CLEARvoz Journal Vol. 3, No. 1 (2016) 39-46

CLEARvoz Journal

Comparison of Traditional and Innovative Discipline Beliefs in Administrators

Jessica Hannigan & John Hannigan, *California State University, Fresno, California*

Abstract: Traditional methods of discipline have demonstrated to be ineffective in helping students learn or behave. The use of suspensions as the only means of discipline has become a commonly engrained practice for many administrators. This study presents empirical data on the differences between traditional and innovative administrator beliefs about discipline. The findings indicate key differences between traditional and innovative administrator beliefs.

Key words: School Discipline, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, Belief, PBIS Champion Model, Response to Intervention

Introduction

"A student struggling to read is not sent home and expected to return reading fluently, so why is it that a student struggling to behave is sent home and expected to return behaving decently?"

If an administrator is working with a teacher around specific areas needing attention, these areas must be documented in an evaluation as unsatisfactory requiring an assistance plan for improvement. The areas requiring improvement must be recorded, including assistance provided by the administrator documenting the support with dates and observations. Outcomes from the assistance plan are documented and a re-evaluation date scheduled to see how the teacher is responding to the support. If the teacher does not respond, they are referred to the Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program. In PAR, performance goals for the teacher must be in writing, clearly stated and aligned with student learning. Assistance and review must include multiple observations and the school district must provide sufficient staff development to assist the teacher to improve his or her teaching skills and knowledge. The program must have a monitoring component with a written record and the final evaluation of the teacher's participation must be made available for placement in the personnel file of the teacher receiving assistance. Only after years of documentation of support and evaluations, can a district move to release the permanent teacher from their contract and placement at a school. The same amount of extensive individualized support allotted to a struggling teacher is not reciprocated for a student struggling to behave in all cases.

Traditionally, exclusionary discipline is utilized as the only means of teaching behavior to a challenging student. In addition, there are a disproportionate number of minority students disciplined more frequently and punitively compared to their white counterparts. Innovative discipline should be designed to improve behavior, rather than dismissing it for a few days through suspension and hoping the student returns to school 'fixed.' An administrator who only uses suspension to discipline is akin to a teacher who uses only one strategy to teach a child to read. When the student does not respond, the teacher continues to use the same approach hoping for different results; using this approach will produce a child who cannot read. Similarly, using only suspension as a means to teach behavior will produce a child who does not behave.

Context and Background

Over the last 10 years, methods to discipline K-12 students have evolved significantly in comparison to traditional discipline methods. Corporal punishment, zero tolerance, and use of exclusionary practices such as suspensions and expulsions have shifted toward creating positive school environments. In analyzing over twenty years of research on discipline approaches, researchers found that out-of-school suspension and zero-tolerance approaches do not reduce or prevent misbehavior and correlates with lower achievement (Losen, 2011; Irvin, Tobin, Sprague, Sugai, & Vincent, 2004; Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Mayer, 1995; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). In fact, this form of traditional discipline does not make the school feel safer and results in negative outcomes for the child and the community (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Similarly, Balfanz and Boccanfuso (2007) found that students who were suspended and/or expelled were more likely to be held back a grade or drop out of school. Furthermore, the likelihood of being involved in the juvenile justice system is increased significantly for students addressed with a traditional discipline approach (Wald & Losen, 2003; Leone, Christle, Nelson, Skiba, Frey, & Jolivette, 2003). Chard, Smith, and Sugai (1992) summarized discipline practices in education by stating that, "there is one burden that consumes more time, energy, and attention than any other … school discipline" (p. 19). When problem behaviors occur in schools, reacting in a stringent manner has been the common practice, which has not demonstrated to be successful (Chard et al., 1992). It is assumed that students cannot learn with a disruptive student in class. Current research explains the impact exclusionary practices have on non-suspended students. Perry & Morris (2014) found that higher levels of exclusionary discipline within schools over time generate collateral damage, negatively affecting the academic achievement of non-suspended students in punitive contexts.

Theoretical Framework

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) provides an operational framework for achieving academic and behavioral outcomes. Specifically, PBIS is a decision making framework that guides selection, integration, and implementation of the best evidenced-based academic and behavioral practices for improving important academic and behavior outcomes for all students (Sugai et al., 2010). The framework of PBIS is one approach proven successful in addressing challenging behavior within general and special education classroom settings. This approach is based on the premise that students exhibit goal-directed behavior in response to environmental events, social interactions, and other internal emotional states. PBIS emphasizes four integrated elements: 1) Data for decision making, 2) Measurable outcomes supported and evaluated by data, 3) Practices with evidence that these outcomes are achievable, and 4) Systems that efficiently and effectively support implementation of these practices (Sugai & Horner, 2002). In addition to the four integrated elements, PBIS schools organize their

evidenced-based behavioral practices and systems into an integrated continuum in which students experience support based on their behavioral responsiveness to intervention. A three-tiered prevention model, also known as Response to Intervention (RtI), allows for all students to have access to the interventions they need at the primary (Tier 1), secondary (Tier 2), or tertiary (Tier 3) levels of support. Similar to the core components of PBIS, RtI refers to the process that emphasizes how well students respond to changes in instruction and behavior. RtI is an overall integrated system of service delivery that is effective for all students who are at risk of school failure, as well as students in other disability categories (Batsche et al., 2005). The RtI framework provides an improved process and structure for school teams in designing, implementing, and evaluating educational interventions. Specifically, RtI is an array of procedures that can be used to determine if and how students respond to specific changes in instruction and behavior. The essential elements of an RtI approach include the following: providing scientific, research-based instruction and interventions in general education; monitoring and measuring student progress in response to the instruction and interventions and using these measures of student progress to shape instruction and make educational decisions; high quality, research-based instruction and behavioral support in general education; universal (school-wide or district-wide) screening of academics and behavior in order to determine which students need closer monitoring or additional interventions; and multiple tiers of increasingly intense scientific, research-based interventions that are matched to student need (California Department of Education, 2009).

The PBIS Champion Model System is a framework for creating a comprehensive systems approach for the design and delivery of an effective behavior system at a school or district that helps mold the key components of both PBIS and RtI into one system. This action-oriented framework provides quality criteria and how-to steps for developing, implementing, monitoring, and sustaining each level of the system: Bronze (Tier 1), Silver (Tier 2), and Gold (Tier 3). Each tier in the system consists of three categories: Category A–Markers, Category B–Characteristics, and Category C–Academic and Behavioral Goals and the Work of the PBIS Team. Each category is composed of quality criteria and a set of defined actions (Hannigan & Hauser, 2015).

Establishing a solid behavioral foundation with this framework is essential to approach discipline in an innovative fashion. If schools do not have a system that responds to school-wide, targeted/at-risk, or individualized behaviors, they will not have the time to address discipline in a preventative fashion. Applying this framework also requires an administrator to believe in the value of innovative discipline. If an administrator's beliefs around discipline does not align with the innovative approach, it is likely that he/she will continue using traditional methods. Comparing discipline beliefs of traditional and innovative administrators will help the researchers identify trends in both.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify the trends in belief systems about discipline in administrators implementing the PBIS Champion Model at the emergent and gold levels in the Central Valley. A pragmatic, qualitative design was used that included the examination of qualitative survey data to investigate the differences in administrator beliefs from both levels. Specifically, the selected administrators were either in the emergent stage or gold model stage of implementation. Emergent school administrators were defined as administrators in schools at the beginning stages of PBIS Champion Model implementation with high numbers of suspensions from the previous school year. They were self-proclaimed traditional disciplinarians. Gold level

school administrators were defined as administrators with schools in the highest level of PBIS Champion Model implementation. Innovative discipline approaches in lieu of suspensions was common practice at this level. Gold level school administrators were required to maintain a low number of suspensions and demonstrate evidence of innovative discipline to maintain their model status. They self-proclaimed as innovative disciplinarians.

This study was comprised of (n = 60) school administrators in the Central Valley from a variety of grade levels: elementary, secondary, and alternative education sites. Purposeful sampling was utilized in identifying the administrators. Gall, Borg, and Gall (2003) referred to this method as stratified, purposeful sampling because it includes "several cases at defined points of variations (e.g., average, above average, and below average) with respect to the phenomena being studied" (p. 179). Administrators from each level (emergent and gold) were emailed a short survey with two open ended questions. The questions on the survey included the following: (1) What are the key differences between a traditional disciplinarian and an innovative disciplinarian? (2) Describe your discipline approach preference? All survey responses were coded to examine trends between what the researchers' refer to as traditional and innovative disciplinarian beliefs. Comparison of traditional and innovative administrator beliefs reveal clear differences between the two.

Findings and Discussion

For the purpose of this study, the responses were grouped into two categories: (1) **Traditional Disciplinarian** – A traditional disciplinarian is a disciplinarian who prefers the black and white discipline handbook as a guide of how to conduct discipline. This type of disciplinarian believes exclusionary discipline is the most effective and prefers inconveniencing the parents rather than addressing the behavior at school (2) **Innovative Disciplinarian** – An innovative disciplinarian believes in teaching behavior similar to teaching academics. This type of disciplinarian will innovate based on discipline incidents and take the time to assign, implement, and monitor effective discipline. The responses from the administrators were coded and grouped into these two categories. Table 1 summarizes the belief trends of traditional and innovative disciplinarians.

Table 1

Traditional and Innovative Disciplinarian Belief Trends

Respondent Group Trends	Traditional Beliefs	Innovative Beliefs
Online	Believes suspensions will work to change behavior Prefers a black and white discipline handbook with exact number of days outlined for suspensions based on behavior Argues that parents need to be inconvenienced with suspensions Gives in to pressures from others to suspend students Wants to use the student suspension to set an example Argues that suspensions do work and needs justification for doing alternative discipline approaches Has many reasons why they do not have time to use alternative approaches at their school Avoids having difficult conversations about discipline Prefers sending the students home instead of dealing with the behavior at school Wants to show the teachers they are supported by using suspensions to discipline	Believes that discipline should be a teaching opportunity Addresses behavior in an individualized fashion Provides reflection and teaching opportunities as part of the consequence/intervention Monitors the behavior on an ongoing basis Works hard to find the function of the behavior and innovates based on discipline incident Involves parents and teachers Establishes a relationship with the student Does whatever they can to provide a consequence/intervention without having to use suspensions Has the confidence to justify the reasoning for using alternatives Has the skills to build other believers by demonstrating the positive effects of using alternative discipline appropriately

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

Findings suggest key differences between traditional and innovative disciplinarian beliefs. School administrators from Gold level PBIS Champion Model schools gave responses in alignment with innovative beliefs about discipline compared to the emergent school administrator that aligned more with traditional beliefs. Although, an abundance of research indicates the ineffectiveness of traditional discipline methods, many still believe in it and, therefore, need a framework to help shift their beliefs and response to student misbehavior. Based on these findings, the following future practice recommendations are made for administrators to reference as a starting point to shifting their beliefs towards innovative discipline practices:

- **Beliefs** – Instruction is approached with a belief that every student can and will learn. With this belief, every resource and support is exhausted to provide a student with the resources needed to support learning. Approaching behavior in a similar manner is the initial step of shifting belief systems around discipline.
- **Invest in preventative Response to Intervention (RtI) systems for both academics and behavior** – Invest in building the capacity of school staff on creating effective systems for responding to students school-wide, targeted/at risk groups, and individualized both in academics and behavior. This investment will help administrators create a preventative culture at their school.
- **Visibility and Active Supervision** – Administrators need to be out of their office and visible to build effective relationships and make meaningful connections with kids. Active supervision requires an intentional focus on movement, scanning, and positive interactions during supervision; this is critical and needs to be modeled by the administrator.
- **Invest in Gaining Faculty Commitment** - Take time to educate staff on innovative discipline approaches. Make it a priority to share school behavior data, gather input, and work with staff on discipline so they feel part of the process.
- **Create and nurture a behavior team** – Every school needs a behavior team to set behavior goals, establish and monitor behavior interventions, and support with preventative systems work. Use a monitoring tool to ensure data is being used to identify and monitor the progress of your focus students.
- **Create a toolkit of effective discipline** – Organize preventative discipline ideas in a toolkit for future reference. As administrators conduct discipline in this manner, they begin to accumulate a set of effective actions. Therefore, if there is another case similar, the administrator can reference their toolkit to help save time.
- **Supporting a system for alternatives** – Although it may be challenging to allocate so many resources for one student, the ultimate goal is to help the student learn and change his/her behavior. Without a deliberate focus on alternatives, the student will continue taking the time of your staff throughout the school year with continuing behavior challenges. Teaching desired outcomes through alternatives to suspension will reduce the frequency of repeat offenses, thus creating less time dealing with discipline than using suspension alone.

Past and current research on this topic has clearly demonstrated the negative effects of traditional discipline approaches on students and school culture. However, the findings from this study demonstrate current evidence of traditional beliefs in administrators throughout the Central Valley. Key differences were identified between traditional and innovative administrators. Most

significantly, the dominant trend separating the beliefs of the two groups were traditional administrators believed suspensions work and innovative administrators focus on using discipline to teach behavior. The researchers hypothesized a difference would exist when comparing traditional and innovative disciplinarians. This hypothesis was further reinforced by the findings that Gold level PBIS Champion Model administrators used innovative approaches to discipline and the emergent level administrators preferred a traditional approach. Future research in this area needs to focus on whether the Gold level administrators experienced a career defining moment that shifted their thinking toward innovative discipline practices. Prior to establishing the Champion Model at their school, many of the Gold level administrators met similar criteria to the emergent administrators. It would be interesting to investigate the correlation between establishing a model behavior system in a school and administrator belief systems about discipline.

References

Balfanz, R., & Boccanfuso, C. (2007). Falling off the Path to Graduation: Early Indicators Brief. *Baltimore, MD*.

Batsche, G., Elliot, J., Graden, L. J., Grimes, J., Kovaleski, J. F., Prasse, D. Tilly, D. W. (2005). *Response to intervention: Policy considerations and implementation*. Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

California Department of Education. (2009). *Determining specific learning disability eligibility using response to instruction and intervention (RtI²)*. Retrieved from http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/sr/documents/sldeligibltyrti2.doc

Chard, D., Smith, S., & Sugai, G. (1992). Packaged discipline programs: a consumer's guide. In *1992 Oregon conference monograph. Eugene, OR: University of Oregon*.

Gall, M. D., Borg, W. R., & Gall, J. P. (2003). Educational research: An introduction (6th ed.). White Plains, NY: Longman.

Hannigan, J., Hauser, L. (2015) The PBIS Tier One Handbook: A Practical Approach to Implementing the Champion Model. Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks.

Irvin, L. K., Tobin, T. J., Sprague, J. R., Sugai, G., & Vincent, C. G. (2004). Validity of office discipline referral measures as indices of school-wide behavioral status and effects of school-wide behavioral interventions. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, *6*(3), 131-147.

Leone, P.E., Christle, C.A., Nelson, M., Skiba, R., Frey, A., & Jolivette, K. (2003), *School failure, race and disability: Promoting positive outcomes, decreasing vulnerability for involvement with the juvenile delinquency system*, The National Center on Education, Disability, and Juvenile Justice.

Losen, D.J. (2011). *Discipline Policies, Successful Schools and Racial Justice*; Irvin, Tobin, Sprague, Sugai, & Vincent, 2004; Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Mayer, 1995.

Perry, B. L., & Morris, E. W. (2014). Suspending Progress Collateral Consequences of Exclusionary Punishment in Public Schools. *American Sociological Review*, 0003122414556308.

Skiba, R. J., & Rausch, M. K. (2006). Zero tolerance, suspension, and expulsion: Questions of equity and effectiveness. *Handbook of classroom management: Research, practice, and contemporary issues*, 1063-1089.

Skiba, R., & Peterson, R. (1999). The dark side of zero tolerance: Can punishment lead to safe schools?. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 372-382.

Sugai, G., Spaulding, S. A., Irvin, L. K., Horner, R. H., May, S. L., Emeldi, M., & Tobin, T. J. (2010). Schoolwide Social-Behavioral Climate, Student Problem
Behavior, and Related Administrative Decisions. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 12*(2), 69-78.
Sugai, G., & Horner, R. H. (2002). The evolution of discipline practices: School-wide positive behavior supports. *Child and Family Behavior Therapy, 24*, 23-50.
Wald, J. & Losen, D. (2003), *Deconstructing the School-to-Prison Pipeline: New Directions for Youth Development*.