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A Case Study for a Hybrid Model of Behavior Modification

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Abstract

Schools have an obligation to maintain a safe and orderly learning environment. Additionally, schools have an obligation to foster productive behaviors in their students that will mitigate for the need to suspend students. In an effort to reduce student suspensions, many schools and school systems are turning to Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems (PBIS) for solutions. The full paper provides a case study for an alternative discipline strategy that provides teachers with greater autonomy while reducing the need to monitor individual student behavior.

Keywords

discipline, behavior, self-agency, operant conditioning, social cognitive theory

1. The Problem

Schools have been tasked with the onerous responsibility of creating a balancing act between a safe and orderly learning environment while simultaneously redirecting disruptive students. No one would argue that either task is easy, but everyone would recognize that both tasks are essential.

In an effort to balance these dual responsibilities, many schools have turned to Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems (PBIS), recognizing that lowering student suspensions should correlate to a safer school environment. PBIS generally work to create an environment where positive behaviors are rewarded, and a tiered level of consequences are used when behavior does not reach expectations. (Note 1) This framework is closely associated with operant conditioning, a system of positive and negative reinforcers.

The heavy reliance upon PBIS to reduce suspensions is not without problems. First, it is very difficult to have all teachers react to events in the same way. Failure to create a standard environment means that students are subjected to multiple “mini-environments” during the day. In some of these instances, a particular behavior may meet strong objection while in other instances the same behavior may be met with indifference by the teacher.

It follows that faithful implementation of PBIS requires teachers to have high fidelity when introducing both negative and positive reinforcers. This school-wide necessity is nearly impossible to manage in even the best of circumstances. Teachers have bad days, students have bad days, teachers are sick, and a substitute teacher creates an entirely different environment with entirely different expectations. The variances that occur on a daily basis are almost innumerable.

There is one more problem with the foundations of many PBIS. The programs work to persuade students to be autonomous and display self-responsibility, but the source of their behavioral strategies is rooted in operant conditioning. Skinner (1974) argued that people respond to past stimuli and can add nothing to their performance on their own. This thinking correctly recognizes that the environment shapes behavior while missing the very important point that behavior also shapes the environment. As Skinner famously put it: "A person does not act upon the world, the world acts upon him". (p. 211)

Rewards certainly have their place, but study participants were not keen to institute a strict system that relied heavily upon them. Nor were they enthusiastic about integrating a view of behavior whose major proponent, Skinner, asserted that self-agency was an illusion. Furthermore, it was recognized that management of a reward system would be time consuming and there was understandable concern that students would become resistant to any expectation that did not have an accompanying extrinsic reward.

Due to this, an effort was undertaken to build a system that emphasized student success in the classroom as the ultimate reward. The case study that ensues leans upon the principles Skinner espouses while incorporating strategies that flow from social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997). The foci of the efforts were:

- 1) Minimization of the taxing demands placed upon teachers to maintain classroom control,
- 2) Facilitation of productive student behaviors, and
- 3) Internalization of these behaviors by students, minimizing the need for teachers to police the classroom environment.

Brevity does not allow for a full explanation of social cognitive theory. (Note 2) That said, Bandura recognized that the relationship between the environment and behavior is bidirectional, as opposed to the one-way path proposed by Skinner. Furthermore, social cognitive theory places strong emphasis upon a person's belief in their ability to organize and execute courses of action necessary for successful attainment of goals. In short, the theory provides a conceptual starting point to help students develop productive self-agency, where they self-monitor and correct their behaviors. The ability to self-correct personal behaviors can then be generalized to an effective learning environment.

1.1 The Hybrid Model

Skinner's principles of operant conditioning are powerful and useful, but they are not sufficient. As noted, implementation of a highly controlled environment in a complex situation like a school is problematic and perhaps impossible. Asking a multitude of teachers to create a complex and unified behavioral system would likely require them to spend nearly all of their time managing the program,

rather than facilitating an effective teaching and learning environment. Recognizing this to be true, the study incorporated elements of Bandura's social cognitive theory, specifically emphasizing self-efficacy and outcome expectancy in an effort to meet the goals stated above.

What follows is a real-world study that was undertaken to reduce the amount of classroom disruptions, decrease suspensions, and free teachers from the onerous burden of maintaining something akin to a police presence in their classroom.

2. Method

The school setting was a middle school with approximately 850 students. Across a nine-week period, the number of referrals from teachers ranged from 0-62. Many of the students would profess they were not sure why they were sent to the office and would disagree with the details the teacher had provided; details that took time away from effective instruction to resolve.

As a first step, teachers were called to a faculty meeting where they were informed that referrals were no longer in play except for major offenses that needed immediate action. The result was predictable, many teachers thought they had lost their last option for class control.

It was then explained what would replace the old system of referrals. Teachers were instructed to contact the office any time they sensed a problem was brewing. They were not to wait until there was an actual problem. So, for example, if a student had been asked to redirect and that request was met with further disruption, the teacher would contact the office.

That contact initiated a rapid response, ala Skinner. The principal guaranteed the teachers that he or a designee if he were not available, would be in their room in a minute or less. Entry into the room was accompanied by a short announcement that the teacher had requested the principal's presence, and the principal was obligated to show up. This was done intentionally so the teacher was perceived as being in complete control of the situation.

Upon entering the room, the principal would affirm the teacher and then announce that it was incumbent upon everyone to stay on task and to be respectful of others who were also trying to learn. The whole enterprise took less than fifteen seconds to accomplish; no student was called out because the intervention occurred before a real problem began.

If a problem persisted, the teacher would call again and this time the principal would ask for a name. The student and the principal made a quick trip outside the room, where the student was asked: Who is in charge?

The typical reply was the principal is in charge. Not true. Who is in charge? The teacher? Wrong again. Who is in charge? Me? (the student).

When the student came to the correct answer, there was another quick conversation where the student was informed they had the power to make the principal return to the room very quickly or never again. If they chose a revisit, the student was also informed that would create a scenario where they were removed from the room and were required to complete assignments in a sterile environment. Students

were now charged to manage their behavior and weigh the consequences. Self-agency was emphasized but the teacher had been largely removed from the time burden to create these behaviors.

This process was repeated many times over the course of about three weeks. The students, in multiple locations with multiple teachers, were able to witness that it did not really matter which room they were in, the principal responded quickly. This helped to facilitate the school-wide environment that PBIS relies upon to create outcomes with fidelity.

The students were also able to learn the process if you will. They could predict what would happen next. That would soon change. A central goal of the study was to have students believe they could predict the process. This helped to minimize behaviors in the first phase of implementation, while also setting up for the next phase of the case study where further reduction of the need for external controls for student behavior occurred.

2.1 Phase 2

In phase 1 the teachers had been instructed to never go near their intercom box unless they were going to call for the principal. In phase 2 these instructions were modified so that teachers, at the first hint of a problem, would start working their way in the direction of the intercom.

Students knew the routine and recognized this was a precursor to a principal visit. Except this time the teacher would not call if the problem resolved itself. It did not take long for students to think that things had returned to normal, and the directives of the teacher could now be measured against her patience and their ingenuity for generating disruptions. As noted, that was intentional.

After a suitable amount of time, where the learned behaviors started to decay, the teacher would continue to the intercom and once again, make the call for the principal. This action elicited surprise and often agitation from the students. They wanted to know why a call was made this time when someone else did the same thing a minute ago, for example.

This is when the teacher would announce: I make the decision as to if and when I will use the intercom. You now know the expectations, and your behavior should no longer be a response to having the principal visit. However, I always maintain that option if and when I believe it is necessary.

Students were now on a random reinforcement schedule. The teacher did not have to burden herself with overuse of the intercom, but knew it was available as the first step to suppress problems before they arose. The students knew what could happen, but they could not predict when it might happen. This reality served as an effective constraint to mitigate for behaviors that could otherwise escalate into disruptions.

2.1.1 Principles into Practice and the Subsequent Results

- 1) Skinnerian principles of behavior were put to use. A stimulus/response pathway was created and reinforced for a sufficient time that students could anticipate what would happen next.
- 2) Additionally, and importantly, principles of self-agency were employed. The students were challenged to recognize that they possessed self-agency and the choices they made would determine the outcomes that resulted.

3) The students were then placed on a random reinforcement schedule where they could not predict if or when a behavior would be recognized as problematic. What they did know was that the teacher's movement towards the intercom might initiate a rapid response from the office.

There were several positive outcomes that were produced as a result of this intervention. First, the number of referrals decreased dramatically to the point where there were weeks where fewer than five students' behaviors were being addressed. Prior to the study, it was not unusual for the school administration to see anywhere from 5-15 students per day.

Second, teachers were much more enthusiastic about managing behavior. They were freed from many of the petty disruptions that did not warrant discipline but were impacting classroom effectiveness. The strategies employed in the study eliminated the need for a school-wide environment that was dutifully monitored and implemented by everyone.

Third, by placing students on a random reinforcement schedule, teachers were further freed from managing the classroom environment. Significantly, these strategies shifted the teacher from having to manage the behavioral rewards for an entire class to managing the learning environment for that class, a task that was far more important. Now, the teacher used their professional judgment as to when an intervention might be needed and students could no longer use the excuse that other teachers did not care about a certain rule.

Fourth, the opportunity for the principal to visit classes in this process allowed for real-time observations of teacher preparation and the actual practices being used in the class. The relationship between the administration and instructional staff became symbiotic.

Fifth, students began to buy into their ability to shape their environment. There was a cultural shift, as evidenced by a marked decrease in office referrals. Prior to the study, as noted, it was not unusual to see 15 students per day for minor discipline disruptions. After complete implementation of the effort, student referrals dropped to approximately 1 per day and many days saw no referrals due to class disruption. (Note 3) Furthermore, students that had been part of the actual intervention process were identified for follow-up when appropriate. Many of these students had become callous to discipline, and for them, a trip to the office where they were congratulated on their successes and they could report on their academic progress was a welcome replacement to the negative reinforcers they were generally provided.

Finally, as the program became routine, the principal designated other administrative staff to respond to a class disruption, freeing the principal to deal with other administrative tasks.

3. Conclusion

Programs that rely upon teacher management of individual student behaviors are inevitably going to be labor intensive for the teacher and maintaining fidelity for these efforts will be very hard to accomplish. Still, discipline is integral to an effective learning environment, and there has to be a means of facilitating positive student behavior, preferably without asking the teacher to perform a Herculean

task.

The behavioral program suggested above relied upon well-established constructs from operant conditioning and social cognitive theory related to behavioral modification. Teachers were relieved to forego the onerous burden of trying to maintain individual discipline. Students began to rethink their roles, and they could see the advantages of grade improvement and the increasing cooperative nature of the classroom. The administration benefited by gaining additional time to address administrative tasks beyond discipline. Finally, and importantly, the program required no formal training, as every teacher was able to frame the program within their own unique circumstances and make it work for them.

References

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Notes

Note 1. See

<https://www.understood.org/en/learning-thinking-differences/treatments-approaches/educational-strategies/pbis-how-schools-support-positive-behavior#:~:text=How%20PBIS%20works%20%23Tier%201%20is%20a%20schoolwide%20C,supports%20and%20services%20because%20of%20ongoing%20behavioral%20concerns> for an excellent explanation of the thinking behind PBIS and the tiered system of interventions.

Note 2. It has been my experience, based upon nearly thirty-years as an administrator, teaching leadership courses at the college level, and conducting professional development across several states in dozens of schools, that teachers tend to rely heavily upon “carrots and sticks” to induce positive student behavior. I have also countless laments count that “carrots and sticks” just do not work in some instances. Many teachers, after instituting a process similar to the one described above, have noted positive shifts in many students with problematic behavior. Freeing teachers from “police work” can open the door to behavioral and academic breakthroughs.

Note 3. Interestingly, there was an uptick in behavioral issues during lunch, an environment the study had not considered. The disruptions were not major, but they did mirror many of the behaviors that had been problematic in the class prior to the study.