Preparing Educators to Address the Rising Problem of Behavior Problems

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Executive Summary

Classrooms are facing numerous challenges within today’s educational landscape, with one of the most pressing issues being the shortage of qualified teachers prepared to handle the growing urgency of managing problem behaviors. This shortage has created a need for ongoing professional development opportunities that can help teachers better support the diverse needs of their students. In recent years, there has been an increased focus on evidence-based practices such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), social skills, and emotional development, which have shown promise in improving outcomes for students. Additionally, the role of mental health in the classroom has become increasingly recognized, with a growing emphasis on creating supportive classroom environments and promoting positive mental health practices. Classroom management and climate are also important factors that can impact student success.

KEYWORDS

Problem Behavior, Challenging Behavior, Disruptive Behavior, Teacher Preparation, Teacher Training, Professional Development, PBIS, Social Skills, Emotional Development, Mental Health, Disproportionality, Student Discipline
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Problem Behaviors Are Becoming a Big Problem: Student Disruptive Behavior on the Rise

Behavioral challenges in the classroom are on the rise in terms of frequency and severity, and teachers are not equipped to manage it. Problem behaviors include bullying, tantrums, defiant behavior, elopement (running off), self-injury, aggression, unresponsiveness, emotional outbursts, and non-compliance. More than 70% of teachers report a recent increase in disruptive behavior in the classroom compared to 66% in 2019 (Prothero, 2023). Tantrums and defiant behavior are frequent and more than half of teachers report that these behaviors happen multiple times weekly and 25% report that they happen multiple times per day (EAB, 2019). One of the results of frequent behavioral issues in the classroom is that students end up losing about 3 weeks of instructional time (EAB, 2019). There are many factors that are contributing to this rise in disruptive behaviors including 68% lower student morale than before the pandemic and about 33% of students not being motivated, according to teacher reports (Prothero, 2023). Another contributing factor is the negative impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on student’s socio-emotional development with 87% of schools reporting increased incidents of misconduct, rowdiness, disrespect toward staff and peers, and prohibited use of electronic devices (NCES, 2022). In addition, more than 70% of schools are reporting dramatic increases in absenteeism.
Another important consideration for the increases in disruptive behaviors is the rise in mental health issues for students. Students may exhibit additional issues such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse, suicide ideation, self-harm, and other mental health issues. 1 in 5 children and teens in the United States exhibit symptoms of a mental health disorder (CDC, 2023). The most common mental health diagnoses in children and teens are depression (3.2%), anxiety (7.1%), behavior problems (7.4%), and Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (9.4%) (CDC, 2023). Often, mental health disorders overlap or co-occur. For instance, many children and teens with depression also have anxiety (73.8%) and/or behavior problems (47.2%). When not treated or addressed, mental health issues can adversely impact a child’s emotional and social well-being and their ability to learn or participate in everyday activities with their peers. Teaching social skills and working on emotional development are effective and pro-active approaches to targeting mental health concerns and teaching these skills has been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, substance use, and impulsive or dangerous behaviors (e.g., Taylor, et al., 2017). Improving student wellness skills can also improve self-care, peer interactions, attendance, behavior, and academic performance (e.g., Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; DePaoli, Atwell, & Bridgeland, 2017). It is essential to target mental health directly by providing students and educators with the knowledge and understanding that is needed to be able to identify issues and provide support. But how can teachers help their students when they do not have the necessary training?
Running on Empty: Teachers Are Not Prepared

Only about a third of teachers are effectively trained to manage challenging behaviors (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2020). More than 40% of teachers think that they are not fully prepared for classroom management and handling student behavior (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014). This is partially due to the paucity of coursework and training in college programs for teachers. Only 15% of teacher special education programs provide sufficient coursework on classroom management and only about 33% of programs require teacher candidates to practice these skills (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014). While Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) are known to help with behavior management, only 63% of teachers reported having any training in it, and only 57% of teachers reported that they use it regularly (EAB, 2019).

In addition to the insufficient training of new teachers, there is a concerning trend of teacher shortages and lack of on-going professional development to meet the needs of students. In the 2020-2021 school year, 44 states reported shortages in teachers and that has jumped to 48 states reporting teacher shortages in the 2021-2022 school year (Gaines, 2022). In many cases, unqualified teacher candidates are placed in classrooms with a provisional license. This can be problematic when the candidates have not had sufficient training in classroom management. This can also add to the increasing numbers of teachers leaving the field and ultimately, these issues affect student safety and outcomes.

Is It Getting Too Hard? Teachers Are Overwhelmed

In addition to the lack of appropriate training in behavior management, teachers frequently suffer from extreme stress and burnout. This, of course, adds to teacher shortages and has a negative impact on students. The level of burnout is directly related to
classroom management skills of the teacher burnout can have profound consequences such as emotional exhaustion, difficulties with emotion regulation, depersonalization, negative perceptions of students, and poor job satisfaction (Gilmour, et al., 2022). These symptoms can add to the disproportionalities in student discipline and education placement.

Teacher burnout and stress can affect their well-being and sense of belonging in the workplace. This can lead to poor attendance, attrition, and lower student outcomes. The teaching profession is one of the biggest high-risk careers mostly due to occupational risk hazards such as workload, lack of social support, lack of training and resources, difficulty with classroom management, role ambiguity, etc. (Alarcon, 2011). PreK-12 teachers fill one of the largest occupational groups in the country (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014) but teacher stress is extremely high compared to their professions with about half of teachers leaving education within the first 5 years of teaching (Ingersoll, 2001) and about 15% leaving education every year (about 500,000 teachers/year) costing taxpayers about $2.2 billion/year (Haynes, 2014). Hayes’ research also reported that teacher burnout rates are about 50% higher for Title I schools and more than 70% higher for teachers serving a majority of students of color. Burnout can also lead to higher absenteeism, low job satisfaction, and can even have serious impacts on mental and physical health (Merida-Lopez & Extremera, 2017).

A great deal of studies report that there is a significant relationship between teacher stress and a student’s ability to regulate emotions and manage stress (e.g., Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). Our ability to identify, manage, regulate, and evaluate our emotions
and to perceive, understand, and respond to the emotions of others is referred to as emotional intelligence (EI) (Cherry, K., 2020). Lower emotional intelligence is associated with higher burnout and decreased abilities in regulating emotions and managing stress (Merida-Lopez & Extremara, 2017). Lower levels of stress and teacher burnout can result in improved outcomes for students (Herman, Hickmon-Rosa, & Reinke, 2018) and when teachers experience difficulties with coping with stress it can lead to behavioral problems with students and lower academic outcomes (Wentzel, 2010). The COVID pandemic led to increased stress and burnout for many educators. In one study, 55% of teachers reported that they were thinking about leaving the field of teaching (Kamentz, 2022). Another study with over 300 educators identified certain factors that contributed to teacher burnout and stress which included anxiety and stress about COVID-19, anxiety about teaching under COVID conditions, parent and student communication, and support from administration (Pressley, 2021).

Rising absenteeism is not just happening for students, but for teachers as well and 70% of schools reported that there has been an increase in absences with staff since the pandemic, and 99% reported that it is not always possible to find substitute teachers so schools must rely on administrators, non-teaching staff, and others to cover classes on a regular basis (NCES, 2022). Teacher absenteeism increases behavioral challenges in the classroom, often with less prepared staff who struggle to keep order. Lack of preparation and training, inconsistent adult presence, and issues such as COVID and social-justice issues leave
many schools resorting to traditional discipline practices that are often not only ineffective, but harmful.

How School Discipline Is Being Handled

In recent years, there has been a growing concern over the way school discipline is being handled. Studies have shown that certain groups of students, such as Black, Latinx, and those with disabilities, are disproportionately targeted and disciplined by school officials (Lehmann & Meldrum, 2022; Whitford et al., 2019). Current disciplinary practices often involve a punitive approach, where students who are perceived to be breaking rules are met with harsh consequences, such as suspensions or expulsions. However, this approach has been shown to be ineffective at preventing future misbehavior and may even worsen the problem by pushing students out of school and into the juvenile justice system. In addition, studies have shown that the use of suspensions and expulsions is often arbitrary, with some students receiving harsher punishments than others for similar offenses (Erickson & Pearson, 2021; Gerlinger, 2021; Yaluma et al., 2021). The issue of disproportionality in student discipline is particularly troubling, as it suggests that certain groups of students are being unfairly targeted by school officials. This can have serious consequences, not only for the students themselves, but also for their families and communities. Students who are suspended or expelled are more likely to drop out of school, which can lead to a range of negative outcomes, including lower earnings and higher rates of incarceration.
To address this issue, there has been a growing movement towards preventative practices, which refers to any actions taken by a teacher to avoid unwanted conduct. *(Preventative Approaches, n.d.)* These practices may include restorative justice programs, which involve bringing together those who have been harmed by a student’s behavior and working to repair the harm done, as well as social-emotional learning programs, which teach students skills such as self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making (Hashim et al., 2018; Hoffman, 2009). Preventative practices may also involve changes to school policies and practices, such as eliminating zero-tolerance policies, which require schools to impose harsh punishments for certain offenses regardless of the circumstances (Berlowitz et al., 2017). Instead, schools may adopt more flexible and individualized approaches to discipline, which consider the unique needs and circumstances of each student.

Overall, the issue of school discipline and disproportionality in student discipline is a complex and multifaceted one. While current practices may be exacerbating the problem, there is growing momentum towards more preventative and restorative approaches that aim to address the underlying causes of misbehavior and promote positive outcomes for all students. **Without proper training and preparation, school staff will not be successful in responding to or preventing disruptive behaviors.**

**Rethinking Professional Development and Teacher Preparation**

While professional development can have immense benefits for educators, often, it is not targeted toward practical applications, such as classroom management. In many cases, professional development is repetitive, introductory, and does not match with the reality of managing a classroom (Woulfin & Jones, 2021). Specialized and specific training is required to fully prepare educators. Professional development that utilizes interactions
with colleagues can improve the effectiveness of teachers (Brock & Carter, 2017). In addition, working collaboratively with peers and getting support from administrators can lead to stronger commitment and improved motivation (Garwood, Werts, Varghese, & Gosay, 2018). **High quality professional development can be the key to keeping educators** and has been shown to affect their decision to stay in education or at their school (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). In addition to building classroom management skills, it is important to help educators learn to handle their own stress and improve their mental well-being. Teaching them skills in emotional wellness and mental health can improve job satisfaction and create safer and more positive classroom environments (Whalen, 2021).

To effectively manage a classroom of students, educators must learn how behavior works and what procedures are best for managing behavior. Competency-based training (CBT) and performance-based teacher education (PBTE) are the most common professional development procedures used to train teachers (Kirkpatrick, Akers, & Rivera, 2019). These protocols require that teachers practice and demonstrate what they learn and that the concepts are broken down into manageable components. BST is similar but consists of more hands-on training and has been shown to be more effective than traditional approaches to professional development (Brock et al, 2017). BST includes instruction, modeling, rehearsal, and feedback (Leaf, et al. 2015). All components can be delivered in person or remotely and several studies support the use of video modeling for the modeling step of the teaching sequence (e.g., Whittenburg, et al., 2022).
Another approach to classroom management is to proactively teach social skills, wellness, and emotion management, which has been shown to improve student behavior, relationships, academic performance, emotion regulation, responsible decision making, and resilience (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). Researchers have identified the core components of an effective wellness program to include social skills, identifying feelings in self and others, and behavioral coping skills/relaxation (e.g. Lawson, McKenzie, Becker, Selby, and Hoover, 2019). Other important components for an effective wellness program include providing opportunities for students to practice, having multi-year programming, providing training and implementation support for staff, and having at least one evaluation study with a comparison group and pre-post measures that shows a positive outcome on academics, conduct, emotional distress, or positive social behaviors (CASEL, 2013). In special education, teaching these skills can help to decrease challenging behaviors such as bullying, aggression, and harassment (Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2015).

Professional development in wellness and social development has been shown in multiple research studies to improve teacher’s well-being and to reduce burnout and stress and improve student outcomes (Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Whalen, 2021). Teachers’ comfort in implementation and their perceptions of student motivation and behavior had the most significant effect of their stress, perceived teaching efficacy, and job satisfaction (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012). The most important skills for educators to learn in order to have positive relationships with their students, create and maintain a healthy learning
environment, and manage student emotional and behavioral challenges are self-awareness, social awareness, cultural awareness, prosocial values, and self-management (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

To build the proficiencies and confidence of educators to more effectively manage their classroom and teach their students, the RethinkEd multi-tiered Behavior Series can help educators and administrators to learn the basic skills of behavior management including prevention, responding, setting up the classroom environment, relationship-building, data collection, enhancing student motivation, reporting, personal bias, compassion fatigue, and creating positive learning environments. This flexible, on-demand series is appropriate for all levels of educators and staff. Behavior intervention tools such as a point system and incident reporting can also help teachers to keep behavior on track, and more intensive behaviors can be addressed using behavior contracts, self-monitoring, and targeted behavior tracking. Preventative tools for teaching important skills such as awareness of self and others, social skills, stress management, and self-management are also available in the Wellness and Mental Health series for professional development and student instruction.
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About Us

RethinkEd combines the power of technology and research to deliver innovative, scalable, and evidence-based instructional materials and supports for all learners and educators, including those with disabilities. The comprehensive suite of tools ensures that every student develops the academic, behavioral, and social/emotional skills they need to succeed in school, at work, and in life. RethinkEd positions educators, students, and families for success.

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