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Comprehensive School Wide Discipline: Providing Positive Behaviour Support to All Students

Comprehensive school-wide behaviour management systems have had considerable success reducing the challenging behaviours of students with and without disabilities. In this paper the authors provide an overview of these systems, highlighting the essential content and processes typically found in successful management plans.

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INTRODUCTION

The management of students whose behaviours disrupt educational environments remains a major concern among most educators. Teachers frequently report that far too many students engage in behaviours that interrupt the instructional flow of the classroom, minimising the impact of classroom activities. In some settings, discipline problems are so prevalent teachers spend more time on behaviour management than on actual instruction (Walker, Homer, Sugai, Bulis, Sprague, Bricker and Kaufman 1996; Quinn Osher, Hoffman and Hanley, 1998; Warren, Bohanon-Edmonson, Turnbull, Sailor, Wickham, Griggs and Beech 2006). Moreover, with increased numbers of students identified with disabilities educated in general education environments, including those with emotional and behavioural disorders, the challenges associated with behaviour management are exacerbated (Hieneman, Dunlap and Kincaid, 2005). Not surprisingly, teachers' levels of anxiety and concern about how to best address inappropriate school and classroom behaviours are quite high.

In the United States, approximately 65% of teachers believe that the lack of discipline in their school is a very or fairly serious problem; approximately a third of teachers consider quitting the profession because of student behaviour (National Centre for Educational Statistics (NCES), 2002; Public Agenda, 2004).

The concern about behaviour management in schools is also reflected in national reports in Ireland. The recent Report of the Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools (Department of Education and Science (DES), 2006) indicated that while it is difficult to provide a national picture of the state of discipline in Irish schools, some conclusions can be drawn from the evidence. There are a small number of students in every school who cause the most disruption and this number appears to be on the increase. The Task Force also reported on the range of disruptive behaviours in schools,

from mildly disturbing to serious criminal behaviour. While the serious impingements attract media attention, “the cumulative impact of ongoing low level disruption must not be underestimated, as it, too, has a corrosive effect on teaching and learning” (Martin, 2006, p. 7). There was also evidence from the Task Force Report that some schools are less able to cope successfully with the challenge than others and endure a disproportionate volume of persistent disruptive behaviour. This causes stress, frustration, a sense of disempowerment among the school community and interferes with the teaching and learning process.

Previous nationwide studies have also highlighted the extent of disruptive behaviour in Ireland. The Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) conducted a survey of Irish primary teachers on discipline in schools (INTO, 2002). While 92% of schools reported that they had developed codes of behaviour, teachers were of the opinion that approximately 15% of pupils in primary schools constituted serious disciplinary problems. Results from a survey of over 1,700 second level teachers conducted by the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI) (ASTI, 2004) on discipline in schools, showed that 71% of teachers were teaching classes in which some students engaged in continuous disruptive behaviour. The extent of challenging behaviour in special schools in Ireland has also been reported (Kelly, Carey and McCarthy, 2004). The findings from this extensive nationwide research project indicate that in a sample of over 3,500 pupils in special schools, 31% presented with challenging behaviour. This level of challenging behaviour in schools, according to the study, interferes significantly with the education of all pupils, causes teachers and principals to experience increased stress levels and leads to difficulty in carrying out their job role.

To address the behavioural needs of students and provide support to educators faced with the challenge of managing behaviour, many schools have adopted comprehensive school-wide behaviour management systems. This is due in large part to the positive outcomes reported by researchers and programme developers in large numbers of project schools. Data from more than 500 schools in the United States (White, Algozzine, Audette, Marr and Ellis 2001; Nelson, Martella and Marchand-Martella, 2002; Sugai and Horner, 2002; Rosenberg and Jackman, 2003) indicate that school-wide systems result in a reduced number of office referrals for behaviour, fewer suspensions from school, and improved measures of school climate. These school-wide behaviour management systems include Positive Behaviour Support (PBS), the PAR model which refers to preventing, acting upon and resolving troubling behaviour, and Unified Discipline which emphasises the importance of establishing unified attitudes, expectations, discipline procedures and team roles.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of comprehensive management systems. First, several key assumptions guiding the approach are provided. Second, descriptions of the typical content of the model and the processes through which the

content is presented, implemented, and maintained are provided. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications that are specific to educational environments in Ireland.

ASSUMPTIONS GUIDING COMPREHENSIVE MANAGEMENT

Several key assumptions guide the development of positive comprehensive behaviour management systems. First, successful behaviour management systems work best when conceptualised as existing on three discrete tiers or levels of specificity (Walker et al., 1996; Lewis and Sugai, 1999; Rosenberg and Jackman, 2003). At the initial level, often referred to as *inclusive proactive management activities* (Figure 1), preventive and protective factors that encourage students to meet behavioural expectations are emphasised. At this inclusive or universal tier, learning environments are organised by the development of a mission statement, rules, procedures, and consequences for appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. Moreover, parent and family involvement, crisis procedures, and the physical environment are structured in ways that promote student success. By having a consistent set of rules, expectations, procedures, and consequences, consistency in the application of discipline procedures is increased, and the frequency of students requiring more intensive interventions is reduced.

For those students who don't respond to the universal supports, a second tier of targeted secondary interventions are provided. These interventions typically include specialised academic enhancements and accommodations as well as individually tailored behaviour-change initiatives, including social skills instruction, self-monitoring, and the teaching of appropriate replacement behaviours.

Interventions at the third tier of the model are most appropriate for students whose behaviours are severely involved, frequently antisocial, and very difficult to change. Collaborative multidisciplinary planning is at the core of these interventions, and a major goal of educators is connecting students and their families with appropriate community-based social service agencies (Walker et al., 1996; Rosenberg, Westling, and McLeskey, 2008).

Insert Figure 1 here

The second assumption guiding the development of successful management systems is that members of the school community have a comprehensive view of their environment and organise themselves for maximum impact. Inherent in this assumption is the need for all stakeholders associated with the local school to participate in the setting of behavioural standards as well as the development of rules, procedures, and consequences. This type of participation helps promote fidelity to and consistency with the comprehensive management plan.

The third assumption is that members of the school community recognise that efforts at behaviour management are directly related to effective subject area and social skill instruction. A critical prerequisite to the success of any behaviour management system is that motivating, effective instruction occurs on a consistent basis. Moreover, for students who encounter repeated frustration with academic content and the way it is presented –

perhaps due to a disability – it is essential that teachers differentiate the curriculum and provide appropriate learning support (Rosenberg et al., 2008).

CONTENT AND PROCESSES RELATED TO COMPREHENSIVE MANAGEMENT

When developing comprehensive behaviour management plans, school-based teams address a variety of factors associated with the prevention and remediation of problem behaviours. First, we describe the content associated with comprehensive management, and then detail the group processes that facilitate development and maintenance of the plan.

Content

Five core content areas contribute to successful comprehensive management plans: (a) organisational variables; (b) explicit mission, rules, and procedures; (c) surface management and consequences; (d) crisis management; and (e) functional thinking and specialised interventions (Curwin and Mendler, 1988; Lewis and Sugai, 1999; Rosenberg and Jackman, 2003; Hieneman et al., 2005; Rosenberg et al., 2008).

Organisational Variables

All schools and classrooms contain organisational challenges that influence the teacher/learning process and student behaviour. When developing their school-based plans, teams consider how physical designs of the classroom, scheduling, grouping, and traffic flow contribute to decreases in problem student behaviour. Care should be taken to ensure that students have a reasonable balance of public and private space, and that student behaviour can be readily monitored by teachers. The classroom should be aesthetically pleasing to the senses, communicating a sense of pride to students and teachers. Finally, the processes of scheduling and instructional grouping should reflect that instructional time is organised and valued.

Mission Statements, Rules and Procedures

Mission statements, rules, and procedures communicate behavioural standards and expectations. Useful mission statements are brief declarations that reflect a school's commitment to helping students perform, academically and socially, to their highest levels. To achieve the mission, students are to adhere to reasonable rules and procedures. Rules define what is and what is not acceptable behaviour; procedures delineate the specific steps for completing an activity or operation. Well-defined rules and procedures are extremely important, particularly for students with disabilities who usually require or need explicit behavioural prompts and supports.

Behaviour Management Techniques

In well-managed schools, staff respond to instances of student rule and procedural compliance and non-compliance in one of three ways; surface management techniques, consequences for rule and procedure compliance, and consequences for non-compliance.

Surface management techniques are teacher actions that address minor instances of misbehaviour efficiently and with little disruption to classroom activities. Among the more common surface management techniques are proximity control and tension decrease through humour. Proximity control consists of the teacher standing near a student who may be off-task or experiencing difficulties. The proximity of the teacher assists the student to stay on-task and allows the teacher to continue without interrupting the lesson. Humour can also be an effective strategy to decrease tension, frustration or anxiety in a classroom and increase academic performance.

Consequences are planned and deliberate teacher actions that follow instances of appropriate and inappropriate student behaviour. To reinforce and sustain appropriate behaviours, many teachers employ well chosen praise statements and tangible yet natural recognitions such as phone calls home, certificates, opportunities to tutor younger students, and free activity time. To decrease problem behaviours, effective teachers select actions from a hierarchy of negative consequences, based on the frequency and intensity of the problem behaviour. Typical alternatives in the hierarchy include directed verbal reminders, teacher directed time-outs, reflection time, and, in extreme cases, referral to the principal and communication with parents.

Crisis Management

When a student is in crisis (unable to exert sufficient control over his or her behaviour) actions must be taken to help the student in a safe, non-punitive fashion while maintaining the safety of others. As part of a comprehensive plan, all teachers should be aware of the best ways to manage the crisis situation including remaining calm, guarding against body language and confrontational verbalisations that escalate emotions, and having a re-entry plan for the student once the crisis subsides (Johns and Carr, 1995; Jones and Jones, 2004).

Functional Thinking and Specialised Interventions

Functional thinking and specialised interventions are usually necessary for students who fail to respond to inclusive behavioural systems and supports. Functional thinking means determining the possible functions of the behaviour. Specifically, the behaviour is analysed to see what the student is gaining by engaging in the action – attention, revenge, avoidance of failure – and an intervention focusing on developing replacement behaviours is designed. Replacement behaviours are functionally equivalent actions that allow students to meet their needs in a socially acceptable fashion. Specialised interventions tend to be behaviourally based dynamic programmes that serve to simultaneously weaken inappropriate behaviours while strengthening the appropriate replacement behaviours. Most of these interventions can be implemented by school-based

personnel. However, there will be a few students who require a collaborative approach to support involving the services of a multidisciplinary team.

Processes

Although the content of comprehensive management is important, it is the group processes used during the development and maintenance of the behaviour plan that lead to positive results. While considerable research supports the use of comprehensive school-wide behaviour management programmes, some schools fail to benefit from such initiatives. Similar to other school reform efforts, successful implementation of comprehensive school management often requires practical considerations of group processes, leadership, administration, and communication (Handler, Rey, Connell, Thier, Feinberg and Putnam, 2007).

In the PAR programme (Rosenberg and Jackman, 2003) groups of approximately 25 stakeholders from one school participate in an initial 3 – 5 day training to develop their own unique school-wide plan. The groups, comprised of teachers, administrators, related service personnel, paraprofessional, and parents, participated in activities designed to create their schools' comprehensive plans.

- Initially the group articulates and prioritises the issues in their school. Participants “vent” their frustrations and concerns, as well as identifying barriers that have stood in the way of previous efforts.
- Second, the group views and provides critiques of video segments of teachers responding to classroom disruptions. Discussions of the cases allow participants to come to consensus regarding how best to respond to typical inappropriate behaviours.
- Third, small groups design the management structures including a mission, rules, and consequences. The entire team critiques the work of the individual groups, and after considerable debate, a final copy for a manual is agreed upon. Components are then edited for clarity and presented in a user-friendly manner appropriate for students, parents, faculty and administrators.
- Finally, an action plan for the “roll-out” and sustainability of the plan is developed (Figure 2). Activities that promote sustainability include the distribution of periodic data-based reports on student behaviour and regularly scheduled booster sessions designed to reinforce successful elements of the programme and modification of those aspects that have not worked as expected.

Insert Figure 2 – Action Plan here

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE IRISH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Many elements of a comprehensive school-wide model of behaviour management and positive behaviour support for students are recommended as good practice in policy and research in Ireland (Ireland, 1999; Kelly, Carey and McCarthy, 2004; Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI), 2004; INTO, 2005; DES, 2006) and in legislation (Ireland, 2000).

However, a more systematic approach with an emphasis on teaching and learning is necessary. There are currently structures in place in schools that could be built on to incorporate a comprehensive school-wide model of behaviour management and a more inclusive approach to all students. One structure in particular is the staged approach to assessment, identification and programming which is recommended for students with special educational needs (DES, 2005). The following framework demonstrates how the key assumptions which guide the development of positive comprehensive behaviour management systems, including a tiered approach to discipline, as described above, might be incorporated into this already existing structure in schools.

Stage 1: Inclusive pro-active stage

The emphasis at this stage is on the assessment of learning and behavioural needs and the provision of an environment where students can have successful learning experiences. Consideration would be given to the physical environment of the school, the relevance of the curriculum, the involvement of parents and particularly effective teaching for diverse groups of students. It is evident from the literature on behaviour management that students with emotional and behavioural difficulties are the first to be disruptive when faced with unskilled or inappropriate teaching (Visser and Cole, 2003). The TUI called for a comprehensive programme of continuous professional development with a focus on challenging behaviour, classroom management and appropriate pedagogies (TUI, 2004). This sentiment is reiterated in the Report of the Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools (DES, 2006).

At this first stage, or inclusive tier, a policy and code of practice in relation to discipline in schools should be developed. However, the presence of a policy does not guarantee its implementation. Schools now engage in the process of school development planning, providing them with an opportunity to consider internal coherence and consistency across all policies and practices. School policies on discipline should be developed and implemented in ways that are consistent with the school ethos. A collaborative approach is essential, engaging staff, parents, students and others as appropriate in the process. School rules and procedures with consequences for appropriate and inappropriate behaviour should be clearly stated and information should be disseminated to all concerned. The National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) (2007) in fulfilling the requirements of Section 23 of the Education Welfare Act (Ireland, 2000) is in the process of writing guidelines for developing school codes of behaviour which would be a useful resource for schools.

Stage 2: Secondary interventions

This stage considers intervention for students who are experiencing difficulties despite the pro-active approach suggested in Stage 1. More detailed individual assessment and planning for learning and behaviour by the classroom teacher, in collaboration with the learning support/resource teacher, are essential in Stage 2. Behaviour management programmes, to be implemented at home and at school, are drawn up in collaboration

with parents and students. Emphasis is on learning support and explicit teaching of social skills, replacement skills and self-management strategies.

Stage 3: Third level intervention

Concern was expressed in The Report of the Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools (DES, 2006) about the “escalating nature of antisocial behaviour patterns in schools” (Concluding remarks). Intervention at Stage 3 will generally involve assessment of need from a specialist outside the school in respect of students who have failed to make progress following the implementation of a behaviour programme in Stage 2. Support for students in Stage 3 involves the development of a behaviour intervention plan requiring functional assessment of behaviour, systematic planning and monitoring of student progress in collaboration with parents, students and other relevant agencies, including psychologists and social workers.

Behaviour Support Classrooms in schools staffed by teachers from within the school and assisted by relevant agencies have been recommended by the Report of the Task Force (DES, 2006) for this level of intervention. The establishment of a Behaviour Support Team, which would be easily accessible to schools experiencing difficulties in coping with persistent and serious disruption, has also been recommended (DES, 2006). It is essential that these initiatives, in addition to other existing programmes, for example, programmes of support provided by the Special Education Support Service (SESS), are delivered in a coordinated framework of support for schools, which would include a comprehensive programme of continuing professional development for all relevant staff. It is also important that programmes are evaluated to determine their effectiveness in terms of improved outcomes for students, including the possibility of the reintegration of referred students to their regular class.

CONCLUSION

A comprehensive school-wide approach to positive behaviour support for all students has been discussed. While the content of this approach is important, the group processes within schools, including leadership and meaningful collaboration, are essential in implementing and maintaining the content and achieving positive outcomes for all.

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