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The Impact of In-Service Education on Reducing Aversive Interactions between Staff and Students with Serious Emotional and Behavior Problems

By

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Introduction

This paper is about the impact of staff inservice education on the quality of interactions between staff and students at an educational facility for at-risk youth operated by the Orange County Department of Education. Data on the use of punitive behavior management techniques was gathered before, during, and after staff training in the use of more positive approaches to responding to disruptive behavior. Staff members use of punitive techniques as physical restraint and suspensions was greatly reduced following the training.

Millions of children come to school suffering the effects of poverty, neglect, or abuse (Kozol, 1992). These conditions often result in disruptive and difficult to manage classroom behavior (Passaro, et al. 1994). If a pattern of disruptive behavior is established during a child's early school career the risk for later more serious antisocial behavior is increased (Stage and Quiroz, 1997:333). In addition, a pattern of disruptive behavior places a student a greater risk of poor academic performance and eventually school failure (Stage and Quiroz 1997:333).

The seriousness of these behaviors demands skillful and early intervention. Unfortunately this is an area where many teachers lack training. Generally, interventions are "driven by strategies designed to manage disturbing behaviors instead of strategies to meet the needs of young persons" (Passaro et al., 1994:31). Passaro and his colleagues (1994) have proposed implementing programs that not only reduce disruptive behaviors but also, promote learning while increasing the classroom success of students. Such programs would emphasize the reduction of negative interactions between teachers and students while increasing the number of positive interactions.

Description of the Setting and Problem

Post Lane Elementary School is an educational facility operated by the Orange County Department of Education in the Alternative, Charter, and Correctional Education Schools and Services (ACCESS) Division. It serves children six through twelve years of age who are residents of a nearby group home. The facility serves twelve to twenty-five children depending on the current group home census. These students are divided into two classrooms, each with a teacher and instructional assistant. A School Psychologist and a Resource Specialist provide support services about once a week. There is a ratio of about one adult for every four students.

The group home is a residential treatment center for children five to twelve years of age. These children have been separated from their parents/guardians and suffer from severe emotional and behavioral disorders. The goal of the treatment center is to either reunite clients with their families or find an alternative long-term placement. The average stay is 16 to 25 months. Individual, group, and family treatment are provided.

At the time of the initial data collection, twenty-four of the most recent and current student profiles were analyzed. The students at Post Lane ranged in age from six to twelve years old, with a ratio of five boys to every three girls. Fourteen students (58%) were identified as White, three were African-American (13%), two were Latino (8%), and five (20%) were of a ethnically mixed background. Out of the twenty-four students, eleven (46%) received special education services. Nine out of the twenty-four students (38%) were diagnosed with a DSM IV Axis I diagnosis. These included seven students with a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), two students with a diagnosis of oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), one student with conduct disorder, one student having psychotic disorder-not otherwise specified, and one student with multiple diagnoses including ODD, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), dysthymic disorder , and ADHD.

Previous to the training described herein, the staff at Post Lane Elementary primarily utilized punitive approaches such as time-outs, physical restraints, and suspensions as interventions. It became apparent to the ACCESS Director, site staff, and support personnel that these techniques were not effective in reducing the frequency or intensity of disruptive behaviors. Staff members were involved too often in such high risk interventions as physical restraint and students were missing instruction on a regular basis thereby increasing their risk for academic failure. Clearly, a shift to a more positive and proactive approach was needed.

The Solution: A Collaborative Approach to Staff Education

The Director of ACCESS decided that the staff needed to shift to using positive interventions. He mandated that physical restraint and removal were to be used only when student or staff safety was concerned. Staff members met once a week for fifteen weeks to

review materials developed by one the authors (P.P.) and discuss alternatives to the punitive approaches previously used. These meetings were typically about an hour long. The goal of the training was to decrease the number of negative interactions, physical restraints, and suspensions; and increase the number of positive interactions between staff and students. The program focused on the strategies of differential reinforcement and positive correction to accomplish these goals.

First, staff members were encouraged to use differential reinforcement, e.g., acknowledging appropriate prosocial behavior and ignoring inconsequential negative or inappropriate behavior. The recognition and rewarding of appropriate behavior is one simple yet powerful way staff members can interact with students to create a more positive classroom environment. Research continues to gather demonstrating that differential reinforcement is effective in reducing problem behaviors and increasing appropriate behavior (Lewis 1998:4) and it has been described as the "…most powerful motivator and behavioral management tool available to classroom teachers." (Aber and Heward 1998:399).

Latham (1988:9) has observed that eight out of every ten interactions between teachers an students are negative, , with frequent use of phrases like "Don't do that!" or "Didn't I tell you to stop that?" He recommends that this ratio be inverted so that there at least eight positive teacher-student interactions to every one negative interaction. Staff members were encouraged to strive for this ratio of positive to negative interactions and were coached on a variety of specific methods to reinforce appropriate behavior and increase positive interactions. These techniques ranged from the use of simple gestures such as a smile or verbal praise to more formal methods such as points earned as part of a token economy.

Sometimes behavior is impossible to ignore. When dealing with a student who does not respond to ignoring, praise, or redirection, staff members were encouraged to use positive correction. Prior to the training, corrections most often took the form of punishment, coercion, or threats such as "Do this or else!". These strategies, like other aversive techniques, are not effective in the reduction of disruptive or inappropriate behavior (CCBD 1990:243).

In order for the corrective action to be effective, it must be instructive to the students and incorporate a positive model. The model taught staff members has four steps. First, the staff member responds to the student with a positive comment, "You started out with a great morning, coming in quietly and beginning your work, thank you." Next the staff member states the nature of the student's mistake as objectively as possible: "But, right now you are disrupting the classroom by yelling and screaming out." The staff member then clearly describes his or her expectation of the student: "If you have a question, or need some help, I need you to follow the class rules (refer back to previous expectations already in place, perhaps a list of rules on wall) and raise your hand." Then the staff member asks the student to repeat this expectation: "What is it that I need you to do in order for me to call on you?" The staff member then immediately recognizes and reinforces whatever steps the student takes towards fulfilling the stated expectation. This model can be used to correct behaviors ranging from failure to follow directions to fights between students.

The Results

ACCESS guidelines require that Behavioral Incident Reports be filled out following every suspension or use of physical restraint. Data from these reports was collected and tabulated for a total of twenty-four months. Data was analyzed for four periods: 1) the six

months prior to training; 2) the six month period that included the fifteen weeks of staff training; 3) the six months immediately following the training; and 4) the following five months. These four data points allowed an evaluation of the short and long term affects of the training on the reduction of the use of aversive interactions between students and staff members.

Table 1 illustrates the frequency of student interventions, physical restraints and suspensions, tabulated over the four periods. In the Pre-Training period, the number of physical restraints averaged 31..33 per month with a total of 188 incidents over the six month period. The average number of monthly suspensions for this period was 12.83. A total of 77 students were removed from school during this period.

In the second six months the number of physical interventions fell modestly to 167, for an average of 27.83 per month. The number of suspensions actually increased slightly to 82, an average of 13.67 per month.

During the six months immediately following the training, the number of physical restraints dramatically decreased to 12, an average of only 2 per month. In addition, the number of suspensions was almost cut in half down to 48, an average of 8 per month. During the next five months, the number of physical interventions fell even further to a monthly average of 1.4. Suspensions also continued to fall to an average of only 6 per month.

Table 1. Data by Periods

Period	Frequency of Physical Restraints	Average Number of Physical Restraints per Month	Frequency of Suspensions	Average Number of Suspensions per Month
Pre Training	188	31..33	77	12.83
Training	167	27.83	82	13.67
Post Training	12	2	48	8
Follow Up	7	1.4	30	6

Conclusion and Discussion

The data presented here suggests that even only fifteen hours of staff training can make a dramatic impact on the way students and staff members interact. Educators working with a challenging high risk population almost eliminated high risk physical interventions and substantially reduced removal of students from the classroom. The introduction of two relatively simple strategies, differential reinforcement and positive correction, resulted in a 99 percent reduction in the staff use of physical restraints and a 61percent reduction in student suspensions over the course of the 24 month data gathering period.

The number of physical restraints and suspensions dropped significantly in the six month period following the training and continued during the five month follow-up period. The finding that the reduction in physical restraints and suspensions continued to drop in the five month follow-up period is perhaps most significant in that it suggests that the efficacy of the skills learned by staff members persisted over time.

Lewis (1998:13) has recommended that educators adopt behavioral practices with proven effectiveness rather than continue with traditional discipline procedures that have been shown to be ineffective. He also recommends that challenging behaviors call for a preventive approach that utilizes school staff as a unified team. This action research project shows how these recommendations can be implemented successfully with a relatively small commitment of time. These interventions can be applied in any classroom to create a positive environment that acknowledges the strengths and successes of all students.

Authors

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