monitoring, where they record their own behaviors using a record keeping system, and self-reinforcement, where students learn to evaluate their behavior and then reward themselves when appropriate. Finally, students are learning self-instruction where they verbalize to themselves questions and responses which help them to: identify problems, generate potential solutions, evaluate solutions, use appropriate solutions and then determine whether the solutions they are using are effective (Salend & Sylvestre, 2005). Evidence has shown that this strategy is effective when it is accompanied by manipulations of the environment and/or direct teaching (Lewis, 1995).

Evidence has shown that PBS strategies are much more likely to be effective, especially with students with developmental disabilities. A synthesis of over one hundred research articles involving individuals with a variety of developmental disabilities showed that: 1) PBS is widely applicable to individuals with serious challenging behaviors, 2) research in PBS is rapidly

contributing to our knowledge of how to use the results of assessments and how to correct environmental deficiencies, 3) PBS is effective in reducing problem behavior by eighty percent or more in two-thirds of the cases, 4) success rates are higher when intervention is based on prior functional assessment (Wagner, 1999).

Three Levels of Positive Behavior Support

There are three levels of Positive Behavior Support. They are primary prevention, or universal interventions, secondary prevention, or targeted group interventions, and tertiary prevention, or individualized systems of support. Instead of punishing students for disruptive behaviors, PBS focuses on using proactive strategies for defining, teaching and supporting appropriate behaviors. The idea of PBS is to make problem behaviors less effective for students and appropriate or positive behaviors more functional (OSEP, 2007).

Primary Prevention.

The first level, primary prevention, includes school-wide efforts that are meant to prevent non-compliance or problem behaviors from occurring. These efforts often include: school rules, routines, and physical arrangements. These are all done in order to prevent any new occurrences of problem behaviors (OSEP, 2007). These preventions are taught to students by school personnel before problem behaviors begin in the first place (OSEP, 2007). Research has shown that the prevention of behaviors such as violence, theft, bullying and drug use, are much more effective if the school has adopted policies and strategies which are evidence-based (OSEP, 2007). Some of the strategies that fall into this category are rewarding students, teaching students how to comply with the rules, and having rules which are positively stated (i.e. “be

respectful”), instead of negatively stated (“don’t run”). These rules become expectations which the students are taught to comply with throughout the school setting. The reasoning behind this level of prevention is to teach students to behave appropriately instead of waiting for misbehavior to occur and then punishing the behavior. Use of the primary prevention strategy has shown a large reduction in the amount of students who have to be disciplined in schools. Before implementing primary prevention in schools, school staff must reach a consensus on the following issues: Is there a problem at the school that needs addressing?, what is the nature of the problem?, and what is going to be done about it? The next step in the process is to conduct any necessary assessments and then agree on the strategies that will be used in addressing the problems (OSEP, 2007).

Another example of primary prevention is class-wide behavior support. While most of the behavior problems involving aggression that special education teachers serving the moderate/severe population find themselves facing will be dealt with on an individual basis using a Functional Assessment and behavior supports that target a behavior in a specific student, it is also important to have a classroom behavior management system in place that involves all students in the classroom (Lewis, 1995). There are several things that teachers must take into consideration when developing their own classroom behavior management systems.

One of the first steps that teachers must take when developing a classroom management plan is to develop a set of classroom rules. Rules should be positively stated and show students what behavior is expected from them instead of placing limitations on their behavior (Korinek, 1993). According to Korinek (1993), rules that are selected for use in the classroom should be developed carefully with a great deal of input from students to encourage their commitment to the rules, stated clearly and positively, systematically taught and practiced, and reviewed and

revised when needed. Rules that are developed and presented in this manner have been found to be the most successful in preventing problem behaviors, decreasing their severity and handling problems in a fair manner (Korinek, 1993).

Over the last thirty years, a wealth of research-validated literature on effective classroom management practice has been developed (Alberto and Troutman, 1998; Charles, 1995; Colvin and Lazar, 1997; Kame'enui and Darch, 1995; Kerr and Nelson, 1998; Sugai and Tindal, 1993). This literature contains examples of practices which have been proven effective within classroom systems and have clear empirical evidence of their effectiveness (OSEP, 2007). Examples of some of these strategies include: providing advance organizers and pre-corrections, keeping students engaged, providing a positive focus, consistently enforcing classroom rules, correcting rule violations and social behavior errors proactively and finally by teaching and planning for smooth transitions (OSEP, 2007).

While primary prevention using positive behavior support works for 80% of students in most schools, it does not work for everyone. This is especially true for many moderate/severely disabled students who often require more individualized forms of support (OSEP, 2007). However, the likelihood that higher students will later develop aggressive behaviors may be lessened when schools implement primary prevention strategies (OSEP, 2007).

Secondary Prevention.

The second level of support is called secondary prevention. This level involves targeting small groups of students who are not responding to primary prevention efforts. Students at this level are at risk of exhibiting more problem behaviors and need a little more support than is offered at the primary, or school-wide level, but they do not require the intensity of an

individualized program. Support at this level may involve a brief Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA), largely relying on indirect measures, to determine the function of the behavior, as well as a plan to teach the students new skills which will replace the problem behaviors, changes in the environment that help to prevent problem behaviors and encourage positive ones, and finally monitoring, and reassessing the plan over time to ensure its effectiveness (OSEP, 2007).

A secondary prevention program system provides a foundation for support to targeted groups of students, which often can lessen the need for more individualized support. The key features of this level of support are: low teacher effort, availability of adults for student support, consistency with school-wide expectations, brief functional assessment screening, progress monitoring of student behavior, flexibility, and consistent implementation by all classroom staff (OSEP, 2007).

One strategy that can be used with targeted groups of “at-risk” students is social skills training. Social skills instruction teaches students appropriate communication skills, self-discipline, and problem solving skills. In order to do this, a variety of strategies are used to not only prevent problem behaviors, but also to teach the student more appropriate replacement skills. These skills can lead to more appropriate social behavior and competence, allowing students to interact more effectively and appropriately with peers, teachers, and their own families. Guidelines for schools implementing social skills programs should include the following: establishing a positive learning environment for all students and staff across all school settings, integrating social skills instruction into all of the school’s curriculum and activities, ensuring that instruction matches the intensity of the problem, integrating skills which facilitate generalization, and making sure that social skill assessments and interventions are

currently relevant (OSEP, 2000). Schools should also evaluate the success of social skills instruction based on whether students can accurately and fluently use a skill, whether or not peer acceptance is improved and the degree to which adults positively judge or view the student (OSEP, 2007).

Another strategy that addresses the secondary level of support is called the Behavior Education Program (BEP; Crone, Horner, Hawken, 2004). This program should be part of a larger behavior support plan in a school. It targets students who exhibit problem behaviors, but do not respond to school-wide supports. These students exhibit persistent behavior problems, but do not require more individualized interventions. The BEP provides students with daily support and monitors those who are at risk of developing serious and/or chronic behavior problems. One of the biggest parts of the BEP is the use of data to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention on changing student behavior. This data is used to make weekly decisions, such as whether to modify or fade the intervention. The BEP includes several principals of positive behavior support such as, having clearly defined expectations, social skills instruction, the increase of positive reinforcement for meeting expectations, contingent consequences for problem behaviors, increase in positive contact with adults at school, more opportunities for self-management and increased collaboration between the school and home (Crone, Horner & Hawken, 2004).

The BEP program is based on a daily check-in/check-out system. Check-in/check-out (CICO) is an intervention that provides students with immediate feedback on their behavior. One way this can be done is done through a Daily Progress Report (DPR) and positive interactions with adults. Student expectations are clearly defined and they receive both immediate and delayed reinforcement for meeting these expectations (Crone, et., al., 2004).

CICO provides students with structure, prompts, instruction, feedback and acknowledgement for students who are exhibiting low-level social errors. In a study conducted on the effectiveness of CICO, teachers reported that it was an easy intervention to implement, improving the classroom environment. Additionally students who participated in CICO felt that it was a positive experience (Fairbanks, Sugai, Guardino & Lathrop, 2007).

In order to make sure that strategies at the secondary prevention level are being successful, students must be frequently observed through direct observations so that their progress can be closely monitored. Teachers must do this so that they can make sure that progress is being made and, if it is not, make necessary adjustments to their support system (OSEP, 2007).

Tertiary Prevention.

The third level of support, which is the most individualized, is called the tertiary prevention level. This level was designed to focus on and target the specific needs of students exhibiting severe problem behaviors which are dangerous, highly disruptive and stand in the way of their learning and may even result in seclusion. This level of support is most often used with students who fit a wide range of characteristics such as autism, developmental disabilities, emotional disorders, behavioral disorders and at times, students with no diagnostic label (OSEP, 2007).

Also important to the success of tertiary support is the involvement of not only the student, but those who know them the best and are familiar with their specific needs and circumstances. The main goal of this type of prevention is to not only lessen the problem

behaviors and their intensities, but to also increase their adaptive skills and hopefully improve their quality of life (OSEP, 2007).

Some of the main features of this level of support are that it involves a functional behavioral assessment and a behavior plan that includes individualized strategies which are based on prior assessments. There are many options for tertiary prevention. These include teaching the students replacement skills for the problem behaviors, preventing behaviors through changes in the environment, and having measures for monitoring, evaluating, and reassessing the plan as is necessary. In extreme cases, this plan may also include emergency procedures for handling dangerous behaviors. This provides teachers and other classroom staff with plan for deescalating behaviors as quickly as possible if the student is in danger or hurting themselves or others. The emergency plan may also include necessary ecological changes which can even mean a change in placement. This level of support should be used when students' problem behaviors are interfering with their educational progress, and when primary and secondary level interventions have been ineffective (OSEP, 2007).

When developing behavior plans there are several steps that should be taken to guide the process. The first step is to identify the goals of the intervention. This includes identifying the behaviors, as well as the frequency or duration with which the behaviors are occurring. It also involves determining broad goals that the team hopes to achieve as a result of the intervention. The next step involves gathering information: reviewing the student's records, interviewing important persons in the student's life and direct observation of the students. Specifically this includes finding observable patterns, antecedents, contexts and consequences of the problem behavior. This information will help in identifying the function of the behavior. The third step is to summarize statements that describe relationships between the behaviors and the

environments in which they are occurring. For example, when, where and with whom the behaviors are most and least likely to occur, what the students get or avoid when they exhibit the behavior and any other variables that may affect the behaviors. The next step is actually developing the plan, which involves making changes to the student's environment that will lessen the likelihood of the behavior occurring, teaching replacement skills which make the behavior unnecessary, making sure consequences encourage positive behavior and if necessary an emergency plan for handling dangerous behaviors when and if they occur. The final step in this process is to implement the plan and monitor its outcomes. This involves making sure that the plan is implemented consistently by everyone working with the students and evaluating the students' progress, and making changes and adjustments to the plan when necessary to ensure its success (OSEP, 2007).

The development of goals should center not only on decreasing problem behaviors, but also on increasing the students adaptive skills. Goals should be positive and focus on a long-term vision. When developing these goals it is important to involve the student, their family, any other important individuals in the person's life, and the support team. One way to do this is through a Person-Centered Plan. This plan involves developing a plan for the student which focuses on their future hopes and dreams. It allows them to make choices for themselves, looking at their areas of interest and skills, improving their participation in their school and community (OSEP, 2007).

When support at this level is working, measureable changes can be seen in the students educational progress, social relationships, and independence. Behavior Intervention Plans include goals and objectives which are observable and measurable so that progress can be

evaluated. By measuring progress, we can also see what changes need to be made to the plan if there is a lack of progress towards the goals and objectives of the behavior plan (OSEP, 2007).

The main differences between the tertiary prevention level and the primary and secondary prevention levels is that it focuses on an individualized plan which looks at an individual's needs. This level allows the support team to vary the process, including data collection tools, number of hypothesis developed, extent of the plan, and the amount of monitoring required for the individual's success. Support provided at this level is directly developed to meet the individual's specific behavioral needs (OSEP, 2007).

Traditional and Punitive Forms of Discipline

Research has shown that PBS systems are considered to be best practice, yet many teachers continue to use systems which use punishment to reinforce inappropriate behavior. According to Curwin and Mendler (1998), punitive strategies have shown only limited, short-term results when working with problem behaviors (c.f. Korinek, 1993). Additionally punishment-based strategies often result in anxiety, hostility, resentments, and a decline in motivation among individuals with whom the strategy is used (Korinek, 1993). Although research shows that punishment-based strategies are in some cases the most effective way to treat serious problem behaviors, the use of these punishment-based interventions should be seen and used only as a temporary intervention until more effective measures can be devised, and only after other evidence-based positive approaches have been implemented without success (Pelios, et. al., 1999).

Traditional discipline systems have focused on external control of the individuals and have often relied on punitive procedures to diminish inappropriate behavior (Korinek, 1993).

Tactics such as embarrassment, ridicule, sarcasm, humiliation, constant reminders of past behavior, and exclusion are at times associated with punishment-based systems which are often self-defeating and unproductive (Korinek, 1993). This type of punishment may also cause students to engage in a cycle of seeking revenge or even result in an increase in avoidance behaviors (Gable, et al., 2000). Many experts and professional organizations are in agreement that it is not only ineffective for the most part, but also unethical to use techniques that are considered to be aversive (Gable, et al., 2000). IEP teams should attempt to use every other potential intervention before punishment is considered (Gable, et al., 2000). One of the reasons for this is that punishment does not address the function of problem behaviors, and the effects of the punishments will not be generalized over different environments (Gable, et al., 2000). More traditional strategies including elements of punishment procedures include: time out, overcorrection, delivery of aversive consequences, and exclusion and suspension, all of which have some empirical evidence supporting their use (Lewis, 1995).

The first intervention is “time out” which consists of a student temporarily losing access to positive reinforcement following misbehavior. The empirical evidence supporting time out says that it has been effective in reducing behavior only if specific prerequisite conditions are already in place (Lewis, 1995). “Time in,” when the student is participating and receiving attention, for example, has to be reinforcing to the individual and it cannot be used during activities or times that the student find objectionable or aversive (Lewis, 1995). Research has also shown that while time out has often been used as a consequence for behaviors which are escape-motivated, in some cases it may in reality be reinforcing the behavior because it is allowing the student to avoid or escape the activity or situation (Gable, et al., 2000). Based on

these facts, time out is often just as likely to increase the inappropriate behavior rather than decrease it.

Overcorrection is a procedure where students learn and practice an appropriate replacement behavior, either by repeatedly practicing this alternate behavior or restoring a damaged environment (Lewis, 1995). While there is evidence to support overcorrection as being effective, at this time there is limited evidence of its effectiveness across different populations as well as different behaviors (Lewis, 1995).

The delivery of aversive consequences is an intervention in which students are given an aversive consequence following an inappropriate behavior. Although research has shown reductions in behaviors such as self-injury, there are significant concerns with its use. One concern is the increased likelihood of dangerous side effects such as aggression when aversive consequences are used (Lewis, 1995).

A final example of an often used punishment in school is exclusion or suspension, in which students are removed from school for a certain amount of time following a behavior which is considered to be inappropriate. There exists very little evidence supporting the effectiveness of expelling and suspending students in order to reduce inappropriate behaviors. While some of the traditional and punitive forms of interventions do have some limited evidence supporting their effectiveness, all of them involve waiting until inappropriate behaviors occur in order to react (Lewis, 1995).

Other Factors Which Lead to the Success of Interventions

When evaluating different behavior management strategies there are several things that must be taken into consideration. These include: is the approach and its outcomes clearly

defined?, what evidence is there that the strategy is effective?, does the strategy have an accountability process built into it?, is the strategy sustainable?, is it equitable?, and finally, is the cost of the strategy and its execution realistic? (Lewis, 1995).

Trained staff also can make a big difference in the success rate of interventions, especially when it comes to the restraint or seclusion of students. Some research shows that lack of training can lead to reliance on these techniques for dealing with aggressive behaviors. Positive procedures such as token economies for positive behavior have been successful in reducing the number of restraints and seclusion (Hawaii Dept. of Health, 2004). According to the Hawaii Department of Health, an intensive training of staff in creating a restraint-free environment resulted in a 98% reduction in the isolation of individuals. Additionally, giving students explicit instruction on the behavioral circumstances that would end their seclusion and restraint has led to a 64% decrease in the use of techniques which could be considered aversive (Hawaii Dept. of Health, 2004)

Since many special education teachers, especially those working in the moderate/severe field, have one or more instructional assistants who play just as much of a role in classroom behavioral support as the teacher, the expectations of staff behavior should be outlined so that all classroom staff know exactly how to implement strategies, how to act in response to behaviors, and where they can get assistance if they need it. In order for behavioral support procedures to be effective they should be implemented in the same way by everyone in order to provide a unified approach (Lewis, 1995).

Experts do not suggest that any one strategy be used on its own. King-Sears and Bonfils (2000) suggest that teachers can increase the probability that interventions will be successful by using various combinations of evidence-based strategies (Salend & Sylvestre, 2005). Although

there is one area (cultural diversity) where the applicability of PBS is still unclear, data suggests that this approach is here to stay (Carr et al., 1999). Research results have shown that PBS is a quickly growing field, especially in the area of the use of assessment to develop interventions and strategies that focus on environmental problems. It has also been shown as being greatly applicable to individuals with serious behavior problems and to effectively reduce problem behaviors in anywhere from one-half to two-thirds of cases (Carr et al., 1999). Finally, it has also been found that the rates of success nearly double when the selected interventions are based on a previous functional assessment (Carr, et al., 1999).

Conclusions

The professional literature and several professional organizations support the use of PBS as best practice for use with students exhibiting aggressive behaviors (OSEP, 2007). Based upon the concerns cited regarding punishment-based procedures, researchers, policy makers and practitioners are increasingly considering interventions consistent with the field of PBS to be best practice. One of the common features of approaches consistent with PBS is the use of an assessment of the individual's behavior using a Functional Behavior Assessment. The Functional Behavior Assessment is the most valuable tool for providing teachers with the information they need for developing effective and successful interventions that address the reasons the student is engaging in the behavior. FBA does this by identifying the causes (i.e. what they are trying to get, avoid, escape, or trying to communicate) of the problem behaviors (Gable, et., al., 2000). Just as important though, is the emphasis on changes made in the environment, the teaching of new skills, modification of behavior including teaching and

changing not only student, but also adult behavior, and removing reinforcers that are helping to maintain problem behaviors (Sugai, et al., 1999).

Bridging the gap between the research and actual practice will be the focus of my research. This review of the literature has informed my research, assisted in developing interview questions, and will inform the analysis of the data I obtain from my interviews. This study will investigate the extent to which teachers in moderate/severe special education classroom settings report utilizing these identified effective interventions for students exhibiting aggressive behaviors.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this research study is to identify interventions that are currently being used by special education teachers to support aggressive behaviors and to evaluate their reported effectiveness and also to evaluate whether or not these interventions are evidence-based. A qualitative study was conducted based on interviews with ten special education teachers who are working on a daily basis in the classroom with special education students who exhibit aggressive behaviors. The rationale for selecting a qualitative approach was that the focus of the study was to investigate teachers' perceptions regarding the use of evidence-based strategies in addressing behavior. My research is a collective case study of teachers with similar kinds of students, but who are working at different sites. The methodology used in this study consisted of interviews with teachers based on a questionnaire. Teachers were asked to report on their own experiences working with and supporting students exhibiting aggressive behaviors. A description of the participants, interview questionnaire, and teacher interviews follows.

Participants

Data was collected from ten interviews with special education teachers working primarily with the moderately to severely disabled population. Interview participants were selected based on the following criteria: they were currently working with students who exhibit aggressive behaviors in their classroom, they were working with middle school and high school aged students, they were either beginning or experienced teachers, they had participated in trainings such as the Behavior Intervention Case Manager (BICM) or other behavior in-services, they

were willing to be interviewed for the purpose of this study. These individuals were currently working in the Monterey County area either for the Monterey County Office of Education or Salinas Union High School District. Their levels of experience varied from being in their first year of teaching to having over twenty-seven years of teaching experience. Three out of the ten teachers had at least some of their schooling in countries outside the United States (Great Britain and the Philippines). Many of them received their teaching credential from other parts of the country or other countries (Philippines). The teachers ranged in age from their mid-fifties to their early twenties. Two of the ten participants, were males. Most of the teachers interviewed had at least some training in Behavior Management and Support through either their credential program, or in-services through MCOE Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) or other similar agencies. Two of the interview participants reported receiving the BICM training. Another reported having a similar training in another part of the state. The students that they were working with exhibit a wide range of disabilities such as: Autism, Down Syndrome, Emotional Disorders, OCD and other forms of mental retardation. Three of the teachers interviewed were either in the beginning or final stages of earning their teaching credentials. The others had either their Masters degree or a lifetime teaching credential. This was an appropriate setting for my study due to the fact that aggressive behavior is a common problem in special education classrooms. These individuals were appropriate for this study because they are the people who are actually working with these students on a daily basis. Additionally, they are the ones who put the behavior intervention plans into place and often decide which interventions are working and which are not effective for their students.

Interview Procedures

In order to gather data for this study, one-on-one interviews were conducted with the ten participants. The interview questions were developed after the completion of the literature review on best practices for supporting problem behaviors such as aggression. The interview consisted of fifteen questions as well as some demographic information (See Appendix). All but two of these interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the interviewee in order to quote participants as accurately as possible. Two of the participants declined to be audio recorded, therefore in order to ensure the accuracy of their statements, these participants reviewed the notes from their interviews to make sure that they felt they had been accurately quoted. The interviews began with the preset questions from the questionnaire, but were open-ended. An open-ended interview was the most appropriate method since the goal was to encourage teachers to be as honest as possible about what they were actually doing and why they thought their interventions were or were not working. It is possible that teachers were not as honest as one would hope in terms of interventions that do not work; however, by creating a conversational environment with the interview, the participants hopefully felt more comfortable and were honest talking about all that they do. Due to time constraints and the fact that students and teachers often act differently when there are new people in the room, observations were not done in order to collect data for this study.

After conducting the interviews, I then compared the responses of the interview participants to those practices cited as best practices. In order to identify strategies considered to be best practices, a review of the literature was conducted on behavior supports, especially those addressing aggressive behaviors.

Data Analysis

After completing the interviews, they were transcribed and the responses were coded under a combination of preset categories and new categories that came about as a result of the participants' responses in the interviews. The preset categories included: preferred interventions used by the participants, interventions participants have found to work, interventions that they have found not to work, and interventions that participants were aware of that are empirically based. Questions in these categories inquired about interventions that were found to be successful; what interventions were found to be unsuccessful; intervention they were familiar with that had been identified as best practices, as well as how they defined aggressive behaviors and what, if any trainings that they have received in this particular area. A second set of categories involved common trends or themes that emerged throughout the coding process.

Interview responses were then analyzed and compared to interventions that have an empirically supported research basis, as identified through my literature review. The data was examined for patterns that showed any commonalities between practices that were or were not working, and any other reoccurring themes that emerged through the process.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter reviews the results of the data collected through the one-on-one interviews with teachers. These results are grouped according to the fifteen interview questions that each teacher was asked. What follows is a summary of the results of these interviews.

Types of Students

Teachers were working with a variety of levels of students, with an even wider variety of disabilities. These included: Autism, Down Syndrome, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Emotional Disturbances, Cerebral Palsy, as well as students who are considered to be developmentally delayed. Many of these students also were exhibiting aggressive behaviors.

Definitions of Aggressive Behaviors

When asked to describe and define aggressive behaviors that they were currently experiencing in their classroom, each teacher listed a wide array of behaviors which ranged from mild aggression including stamping their feet, spitting, yelling and crying obscenities, to more violent or physically aggressive behaviors. These more extreme behaviors included: hitting, punching, throwing furniture, kicking, pulling hair, pushing other students, slapping, and biting. Four of the teachers also had students exhibiting self-injurious behaviors (SIBs) such as picking their heads until they bled, hitting themselves in the head, and pounding their heads against the wall with enough force to damage the wall. Another three of the teachers reported students exhibiting behaviors so violent and aggressive that there were times when students had to be physically restrained for their own safety as well as that of the other students and classroom staff.

Frequency of Behaviors

The frequency with which teachers reported seeing aggressive behaviors also varied greatly. While one teacher reported only seeing aggressive behaviors as infrequently as four times a year, most of them said that they were seeing these kinds of behaviors anywhere from once a week to three or four times a day. One teacher reported that, “I can have a day when nothing aggressive happens and I can have a day where I have students go off so the rest of them decide to go off. It’s like a domino effect.” Many of the teachers who reported experiencing daily or frequently aggressive behaviors, also reported having more than one student who exhibited this kind of behavior.

Training

All but one of the teachers reported receiving some kind of training in handling behavior problems such as aggression. Eight of the ten had received, or were currently taking behavior management classes as part of their credential program. Two of the teachers reported having completed the Behavior Intervention Case Manager (BICM) training through MCOE SELPA. One had only completed half of the training. One of them reported taking the Assaultive Behavior Intervention Techniques (ABIT) training in San Diego. Five of the participants had reportedly received training through one or more in-services through the MCOE SELPA or other similar agencies in other parts of the country. Five of the ten, reported having either the Physical Assault Response Training (PART) or Handle with Care training which teaches individuals how to restrain students when they become so violent that they are a danger to themselves or others.

Best Practices

Seven of the ten teachers interviewed said that they were aware of interventions and strategies that are considered to be best practices. One teacher said that she was unaware of whether her interventions fell into the category of best practices. The two teachers who claimed that they were not aware of best practices had either not received any behavior management as part of their credential or were just beginning in the credential program. Even though many of the teachers could not necessarily remember the correct terms for strategies that they knew to be best practices, all but one talked about using positive interventions as part of their daily routine. When asked if they were using interventions that have been identified as best practices in their classroom seven of the ten teachers interviewed reported that they were. The following section summarizes the strategies that teachers reported using that are consistent with best practice, as identified in the literature.

Primary Level of Prevention (Universal Supports)

Most teachers reported that they were using more classroom-wide interventions as opposed to participating in school-wide interventions for behavior support. While two out of the ten teachers reported that school-wide rules and interventions were part of their behavior system, most of the teachers interviewed reported that they were either only guidelines or that they had adapted school rules to fit their students. Although some of the rules are similar or adapted, classroom-wide interventions were reported as being much more meaningful and useful with their students.

Many of the teachers were running classrooms on regular education campuses, where students were occasionally mainstreamed into classes. Even in these situations the teachers

reported that they were using their own classroom management systems to discipline and reward students for completing their work or for displaying appropriate behavior. Many teachers, especially those on high school campuses talked about their students having to follow certain rules such as complying with a dress code.

In addition to more individualized interventions for more severe behavior, most teachers reported having a classroom-wide behavior management plan. Most of these plans included earning rewards for appropriate behavior. Another teacher said that her students, who were very low functioning, needed something much more basic than tokens. She reported using verbal reinforcement and physical contact with her students.

Token Economies.

One teacher described the money and banking system used in her classroom as being extremely successful. She said, “Their money means a lot to them and they don’t like paying it when they misbehave. So that works really well the whole day.” Her students save their money and keep track in the bank statements and check registers. Students use their classroom cash to buy leisure time activities like computer time, Friday movies, class parties, and use of the radio. She also keeps the excitement about the money going by holding two classroom stores at Christmas time and the end of the school year. Although she reports that this system works well with most of her students, she says that it is not as meaningful to her student who is exhibiting the aggressive behaviors and therefore this student has her own rewards system that is individualized to be more relevant to her. This particular student is provided with picture symbols of food items such as soda, chips and cookies that she can earn by completing her work and with appropriate behavior.

Another teacher reported using what she called “class bucks.” She used the bucks to reward her students for displaying appropriate behavior during class time and towards their classmates. She said that it was especially useful to distribute the class bucks during whole class instruction. She said, “You could come in here and hear a pin drop. Cuz they’re after a buck.” She also said that her students often feed off of one another or try to get each other in trouble so she often gives out money to students when they ignore classmates’ behavior. When students misbehave they lose classroom bucks. If they refuse to give up their bucks, instead of fighting with them, she keeps her own record to make sure their totals are accurate when they turn in their bucks. Since they don’t like losing money in this way they usually just pay when they are asked. As a reward at the end of the month she treats the three students with the most class bucks to Subway for lunch.

Two of the participants used reward systems in their classroom in which students could earn either smiley faces or tickets throughout the day for appropriate behavior or doing a good job. The student or students who have earned the most tokens at either the end of the school day or week would earn a prize. One teacher talked about how she started giving out the prizes everyday and then slowly stretching it to once a week and also using the system to help her students learn calendar skills. She said, “First it was everyday, then it was every other day, now we’re using it to reinforce calendar so it’s helping him see days of the week a little bit clearer too.” The other teacher using this system said that “It’s simple enough for all the kids to understand which is just simply earning ‘good job’ marks for appropriate social behavior, appropriate behavior all day, and working in their instructional groups. And then the kid, the two kids with the most good job marks at the end of the day get a prize. I usually have toys and sodas and stuff like that.”

Other Examples.

Other classroom-wide support plans that teachers reported using include: student stores, daily checklists, stars, and constant verbal praise. Although teachers reported that these classroom-wide support plans work for a majority of their students, many of them said that they do not work for all of their students. For these students, they must provide a more individualized behavior plan or reward system that is relevant and meaningful to that specific student.

Secondary Level of Prevention (Targeted Group Supports)

Only one of the teachers interviewed reported using an intervention at this secondary level of support. She reported teaching her students to communicate with each other about their feelings to prevent problems between them from escalating. Although she typically uses this strategy with students who are able to express themselves verbally, she has also used this technique with students who are lower functioning and had little expressive language. She uses a group she calls Round Circle in which she leads discussions about communicating their feelings. During this group students are allowed to say whatever is on their minds. They are encouraged to talk about problems, including those with other students. During group they are allowed to say anything they want. The group, led by the teacher, then talks about these feelings. The use of this strategy is intended to prevent the development of problem behaviors amongst her students.

Tertiary Level of Prevention (Individualized Supports)

When asked about individualized interventions that were being used in their classrooms to support students with aggressive behaviors, the teachers reported using a number of strategies.

Many teachers felt that distraction was useful for diverting students' attention and refocusing it on something else of interest. Also helpful was allowing students to work without time limits, using a calm voice, or talking about their behavior and feelings with the student. While many interventions that teachers talked about employed similar techniques, each teacher had made their own adaptations in order to make them successful in their own classrooms.

Behavior Charts.

Some teachers reported using individualized behavior charts or reward charts throughout the day to reward students' appropriate behavior. One teacher reported using a behavior chart where the student "earns stamps for each class period of the day. She has to not only...perform the desired activity...with some degree of concentration (but also not exhibit) any aggressive behaviors. If she gets 3's or more through the day then she gets her free choice activity at the end of the day. If she gets 5's all day long she gets a certificate to take home and she really likes it." She also stressed the usefulness of rewards charts like this for the data collection of progress related to behavior goals and objectives, allowing teachers to document not only aggressive behaviors, but also appropriate behaviors.

Another teacher reported using a similar system with one of her aggressive students as part of their student's Behavior Intervention Plan. With this reward system "every 15 minutes when he behaves, he earns a smiley face. And throughout the day he has different rewards given to him depending on how many smiley faces he's earned by, say, lunch. If he has fourteen (smiley faces) after lunch it excuses him from afternoon group so he gets to play on the computer or do whatever he wants."

Tangibles.

One of the most popular interventions reported was the use of individualized tangible rewards, such as toys, food items, or activities such as free time or computer time. One teacher reported working with a student who would often have two or three tantrums each day. Although it took several months to begin seeing positive results, this strategy became more and more successful throughout the school year. His teacher reported that “he knows that if I get a bunch of tickets (for good behavior and completion of work) in my box that I can get a really cool prize, because I’ve given him some cool stuff.” When using these reinforcers though, this teacher added that it is important “to key on [the students] interests and play off that to reward him with good things.” If students are not interested in the reinforcers being offered there is less likelihood of success.

Redirection.

Distraction in the form of redirecting students to another activity was another popular strategy among teachers working with less severe aggression. Teachers reported being successful in redirecting students away from an activity and then bringing them back to the problem activity later. One teacher said that she talks to her student about places or things that he likes in order to distract him from his behavior. She said that this tactic was especially successful when the class was out in the community, where he often has trouble making noises on the city bus. She reported being able to distract him from yelling in this way, and at the same time promote conversation skills.

Environmental Modifications.

Another intervention that two of the teachers reported as being extremely important was making environmental modifications to prevent students from engaging in certain aggressive behaviors. One teacher talked about having a student who is extremely interested in Disney movies. He becomes aggressive and will begin trying to pinch and grab classroom staff and fellow students when the movies are visible, but he is not able to watch them. Instead of risking a situation like this, she locks them in a cabinet before the student arrives, so that they are not visible to him. She said, "The best thing is filing cabinets with locks on them and then you can just get rid of all those distracting things and get them to focus." Another teacher with a student with similar behaviors reported using proactive environmental strategies as well to stop behaviors before they occur. She said, "I try to remove anything that will trigger the student because it's too stimulating or too irritating. I try to remove all objects that are going to be a great hazard if they're thrown."

Time Out.

Time out was another strategy that was popular with at least two teachers. With one student whose behaviors included yelling obscenities and slapping, time out was reportedly used as a calming tool. The teacher expressed that the use of time out was not a form of punishment to the student, but instead calming to her. Another teacher working with higher functioning students, reported sending students out into the hallway for time out. Although she reported that it does not work with all of her students, she did say that it was very successful for some students.

Physical Proximity.

At least three of the teachers also reported using physical proximity as a successful intervention. While not described as a long term solution, one teacher reported using proximity when her aggressive student first came to her classroom. She said, “I had to be total in proximity. That was another thing I really used at the beginning. I was just next to her all the time, commenting on her behavior all the time...and then I was able to start fading, fading, fading...” Another teacher reported using proximity to keep her student engaged by providing verbal praise and constant interaction to keep him from wandering around the room and therefore engaging in problem behaviors.

Communication Skills.

Teachers working with higher functioning students felt that it was very important to teach communication skills. Four out of the ten teachers reported that they were working on communication skills with their aggressive students in an attempt to cut down on the students’ reliance upon these types of behaviors. One teacher provided the rationale that, “not knowing how to communicate is the reason for the aggression.” Another teacher reported teaching students to communicate their choices, wants and needs by use of picture symbols. She said that this leads to a decrease in frustration and problem behaviors.

Other Examples.

Other examples of strategies teachers reported using with their aggressive students included: not giving time limits on work, using a calm voice, using picture cues, using time out, using redirection, providing a cool off time, sitting on the bench for part of recess, using sensory

integration, teaching communication skills, using self-management checklists, using reward and behavior charts, working with preferred staff, providing verbal praise, and implementing environmental strategies. Although these were all examples of strategies and interventions that teachers reported currently using in their classrooms, they were also reported as having different levels of effectiveness for different students. Teachers reported that there was not one intervention that worked with all of their students, especially those who exhibit aggressive behaviors and require more individualized behavior supports.

While all of these teachers reported using different strategies to address aggressive behaviors in their classroom, positive interventions were the most popular strategies reported as being successful. They reported trying to be proactive and stopping aggressive behaviors before it happened. Teachers all reported using a great deal of positive feedback when students were behaving appropriately. One teacher developed a sensory area in her classroom to help students, while others gave their students breaks during work times when they become frustrated. Although most teachers have tried a variety of interventions with their students, they agreed that the positive supports really worked the best for their students.

In addition to all of the strategies discussed above, teachers also pointed out some other important factors in getting interventions to work. These included teacher patience and developing rapport with their students. Consistency was also mentioned as an important factor in the success of an intervention. According to one teacher whose students were often mainstreamed into regular education classes with other teachers, when teachers were not consistent with the use reinforcers, her students knew it. She said that the strategies she uses work, but only if teachers use them and are consistent.

Five out of the ten teachers interviewed had conducted Functional Assessments on their students prior to choosing an intervention. One of the teachers who had not done a Functional Assessment felt that his student's behavior was not severe enough to need one. The teachers who had conducted a Functional Assessment on their students' or were part of a team that had done one, had received training in PBS. Other teachers were not familiar with the process of Functional Assessment and therefore had not used the strategy for choosing interventions for their students.

Traditional and Punitive Forms of Discipline

The literature indicates that traditional and punitive forms of discipline have only limited and short-term results for improving problem behaviors such as aggression (Korinek, 1993). Many professional organizations agree that these types of interventions are not only unproductive, but are often considered to be unethical (Gable, et al., 2000). Before these types of punishment-based interventions are used, all other strategies should be considered (Gable, et al., 2000).

While all of the teachers interviewed found at least one intervention that they reported as being effective with their aggressive students, they have reported that several interventions were not successful for supporting students exhibiting aggressive behaviors in their classrooms. While their descriptions of these unsuccessful interventions varied, none of them reported positive behavior supports as being unsuccessful. The strategies reported by the teachers as being ineffective were also those that would not be considered to be best practice in the field. These strategies are summarized in the remainder of this section.

The first strategy that eight out of the ten participants reported as being not working was yelling at the student and/or telling them to do something. One teacher working with a student who would argue with her, reported that she would end up “getting into a power struggle with her. So at the moment you’re like ‘why did I even start this fight? Why did I even start it because I’m just starting to lose control of this situation?’” She also added that she has assistants who are often over demanding, and try to be disciplinarians which “just does not work with her at all and it doesn’t work with most of the students that I have.” She said that when staff used these strategies, the students often exhibited more behavior problems. They began rebelling against staff because they were being too constraining. Similarly, another teacher said that interventions that were unsuccessful included yelling at students and threatening them. She said, “What doesn’t work is if you get angry and you blow up. Yes, they can see in your face that you’re not happy. But you’re not angry with them. You’re angry with what they did.” All of the teachers who talked about these kinds of strategies reported that instead of lessening aggressive or problem behaviors, they often made behavior worse.

Two teachers reported that time out did not work for their aggressive students. One teacher said, “Time out only works for some kids. Time out does not work for kids who are escalating into extremely violent behaviors.” Another teacher said that “It’s not for everybody.” She cited one student who did not care about being given a time out in the hallway and would often leave.

Two teachers also stated that telling the student that their behavior was bad or that they were not doing a good job did not work either. They reported that this only resulted in the student feeling bad about themselves, instead of helping them to improve their behavior. One teacher stated that “some of the stuff that works really well with the regular ed kids like, you

didn't do a good job today," only makes her student shut down and often causes a tantrum.

Another teacher talked about the same thing with her student saying, "he's a sweet kid with great compassion for everyone, and so when he knows he's made a mistake he doesn't want to hear it.

That makes him go off more so you just drop it and just offer him rewards for being good."

Chapter 5: Discussion & Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to identify interventions which teachers are currently using in their classrooms to support students who are exhibiting aggressive behaviors and to determine whether or not these strategies are effective. These interventions were then evaluated to determine whether or not they were evidence-based. To answer these questions one on one interviews were conducted with ten teachers who were currently working in special education classrooms with students exhibiting aggressive behaviors. Teachers answered questions not only about what interventions they were successfully using in the classrooms, but also regarding which interventions that had found to be unsuccessful. Additionally, they provided information about trainings they had or had not received, and any assessments they had used in developing behavior supports for aggressive students in their classrooms.

Discussion of Findings

The results of the interviews are supported by the literature indicating that positive behavior support strategies are the most effective for addressing problems with aggressive behaviors. Overall, teachers reported using positive interventions with students exhibiting aggression. They reported that these positive strategies were much more effective than traditional or punishment-based strategies. While most teachers reported using positive interventions that are supported by the research literature, very few of them reported using the best practice strategy of conducting a Functional Behavior Assessment when developing and selecting interventions.

Primary Level of PBS.

Although all but one of the teachers were located on regular education campuses, only two of them reported school-wide rules being an important part of their behavior management. The reason for this may be that school-wide interventions are more appropriate for higher functioning students who typically participate in general education settings. The students who can utilize a school-wide support system are much more of a part of the school as a whole, are able to understand much broader rules and tend not to have as much need for individualized supports. The teachers reported relying much more on classroom-wide management supports. Although many of the students in these classrooms were mainstreamed into regular education classrooms, they spent much of their day in self-contained classrooms. Teachers reported using a classroom-wide system where students could earn rewards for completing their work or displaying appropriate behavior.

Teachers reported using many different strategies at the classroom-wide level, including using token economies, tangible rewards, checklists and verbal praise. All but one of the teachers reported using strategies which the literature supports as being best practices. Teachers reported providing their students with positively stated rules, a great deal of verbal praise, and keeping students engaged in activities to prevent them from engaging in problem behaviors during down times. Additionally, teachers reported providing their students with positive feedback for appropriate behavior. The reason for the success of these strategies is likely because they include interventions which are proactive and that provide students with behavior supports that meet their needs. In the area of primary prevention, teachers reported providing their students with positive feedback throughout the day, and teaching their students what behavior is expected of them in the classroom.

Secondary Level of PBS.

Only one teacher reported targeting her “at risk” students by using a group she calls “Round Circle.” The research literature supports the use of groups like this in which students are taught to interact more successfully with their peers and teachers. The reason that only one teacher reported using this type of support at the secondary level, is probably due to the higher functioning level of her students. While some of the other teachers reported teaching communication skills, it was typically done on a much more basic level of communicating simple wants and needs. Many of the teachers were serving students with little to no expressive language, which may be one of the reasons that they are not using secondary prevention strategies

Tertiary Level of PBS.

According to the literature, most students who are exhibiting aggressive behaviors do not respond to the primary and secondary levels of support. When this happens, tertiary prevention strategies need to be implemented on an individualized basis. This is consistent with the interview responses from teachers who all reported developing individualized interventions for their aggressive students.

Functional Behavior Assessment is considered to be extremely useful as well as a best practice approach for addressing all difficult behaviors, not just those that are extremely disruptive or aggressive (Sugai, et., al., 1999). Three out of the five teachers who had either personally conducted an FBA or been part of a team, were either currently completing their education or had done so in the last two years. The other two had received extra training on writing behavior plans or had participated in the process, either through in-services or working

closely with behavior specialists in the classroom. Of the three teachers who reported having completed either the BICM or a similar training, two had completed formal behavior intervention plans on their students exhibiting aggressive behaviors.

As cited in the literature, FBA has been determined to be a best practice strategy, however only half of the ten teachers interviewed had conducted FBAs on their students. The reason for this seems to be that they are only done when a student's behavior is so extreme that they are forced to use such an assessment in order to comply with policy guidelines. It is possible that if FBAs were conducted even with students exhibiting milder aggressive behaviors, it would take the guess work out of how to eliminate or lessen this kind of behavior. The research shows that teachers do not have to wait until students are so out of control or violent that they need to be removed from class or school, or restrained before using a functional assessment (OSEP, 2007).

Out of the ten interview participants, only three answered that they were aware that an FBA was a part of best practices. Even though only two teachers were unaware of any strategies that were best practices, most only listed the positive interventions themselves and not the use of FBAs under the heading of best practices. The three teachers that were aware of the importance of the entire process, including the FBA, had recently completed the BICM training or were currently enrolled in a behavior management class as part of their credential.

Many teachers also made a point of saying that there was no intervention that would work with each and every student. This is another reason that the FBA process is so important. As the literature shows, the FBA allows the teacher to look at each student's behaviors, their triggers, and what reinforcement that student is receiving for the behavior, individually and to tailor the behavior plan specifically to that student's needs (Pelios, et.al., 1999).

Eight out of ten teachers did cite that they knew positive interventions were considered best practices. Although half of them did not report using an FBA when choosing interventions for their aggressive students, they did report using reinforcement-based strategies. These strategies are cited as being more effective, as the literature shows they would more likely be if they were used along with having done an FBA (Pelios, 1999).

Research Implications

As the literature shows, successful interventions depend on developing an understanding of the reason for a certain behavior through conducting an FBA (Gable, et. al., 2000). While teachers did report that they have found interventions which they considered to be successful, many of them did not decide on these interventions through the use of FBAs. One reason for this may be that they did not have the training to do so. Another reason may be that teachers who had been in the classroom for many years reported that they were able to identify the causes without doing a formal FBA. Many teachers seem not to see the need for an FBA because they simply did not feel that the behaviors were severe enough.

Another pattern that was noticeable was that teachers who had been working for over ten years, rarely felt like they needed to do an FBA. Teachers felt that they were good at understanding their students without the assessment and did not need to go through the process. They reported that the behavior management training provided as part of their credential program, had given them a basis for their skills, which over the years has become usual care in their classrooms. For the two others who had not received this training as part of their education, it may be that they are not familiar with the process and its benefits.

Many teachers were using behavior charts or self-management checklists which allowed students to gain tangibles such as food items, free time, and prizes. These charts provided teachers with an easy way to monitor and collect data on students' behavior. The literature supports monitoring behavior so that their progress can be evaluated, allowing teachers to make necessary changes when interventions are not working (OSEP, 2007). The reason that these types of supports seem to be so popular is that they are easy to individualize for each student as they are needed. Teachers talked about being able to identify students' interests and tailor rewards to their students. These charts also provide teachers with built in data collection for behavioral goals and objectives.

The literature also supports the interview responses which report that more negative forms of discipline including yelling at students, pointing out what they have done wrong and isolating them via "time out" are not successful. Reasons for the lack of success with the types of interventions were most likely due to not teaching the student a replacement skill to take the place of the problem behavior. As is also cited in the literature, and was reported by teachers, traditional and punitive discipline procedures often cause an increase in problem behaviors including aggression.

Although most local school districts assume that their special education teachers have received behavior management training through their credential programs, the interview results show that not all teachers did in fact receive this training. Based on the results of this study it is recommended that counties and local school districts place more of an emphasis on professional development in positive behavior support for their teachers. Districts currently rely on teachers to seek out these trainings voluntarily. While currently a great deal of emphasis is put on training teachers on techniques for handling students' behavior when behaviors are already

escalating (e.g. crisis management procedures), school districts would be well served to provide training in how to prevent these behaviors from occurring in the first place.

The reported use of positive behavior supports by the teachers in this study is likely the reason that only one reported having to physically restrain a student as the result of aggressive behavior. Additionally, this was the only participant who was using isolation as a strategy to handle such behaviors. This was a first year teacher who had just begun learning behavior management strategies such as positive behavior support.

It seems that new, often untrained teachers often end up with the most complex and aggressive students. It is recommended that these more aggressive students be placed with more experienced or highly trained teachers, in order to provide them with the support they need. Not only would this be beneficial to new teachers who have often not honed their skills as much in this area, but also to the students. Without this experience, teachers are more likely to make use of traditional or punitive forms of behavior management, which may lead to an increase in problems.

Literature supporting the importance of staff training says that intensive training can lead to a decrease in problem behaviors as well as in the need for the use of restraint with students. Out of the ten teachers that participated in the interviews for this study, seven of them had been required to take trainings such as PART or Handle with Care through their employer, in order to learn how to restrain students whose aggressive behavior presented a danger to themselves or others around them. These reactive trainings taught them and their staff how to handle students with aggressive behaviors after they have already escalated to the point where they need to be restrained are often mandatory. None of them however, reported that their school district had required them to take any training teaching them to learn proactive strategies or even basic

classroom management techniques for supporting aggressive or any other disruptive behaviors. While many may assume that teachers are required to get this sort of training as part of their credential program, the results of the interviews show that while this is true in most cases, there are some who do not receive this training. Others who have received this training in the past may benefit from refresher in-services, which may encourage them to begin using evidence-based tools such as FBAs, thus making their interventions more successful. Clearly the need for restraint trainings, and the actual use of physical restraints in the classroom, could be lessened by requiring more proactive trainings encompassing best practice interventions including FBAs. Although teachers need to be trained to protect themselves and their students, prevention may in the long run provide for greater safety and improved quality of life for aggressive students and those around them. Finally, as more and more special education students are being mainstreamed into regular education classrooms with teachers who do not receive as much, if any, behavior management training as part of their credential process, required training in this area is becoming essential.

Limitations

The limitations of this study were that the sample of teachers interviewed was small. Based on the small sample size, the results may not extend to a broad range of behaviors, teachers and classrooms. Another limitation was that no observations of the participants were included in the study. Because of this, there may be some differences between interventions and strategies that teachers reported using and those that they are actually using.

Possibilities for Further Research

Future studies in this area may benefit from conducting observations of the participants in their classrooms actually putting behavior strategies to use. In order to truly evaluate the veracity of what teachers report using as behavior supports, it would be useful to combine interviews with observations, and then compare what teachers said that they were doing with what they were actually observed doing in their classrooms. This would provide a basis for substantiating that teachers are actually putting the interventions they described into practice.

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Appendix A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What are the age/grade levels of the students in your class?
2. Please describe and define any aggressive behaviors that you currently have in your classroom.
3. How frequently do you see aggression in your classroom?
4. Have you received any training on handling behavior problems such as aggression? If so what was the training? (ex. BICM, Behavior Management at school)
5. What interventions are you using in order to deal with aggressive behaviors? Please describe this strategy with as much detail as you can.
6. Did you do any pretreatment before you began using these strategies? (ex. Functional Analysis, scatter plots, ABC, interviews, etc.)
7. Which interventions have you found to be successful?
8. Which interventions have you found to be unsuccessful?
9. Are you aware of any interventions that have been identified as best practices?
 - If so, are you using these interventions or strategies in your classroom and how?
 - If not, why are you not using these strategies in your classroom?
10. What interventions are you using at a classroom level?
11. What about school wide (rules, etc.)?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add?
13. Where do you teach?
14. How long have you been a teacher?
15. How many years of experience do you have teaching students who exhibit aggressive behaviors?

Name:

Age:
Gender:
Ethnicity: