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Elementary School Teachers' Perceptions of and Use of Behavior-Specific Written Praise Notes for Children Identified with Office Discipline Referrals

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Elementary School Teachers' Perceptions of and Use of Behavior-Specific Written
Praise Notes for Children Identified with Office Discipline Referrals

Danielle Agle

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science in Special Education

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ABSTRACT

Elementary School Teachers' Perceptions of and Use of Behavior-Specific Written Praise Notes for Children Identified with Office Discipline Referrals

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Master of Science

Student behavior problems in school and classroom settings are of great concern to parents, teachers, and school administrators. These behaviors range from talking out and noncompliance to more serious behaviors such as violence and vandalism. Effectively managing student behavior problems lays the foundation for creating a safe school environment and is a critical concern for all teachers. A school wide positive behavior intervention and support system (PBIS) is an effective and proactive way to prevent misbehavior. All teachers and staff teach and reinforce a specified set of positive behaviors. These positive behaviors are expected of each student. This study analyzed teachers' perceptions of one aspect of a school-wide PBIS, a written *praise note* system associated with four identified social skills. The participating elementary school served 655 students in 1st through 6th grade. At the request of the school, Kindergarten students and teachers were not included. During the 2012-2013 school year, the number and type of praise notes were analyzed on several levels: (a) all students, (b) students categorized by grade level, and (c) students who received one or more office disciplinary referrals (ODRs). When analyzing the praise notes written by teachers, on average—across the school year—each student received an average of approximately 12 praise notes. During that same time frame, on average, each of the students who received an ODR received 7 praise notes. Based on this data, in comparison to the general student body, students who were identified as exhibiting problematic behaviors tended to receive fewer written praise notes from teachers. Focus groups were conducted with the participating teachers to determine their perceptions of the feasibility and effectiveness of their school's written praise note system, as part of a PBIS system. Overall, teachers perceived the participating school's praise note system as effective in preventing the majority of classroom behavior problems. The majority of teachers expressed their support for both the feasibility and effectiveness of awarding praise notes and reported fitting praise notes in with their daily classroom routines. This research implies that teachers are able to use a written praise notes systems to meet the general behavior needs of most students (Tier 1). However, based on focus group discussions, a few teachers also reported having challenges when attempting to implement the praise notes with fidelity. The majority of teachers identified the need for additional individualized strategies to address the needs of students with more severe behavioral challenges. Implications of this research indicate the need to consider additional options to reinforce desired behaviors of children with more extreme behavioral challenges.

Keywords: positive behavior support, praise note, social validity, social skills, elementary school, teachers' perceptions

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DESCRIPTION OF THESIS STRUCTURE

This thesis, *Elementary School Teachers' Perceptions of and Use of Behavior Specific Written Praise Notes for Children Identified with Office Discipline Referrals*, is presented in a dual or hybrid format. In this hybrid format, both traditional and journal publication formatting requirements are met.

The preliminary pages of the thesis adhere to university requirements for thesis formatting and submission. The first full section of the thesis is presented in the new journal-ready format and conforms to the style requirements for future publication in education journals. The full literature review and focus group questions are included in Appendices A and B. Two reference lists are included in the thesis format. The first includes only the references found in the first journal-ready article. The second reference list includes all citations from the full literature review found in Appendix A.

Background

In the United States, students spend approximately 1,400 hours at school during a school year; thus, the environment that is created is of the utmost importance. Within our nation's schools there continues to be serious incidents such as school shootings, gang activities, and drug violence, which have necessitated "the development of effective methods for promoting appropriate social behavior in school settings" (Metzler, Biglan, & Rusby, 2001, p. 448). Although these more serious behavior problems have caught national attention, it is often the less intense behavior issues such as non-compliance, talking out, and defiance (Spaulding et al., 2010) that cause teacher stress and leads to teacher burn out (Weinter, 2003; Wolk, 2003).

In addition to these behavior concerns, our schools are becoming more diverse in respect to culture, academic ability, and social and emotional behavior (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2012). Considering these growing diversities, teachers and schools find it difficult to meet their student's behavioral needs due to lack of professional preparation and training in effective behavior management strategies (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Lacking training, and faced with behavior management issues on a daily basis, teachers may become frustrated and resort to negative and punitive methods in dealing with behavior concerns in their classrooms (Warren et al., 2006).

Focusing primarily on negative behavior and violation of rules, teachers attend to students' inappropriate behaviors (Robinson, Ervin, & Jones, 2002). When teachers focus on negative student behavior, this focus detracts from academic instruction time (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Likewise, focusing on negative behaviors minimizes opportunities for teachers and school staff to teach positive, appropriate replacement behavior (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Essentially using these negative and punitive strategies may

briefly mitigate behavior problems in the classroom, but these strategies are not a permanent solution to effectively address behavior concerns. Osher, Bear, Sprague and Doyle (2010) recommend alternative behavior strategies for creating a more effective and permanent solution to manage students' challenging misbehavior.

In order to create a more positive focus, and with respect to the diverse needs of students, Osher et al. (2010) recommended three strategies for teachers and schools to address challenging behaviors: (a) teach students positive appropriate behavior; (b) clearly define expectations; and (c) reward and recognize students for their appropriate behavior. Many behavior management programs implemented by teachers and schools focus on behaviors that commonly concern teachers, such as noncompliance, talking out of turn, and disruptions. Although these behaviors may be classified as less intensive behaviors, especially when compared to the previously mentioned school safety violations, Kauffman (1999) suggested that these less intensive behaviors—if not treated—often develop into more serious behavior problems.

By implementing an approach known as Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS), teachers and staff focus on a more positive behavior management cycle. PBIS is designed to implement preventative behavior strategies on a variety of participation levels. These levels include three tiers: school-wide, small group, and an individualized level. These three tiers of PBIS are designed to address students' academic and behavioral needs (Nelson, Young, Young, & Cox, 2009). The purpose of a PBIS program is to clearly teach and establish behavior expectations on a school-wide basis, encouraging and focusing on positive behavior and discouraging inappropriate behavior (Lewis & Sugai, 1999). One way to measure the effectiveness of a school's PBIS system is to track the number and type of Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs; McIntosh, Frank, & Spaulding, 2010). When a student displays behavior that

is not appropriate, either in the classroom or other settings within the school, a teacher sends the student to the office to speak with an administrator. The school keeps a record of these incidents. These referrals usually include the date of the incident, an explanation of what led the teacher to refer the student to the office, the name of the teacher who referred the student, and the outcome of the situation after the student spoke with the administrator. If a PBIS system is effective, teachers will see improved behavior that aligns with the clearly identified behavior expectations. Because these expectations are taught throughout the school, teachers and staff are prepared to more effectively address and manage inappropriate behaviors, thus decreasing the number of ODRs.

Statement of Problem

It is evident from the growing research that children's behavior problems have been and continue to be a pressing concern in our schools (Irwin, Tobin, Sprague, Sugai, & Vincent, 2004). Unfortunately, in dealing with these behavior problems, many educators continue to use punitive strategies (Matjasko, 2011). However, rather than improving students' behavior, punitive strategies have been shown to precipitate additional and increasingly more severe behavior concerns (Way, 2011).

As an alternative to punitive strategies, researchers propose positive and preventative approaches such as PBIS systems, which include behavior specific verbal praise and written praise (Caldarella, Christensen, Young, & Densley, 2011; Flannery & Sugai, 2009). While praise has been widely studied, the use of written praise has not been widely studied (Kennedy, Jolivette, & Ramsey, 2014; Partin, Robertson, Maggin, Oliver, & Wehby, 2010). Additionally, when teachers praise their students, the praise is typically not behavior specific (Brophy, 1981; Caldarella et al., 2011). Therefore, schools may not be aware of how and to what extent their

teachers express praise (e.g., written behavior-specific praise, verbal praise, thumbs up, etc.). In particular, teachers may not understand the potential role of behavior-specific praise in encouraging desired behaviors.

Purposes and Questions Guiding This Research

While the use and effectiveness of verbal praise has been widely studied, little research has been completed on the use and effectiveness of written praise, especially behavior specific written praise (Lewis & Sugai, 1999; Nelson, Young, Young, & Cox, 2009). The purpose of this research is to add to the literature base by analyzing elementary school teachers' use of behavior specific written praise and more specifically teachers' use of specific written praise with students who received one or more ODRs during one academic school year (September 2012 through May 2013).

Praise notes collected during the 2012-2013 school year at one participating elementary school were analyzed for their behavior specificity. This study focused on the number and perceived effectiveness of written behavior-specific praise notes. A count of these written praise notes were analyzed on various levels: the whole school, grade levels, and specific teacher's classrooms in which there were students who received office discipline referrals during the school year. Additionally the average number of praise notes were compared between the classroom and targeted students who exhibited behavior problems meriting one or more office referrals during the school year. The following type of information was identified: (a) the number of praise notes given to students (in relation to the whole school), (b) which students received praise notes (in relation to grade levels), (c) which teachers used the praise note system as expected, and (d) from teachers' perspectives, how the use of teachers' praise notes affected student behavior in their school. This data provided specific information about praise notes,

allowing teachers and administrators to evaluate the effectiveness of praise notes (part of their PBIS system), and what, if any, further training was needed to address areas of concern.

Research Questions

Using a participating elementary school's 2012-2013 praise note data, office discipline referral (ODR) data, and teachers' focus group data, this study addressed the following research questions. In these research questions, *targeted students* are identified as those students who received one or more ODRs during the 2012-2013 school year.

1. What is the average number of praise notes per each month for all students, for each grade level, and for the group of specific students who received one or more office ODRs during the school year? As a group, how do the targeted students' average number of praise notes per month compare to their school's average praise notes per month?
2. Across the school year, as a group, how do the targeted students' monthly average number of praise notes compare to the school's (all students) monthly average number of praise notes per student?
3. What categories of specific praise notes (related to the school's identified four social skills) are teachers utilizing?
4. What are the teachers' perceptions regarding the feasibility and effectiveness of praise notes for all students and more specifically for students who received an ODR during the school year?

Method

This study took place in a Utah suburban Kindergarten through 6th grade elementary school. This school adapted and has been actively involved in the Positive Behavior Intervention

and Support (PBIS) model for over a decade. According to 2011 data on the Utah State Office of Education Website, the student body of this school consists of a total of 746 students, 64 students (8.58%) are of an ethnic minority. Specifically, the student body includes two Native American/Alaskan Native students, 20 Asian/Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander students, 30 Hispanic students, and 12 African American/Black students. The teacher-to-student ratio is approximately 1:23. According to Utah's end-of-year mandated Criterion Referenced Tests (CRTs), 88% of the participating school's enrolled students are considered proficient, performing on or above grade level, in language arts and mathematics curriculum and 83% of students are considered proficient, performing on or above grade level, in science curriculum. The participating school's CRT scores are comparable to, or better than, state-wide averages. On average, 84% of Utah's elementary school students perform on or above grade level in language arts. Approximately 73% of Utah's elementary school students perform on or above grade level in mathematics and science. This public information was retrieved from the Utah State Office of Education's website [www.usoe.org].

Participants

Although all K through 6th grade teachers ($N=28$) at the participating school offered classroom social skills instruction, only 1st through 6th grade teachers and the two teachers from the self-contained special education classroom ($n=26$) participated in offering the written praise notes to their students. Therefore only 26 teachers were invited to participate in the focus groups. In total, 15 of the 26 invited teachers attended the focus groups (57.7% participation rate—five 1st and 2nd grade teachers; four 3rd and 4th grade teachers; six 5th and 6th grade teachers). Although teachers' participation was encouraged, their participation was voluntary. Teachers' reasons for not attending the focus groups included the following: school duties, such

as monitoring students' morning arrival (bus and student drop-off); before-school supervision of students; parent-teacher conference, and last minute preparation for the day's teaching responsibilities. Participating teachers ranged in age from 21 to 59-years-old. Two of the 15 participating teachers were male. Table 1 offers basic demographic information describing the school's 28 teachers employed in the participating elementary school.

Table 1

Description of Teachers by Grade Level

| Grade | Total Teachers | Female Teachers | Male Teachers |
|---------------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|---------------|
| K | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| 1st | 5 | 5 | 0 |
| 2nd | 4 | 4 | 0 |
| 3rd | 4 | 4 | 0 |
| 4th | 4 | 3 | 1 |
| 5th | 4 | 3 | 1 |
| 6th | 3 | 3 | 0 |
| Special Education (self-contained life skills) | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| Total | 28 | 26 | 2 |

Of the 28 teachers in the participating K-6 elementary school, three teachers reported having fewer than three years of teaching experience. Eight teachers reported five to ten years teaching experience; 14 reported 10 to 20 years teaching experience; and the remaining three teachers reported have between 20 to 30 years teaching experience. Of the 28 teachers, 20

teachers reported earning a bachelor's degree and the remaining eight teachers reported earning a master's degree.

Dependent Variables

The dependent variables in this study include the number of the office disciplinary referrals (ODRs) and the number and category of praise notes, which were based on the school's four social skills. Praise notes were differentiated by *who* received the praise note—whether the note was given to a student in the general student body or to the identified students who received an office disciplinary referral during the school year. The data for these dependent variables were collected through existing systems the school already has in place. Information regarding these variables is further explained in the following section.

Office disciplinary referrals (ODRs). Teachers wrote office disciplinary referrals when a student's behavior violated school rules that warranted administrative action. Per the participating school's policy, teachers follow a step-by-step process when referring a student to the office. The first step is that a student must have received three *Think Times*, an intra-class timeout procedure in which the student is encouraged to take a few minutes to think about the specific behavior infraction. If after three opportunities in Think Time the student does not comply with classroom rules and school expectations, an ODR form is filled out by the classroom teacher (Donaldson & Vollmer, 2011). The ODR form is on NCR paper, allowing for triplicate copies. Teachers fill in the following information: the student's name, date of referral, the name of the teacher making the referral, a description of the student's behavior that warranted the referral, and behavioral strategies used prior to referring the student.

After reviewing the referral, the principal calls the student into the office. After conferencing with the student, the principal administers a consequence appropriate to addressing

the problematic behavior. One of the triplicate copies is then placed in an office binder that is divided by grade levels.

The referral is filed one grade level above the student's current grade level. Each grade level is assigned a teacher who serves as the grade's team leader. The team leader is in charge of following up with the ODRs which are placed in their grade level. Involving the team leader from a higher grade level provides some distance between the referred student and the teacher who responds to the disciplinary referral. By providing this distance, the classroom teacher and student are better able to preserve their relationship and the student has a "fresh set of eyes and ears" to see and hear about the challenging situation.

Within a few weeks of being referred to the office, the team leader pulls the student aside and has a follow up conversation about the situation. The conversation consists of asking the student to recount why they were referred to the office, how their behavior has been since being referred to the office, what they are doing to prevent future office referrals, and what the lead teacher can do to assist. The lead teacher then summarizes the follow-up conversation, writing this information on the office referral and placing it back into the binder.

The participating school's ODR data are tracked in a Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet. For the purpose of this study, the primary investigator focused on the total number of ODRs received during the school year and also the total number of office referrals written for specific students. Information gathered on students who receive office referrals includes the student's name (coded to ensure confidentiality), student's grade level, and student's teacher's name (coded to ensure confidentiality).

Praise notes. Praise notes, referred to as *Positive Paws* by the classroom teachers and students, are part of the PBIS initiative implemented in the school. The purpose of these praise

notes is to reward and recognize students who follow school rules. The praise notes are copied from a master copy which includes the four social skills that teachers and staff focus on throughout the school year. These skills include (a) making good choices, (b) accepting responsibility, (c) showing appreciation, and (d) resolving differences (see Table 2). Teachers circle or check the specific social skill which they observed. There is also a section on the praise note for the teacher's and student's name and date the praise note was given.

Once the student receives a note, the student places the praise note in a plastic container in the school's lobby. These praise notes are then entered in a weekly school-wide drawing. This drawing is held during a weekly school-wide assembly. In this assembly three students' praise notes from each grade level are selected to come spin a prize wheel that is divided into four sections. Each section has a different color with corresponding prize boxes. When the wheel stops on a color the student is allowed to choose a prize from the corresponding prize box. All praise notes are collected weekly and recorded monthly for each grade level and teacher.

Independent Variable

The independent variable in this study is the participating school's praise note system. The school administrators distribute ready-to-use praise notes to each teacher as needed. These praise notes focus on the four previously described social skills. Teachers are given several guidelines during training at the beginning of each school year regarding the school's expectations for teachers' use of the praise notes. In each classroom teachers are encouraged to (a) award four to five praise notes per week; (b) give double the amount of praise notes at the beginning of the year in order to create excitement and momentum for positive behavioral support; (c) focus the delivery of the praise notes on the school's four identified social skills; and (d) check/circle the specific skill and write the date and the child's name on the praise note. If

teachers want to praise a certain behavior outside the four identified social skills' categories, they are encouraged to use their own, individual form of reward and praise.

Study Design

This study was a descriptive study that examined the patterns of teachers using written praise notes to reinforce four primary social skills. These four social skills and the basic steps associated with each social skill are listed in Table 2.

ODR students were separated into grade level and by specific classroom. ODR students were identified as any student who received one or more office disciplinary referrals during the school year. The study was conducted across the 2012-2013 school year—August 21, 2012 through May 30, 2013. Praise notes from the participating school were collected monthly during the 2012-2013 school year. The praise notes were then sorted by month, grade level, specific classroom (coded to ensure confidentiality), and specific ODR student (coded to ensure confidentiality). After sorting the praise notes, the praise notes were then counted and totaled for each of the four identified social skill categories, listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Four Social Skills and the Identified Steps of Each Social Skill

| Showing appreciation | Resolving differences | Making good choices | Accepting responsibility |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| I think about what others do for me | I decide if I disagree with other person | I think about the problem | I think about what I did |
| I look at the other person | I tell how I feel about the problem | I decide on my choices | I think about what I should have been doing |
| I say "Thank you" | I ask the other person how they feel about the problem | I think about what happens after I make choices | I think: How can I make it right? |
| I tell others what I am thankful for | I listen to their answer | I make the best choice of all | I think: What will I do next time? |
| | I ask others to help us make a compromise | | |
| | What I say shows I care about others | | |

Social Validity of Teachers Using Praise Notes

In order to determine the social validity of using praise notes, from the teachers' perspective, teacher focus groups were conducted at the end of the 2012-2013 school year. More specifically, the purpose of these focus groups was to determine the teacher's perceptions of the effectiveness and feasibility of using praise notes in the classroom, including the use of praise notes with students who received one or more ODRs, an indicator of significant behavioral problems. Eleven questions served as a guide for conducting each focus group. These questions were distributed to teachers prior to holding the focus groups. During each focus group, a facilitator followed the list of questions, asking for teachers' input. The outlined questions are included in Appendix B.

Three sessions of focus groups were conducted in the participating school's conference room. The first session was conducted with 1st and 2nd grade teachers. This group included five of the potential nine teachers. The second session was conducted with the 3rd and 4th grade teachers. This group included four of the potential eight teachers. The final group was conducted with the 5th and 6th grade teachers. Six of the seven potential teachers attended this focus group session. The reasons for teachers not attending a focus group included conflicting assigned responsibilities, such as supervising students prior to the beginning of school, helping monitor students' arrivals by bus and car, and meeting with parents.

Each focus group session lasted approximately 30 to 35 minutes. Sessions were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The focus group survey questions are listed in Appendix B.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data being analyzed for this study are previously existing data from praise notes and ODRs from the 2012-2013 school year. Data were examined graphically in descriptive and

visual analyses across the 2012-2013 school year. Graphs were created for monthly totals of: (a) the average number of praise notes per day for each month of the school year by grade level, (b) the average number of praise notes per day for each month of the school year by individual teachers, (c) the number of students in general who received praise notes, and (d) the number of praise notes received by students who received one or more ODRs during the school year.

Graphs were created to display data collected for the 2012-2013 school year. Analyses examined patterns in the data across the school year including variations or differences in the number of praise notes given across grade level and individual teachers. Differences in the number of praise notes between students who did not receive an ODR and students who received an ODR during the school year were also examined. Increases or decreases in the average number of praise notes per day each month across the school year were also analyzed. The data were then analyzed and information was provided to the school's teachers, describing their use of praise notes for students with ODRs in relationship to teachers' use of praise notes with individual classrooms.

Research Design

In conducting the focus groups, a proactive approach was established in gathering teachers' perspectives regarding the use of praise notes. This study was conducted to explore teachers' perceptions regarding the feasibility and effectiveness of praise notes with children who exhibited challenging behaviors that culminated in an office referral. Focus groups allowed teachers to "speak in their own voice, rather than conforming to categories and terms imposed on them by others" (Palinkas, 2006, p. 160). Likewise, focus groups encouraged teachers to explain their perspectives "in their own terms" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 2).

After transcribing the audiotapes of teachers' focus groups, their responses were analyzed following the guidelines of content analysis (United States Government Accountability Office [U.S. GAO], 1996). Content analysis provides a structured manner to classify and summarize key ideas and information and to make inferences from the summarized information (U.S. GAO, 1996). This study's ultimate goal of gathering and analyzing teachers' perspectives of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of praise notes with children exhibiting more challenging behaviors than the majority of students.

Data were gathered from audiotaped and transcribed scripts of the three focus group interviews. Two research volunteers—one undergraduate student and the principal researcher, a master's student in Special Education—reviewed the audiotapes and the related accompanying scripts. As prescribed by content analysis methods, these two individuals not only identified and coded specific themes from interviews, but also ascertained a frequency count of specified themes and subthemes (U.S. GAO, 1996). The themes and frequencies were given a final review by a supervising psychologist who was familiar with content analysis. Coding discrepancies between the two research volunteers were mediated by the supervising psychologist. Prior to coding, the two research volunteers and the supervising psychologist listened to the audiotapes and carefully reviewed the transcribed scripts.

Results

In response to the first research question, Table 3 lists the average number of praise notes per student across the 2012-2013 school year, by month and by grade level. Table 4 lists the average number of praise notes per student (for all students combined); an average number of praise notes for each grade level; and an average number of praise notes for students who received an office referral for misbehavior.

Table 3
Praise Notes Categorized by Grade and Classroom Level

| Student count by grade | Classroom student count | Grade & classroom | Sep 2012 | Oct 2012 | Nov 2012 | Dec 2012 | Jan 2013 | Feb 2013 | Mar 2013 | Apr 2013 | May 2013 | No date | PRAISE NOTES year total |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|---------|-------------------------|
| 1st grade <i>n</i> =119 | 24 | 1A | 10 | 4 | 66 | 53 | 63 | 29 | 40 | 18 | 57 | 148 | 488 |
| | 24 | 1B | 54 | 55 | 71 | 82 | 45 | 16 | 34 | 43 | 18 | 44 | 462 |
| | 23 | 1C | 39 | 49 | 64 | 71 | 60 | 0 | 67 | 9 | 33 | 6 | 398 |
| | 24 | 1D | 12 | 3 | 8 | 3 | 7 | 1 | 6 | 15 | 1 | 1 | 57 |
| | 24 | 1E | 22 | 13 | 81 | 49 | 45 | 36 | 48 | 34 | 7 | 135 | 470 |
| 2nd grade <i>n</i> =95 | 24 | 2A | 2 | 0 | 12 | 22 | 12 | 23 | 10 | 20 | 9 | 65 | 175 |
| | 23 | 2B | 3 | 32 | 21 | 10 | 43 | 8 | 14 | 18 | 5 | 51 | 205 |
| | 24 | 2C | 36 | 28 | 111 | 42 | 62 | 42 | 68 | 39 | 55 | 39 | 522 |
| | 24 | 2D | 13 | 4 | 62 | 29 | 34 | 12 | 60 | 46 | 31 | 72 | 363 |
| 3rd grade <i>n</i> =111 | 26 | 3A | 21 | 10 | 33 | 7 | 64 | 4 | 23 | 59 | 15 | 32 | 268 |
| | 29 | 3B | 39 | 51 | 44 | 27 | 81 | 32 | 105 | 21 | 13 | 31 | 444 |
| | 27 | 3C | 22 | 16 | 90 | 8 | 58 | 27 | 54 | 0 | 0 | 31 | 306 |
| | 29 | 3D | 12 | 33 | 30 | 29 | 17 | 15 | 9 | 19 | 5 | 25 | 194 |
| 4th grade <i>n</i> =111 | 27 | 4A | 1 | 5 | 16 | 48 | 56 | 20 | 37 | 8 | 20 | 94 | 305 |
| | 28 | 4B | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 60 | 30 | 61 | 0 | 8 | 8 | 167 |
| | 29 | 4C | 20 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 25 |
| | 27 | 4D | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 38 | 47 |
| 5th grade <i>n</i> =103 | 25 | 5A | 60 | 64 | 95 | 1 | 24 | 8 | 47 | 27 | 67 | 4 | 397 |
| | 26 | 5b | 22 | 50 | 38 | 6 | 23 | 31 | 44 | 25 | 12 | 49 | 300 |
| | 26 | 5C | 30 | 14 | 35 | 9 | 7 | 49 | 23 | 26 | 42 | 89 | 324 |
| | 26 | 5D | 36 | 67 | 45 | 6 | 35 | 7 | 44 | 39 | 14 | 4 | 297 |
| 6th grade <i>n</i> =98 | 33 | 6A | 3 | 19 | 44 | 50 | 26 | 9 | 32 | 17 | 0 | 115 | 315 |
| | 32 | 6B | 0 | 1 | 0 | 9 | 26 | 52 | 20 | 22 | 0 | 64 | 194 |
| | 33 | 6C | 13 | 9 | 31 | 29 | 35 | 38 | 15 | 53 | 20 | 165 | 408 |
| Life Skills <i>n</i> =18 | 11 | Life Skills A | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 354 | 354 |
| | 7 | Life Skills B | 14 | 12 | 6 | 14 | 14 | 36 | 24 | 32 | 40 | 6 | 198 |
| TOTAL All students | 655 | All students | 489 | 539 | 1,005 | 604 | 899 | 526 | 886 | 591 | 472 | 1,672 | 7,683 |

When considering all students, on average, each student received 11.73 Praise Notes during the school year. During that same time period, ODR students received an average of 7.41 Praise Notes per student. Students in the two self-contained Life Skills classrooms received the most Praise Notes per student across the academic year (30.67). Students in 4th grade received an average of 4.9 Praise Notes per student, by far the lowest number in comparison to students in other grade levels. Across the school year, as a group, 4th grade students were the only grade level to receive less Praise Notes per student than ODR students.

Table 4

2012-2013 Yearly Average Number of Praise Notes per Students in Each Grade

| Grade | Number of Praise Notes | Number students by grade level | Average number of Praise Notes per student |
|---------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Grade 1 | 1,875 | 119 | 15.76 |
| Grade 2 | 1,265 | 95 | 13.32 |
| Grade 3 | 1,212 | 111 | 10.92 |
| Grade 4 | 544 | 111 | 4.90 |
| Grade 5 | 1,318 | 103 | 12.80 |
| Grade 6 | 917 | 98 | 9.36 |
| Special Ed. | 552 | 18 | 30.67 |
| All students | 7,683 | 655 | 11.73 |
| ODR students ^a | 215 | 29 | 7.41 |

^aODR (office discipline referral). ODR students received 1 office discipline referral during the 2012-2013 school year.

Monthly averages of praise note data, contained in Table 5 and Figure 1 provide an answer to the second research question. Across the school year, as a group, targeted students' monthly average number of praise notes are lower than the school's (all students) monthly average number of praise notes per student. The rise and fall in the number of monthly counts of praise notes are comparable across all students and ODR students.

Table 5

Average Number of Praise Notes by Month for Each 1st through 6th Grade Student

| Month (Number of school days) | Number of Praise Notes by month for each student <i>N</i> =655 | Number of Praise Notes by month for each ODR student <i>N</i> =29 |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| August/September (28) | .75 | .34 |
| October (20) | .82 | .28 |
| November (19) | 1.53 | .97 |
| December (13) | .92 | .55 |
| January (20) | 1.37 | 1.10 |
| February (19) | .80 | .48 |
| March (21) | 1.35 | .83 |
| April (17) | .90 | .62 |
| May (21) | .87 | .55 |
| Undated (177) | 2.55 | 1.69 |

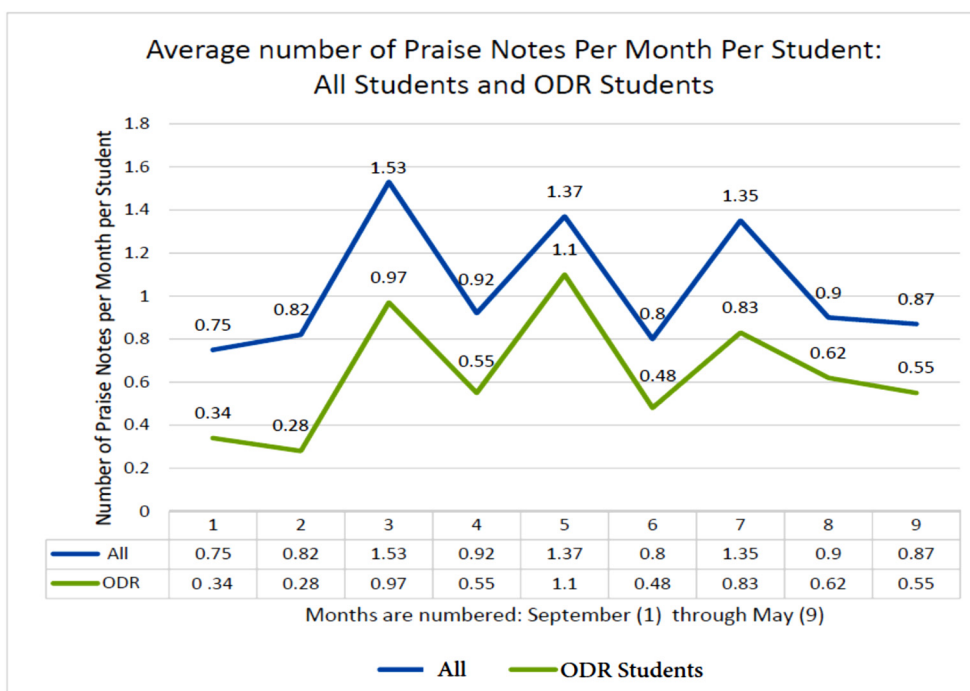


Figure 1

Table 6

All Students: Percentage of Praise Notes Related to Each of the Four Social Skills^a

| Social skill | Number of Praise Notes | Percentage of total Praise Notes ^b |
|--------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Making good choices | 4811 | 62.6 |
| Resolving differences | 212 | 2.8 |
| Showing appreciation | 783 | 10.2 |
| Accepting responsibility | 908 | 11.8 |
| Skill not designated | 1092 | 14.2 |

^a223 of the total 7,683 total praise notes described more than one social skill, thus the numbers in this Table exceed the total number of praise notes.

^bPercentages are based on total number of praise notes.

Table 7

ODR Students: Percentage of Praise Notes Related to Each of the Four Social Skills^a

| Social skill | Number of Praise Notes | Percentage of total Praise Notes |
|--------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Making good choices | 147 | 68.4 |
| Resolving differences | 2 | .9 |
| Showing appreciation | 16 | 7.4 |
| Accepting responsibility | 29 | 13.5 |
| Skill not designated | 26 | 12.1 |

^aFive of the 215 total Praise Notes awarded to ODR students described more than one social skill, thus the numbers in this Table exceed the total number of their praise notes.

Tables 6 and 7 display the response to this study's third research question.

Overwhelmingly, of the four possible social skills, teachers are awarding students—in general and with ODR students—with “making good choices” (62.6% and 68.4% respectively). The category of “resolving differences” is the least used type of praise note—in general and with ODR students (2.8% and .9% respectively).

Feedback from Focus Group Discussions

The fourth research question tapped into teachers' perceptions regarding the feasibility and effectiveness of praise notes for all students and more specifically for students who received an ODR during the school year. In order to assess the effectiveness and feasibility of the praise note system, focus groups were conducted with the participating teachers. The participating teachers were divided into the following groups: 1st and 2nd grade teachers, 3rd and 4th grade teachers, and 5th and 6th grade teachers. Each focus group lasted approximately 30 to 35 minutes in length. A mediator was present in the focus group to lead the group with a list of proposed discussion questions. The proposed discussion questions are included in Appendix B. Based on teachers' input during the focus group discussions, several responses were repeated and emphasized. Repeated themes arose across the three focus groups.

1st and 2nd grade teachers. This group of teachers agreed that their young students were willing to be on their best behavior in order to earn a praise note. One teacher commented "my kids look forward to earning them, so they work." In relation to this, teachers also described the benefits of praise notes for individual students and for the class in general. Praise notes increased students' awareness of the four identified social skills. Another teacher brought up the fact that she finds her students think more about the social skills during the week, if they feel there is a chance they can earn a praise note. This focus group endorsed the effectiveness of praise notes in helping explicitly teach students the specific social skill associated with each praise note that was awarded.

Teachers in this group also felt that writing and giving out praise notes flowed naturally with their classroom routines. In order to ensure this flow, some teachers chose one day each week to write and distribute their praise notes. One teacher shared that "on Friday, I spend a few

minutes and think about who earned them.” A few teachers felt that because of the ease in filling out a praise note—all that is required is circling or checking the specific skill and writing the date and the student’s name—teachers could fill out a praise note immediately, any time, when a specific social skill was observed. A teacher in this focus group who followed this routine simply states that, “I pass them out as they earn them.”

When asked how praise notes worked for students with more extreme behavioral problems and misbehavior, they explained that rarely was a student sent to the office. One teacher even commented that “I haven’t had anybody referred to the office this year.” Because their school did not have very many office disciplinary referrals during the school year, they had not considered how praise notes might or might not work with such a student. More serious student misbehavior was not a concern for the majority of teachers at this school. One teacher in this group commented that perhaps this could be because their “school has such a good behavior program, that kids starting from Kindergarten, by the time they get to us” they have already been taught and have practiced the social skills that the school focuses on, so there are not very many behavior problems. This comment and perception aligns with Reinke et al.’s (2009) research which urges schools to intervene early, when initially starting school in Kindergarten. Early intervention holds the potential to initiate a trajectory of preventing and decreasing behavior problems in children. Because the participating school in this research study has been strongly involved with PBS for the past decade, this school has a minimal number of office referrals; only 29 students out of 655 received an office referral during the 2012-2013 school year.

Teachers in this focus group indicated that a couple of the social skills were easier to notice and praise in the classroom setting. Participating teachers feel that in order to continue to

make praise notes effective, the school should continue to focus on four main social skills, rather than nine. In previous years their school had 13 social skills.

3rd and 4th grade teachers. In contrast to the other two focus groups, participating 3rd and 4th grade teachers did not feel that the school's praise note system was effective or efficient. Several teachers in this focus group expressed that even though the praise notes were simple to fill out, taking the time to stop and fill it out during class took too much time. Some teachers commented that to mitigate this distraction, they would write them during transition times, or they would choose one day a week to write their praise notes. One teacher commented that if they did not have time to stop and fill the praise note out, they would tell their student "remind me later, and I'll give you a positive paw for doing this." Some teachers also expressed that they had their students fill out the praise note after the student earned the praise note. For the most part, this group of teachers expressed their perception that the school's four social skills were difficult to observe, thus making it difficult to give out praise notes. One teacher, who was supported by several other teachers in the focus group, commented that the chosen social skills were too "generic" and that the social skills overlapped with each other. This teacher commented that they felt like "three of the four social skills were not easy to observe in the classroom and were vague." He used the specific example of resolving differences. He said that most of these skills were observed "only on the playground" and that they "can't see" the students using these skills.

When asked what effect they saw praise notes had on students, especially with students with behavior concerns, this particular group of teachers did not feel like the praise notes had a great effect on student's behavior one way or another. Teachers commented saying "I don't know that it really affected mine [students] in a good way or bad way at all. It's not going to

change them.” The teachers felt like there had become too much of an expectation from the student’s to receive a praise note, even for very small positive behaviors. The main speaker of the group points out that he feels like “we have so many teachers that will give those things out....that pretty soon the kids are just like ‘give me a positive paw’ for anything they do.” They commented that they feel that the praise notes would be more effective if they were more intermittent. The teacher that became the main speaker of the group summarized some research he had read that “when students are expecting a reward, then they stop doing it. When students are not expecting a reward and get one, they will keep doing it.” They also felt the praise notes would be more effective if the social skills being focused on were more observable and specific.

5th and 6th grade teachers. The 5th and 6th grade teachers in the participating school did not feel that the school’s praise system was as effective as it could be. When asked what they thought about the system, one teacher commented that they “have not liked it as much this year.” They did like how the school limited the number of praise notes they were able to give a week. One teacher commented that at the beginning of the year they “tried to do only 12 in a week, and then we went to 24 and that still wasn’t enough.” They felt it would be more effective if they were able to give out more each week. They also felt that some of the social skills were more difficult to give a praise note for, because the behavior was harder to observe.

Teachers in this focus group felt that the praise notes were feasible because since their students are older, they have them fill out their own praise notes. One teacher admitted, “I give them to my students to fill out.” They had the same conclusion about the impact these praise notes had for students with behavior concerns, in that their school does not really have a lot of students with behavior concerns. Two teachers commented that “we do not have extreme students” and “it works for some students but not for others.” Because their school does not have

a lot of behavior concerns, it is more difficult for them to see or determine how praise notes may effect students with ODRs.

Summary of Focus Group Feedback

In general, the focus groups agreed that on the whole, the school's praise note system had a positive effect on student behavior. Praise notes were effective with the majority of students and feasible to implement. However, teachers also noted the limited impact of praise notes on ODR students. Teachers recommended more targeted individualized interventions for students with more significant behavior problems.

Discussion

The major finding in this study, teachers perceived a need for additional strategies to encourage students with more challenging behavioral problems. In comparison to the general student population, praise notes were not used as frequently with ODR students. Several teachers indicated that ODR students were not motivated by praise notes. Additionally, the majority of praise notes, approximately 60 to 70% were given for students "making good choices." Teachers mentioned the challenge of finding the other three identified social skills represented in the classroom setting.

Limitations

In organizing and carrying out this research, several limitations were noted. Participating teachers did not uniformly implement the system universally. A few teachers used additional classroom behavior management plans (above and beyond the praise notes). These alternative behavior plans were not investigated or discussed.

A few teachers admitted dissatisfaction with the existing praise note system. These teachers openly reported not wanting to use the praise notes because they believed the notes were not effective, especially for students who had more severe behavior problems. This research

study did not investigate the differences between classrooms of teachers who fully implemented the praise notes and those who did not fully implement the praise notes.

Another limitation, the praise note system was not implemented with fidelity. The PBIS system clearly outlined that teachers were to give out praise notes to students, immediately when the teacher noted a student's behavior that demonstrated one of the social skills. Also, several teachers asked their students to write their own praise notes, as opposed to the teacher writing the praise note.

Cowan states the importance of implementing a PBIS system with fidelity through following given rules and receiving consistent professional development. As the PBIS system in this study was implemented with fidelity, it was discovered that there was "a significant change in the reduction of ODRs and the increase of academic achievement" (2003). Because the PBIS system was not implemented with the same level of fidelity across classrooms, this study did not show equally significant results.

It is possible that teachers did not perceive that the praise notes would be effective which is why they chose not to use the praise notes as described. Another possible reason that the praise notes were not used with integrity or fidelity is that perhaps they are not as effective as they could be. If the praise notes were modified to be more effective, than teachers would be able to see a more positive effect on student behavior and use them more often and as prescribed.

Not following the prescribed method for using the praise note system, made the praise and the praise notes less specific, contingent and genuine. Brophy (1981) has found that praise must include these three characteristics in order to have an effect on improving student academic performance, and behavior. The participating school's praise notes, along with the teacher's own

system they developed for giving them out, did not allow their praise to encompass these characteristics. Thus, the system did not have the success it potentially could have.

Additionally, the participating school did not have very many students who were referred to the office with ODRs. Only 29 students had an office referral during the 2012-2013 school year. Additionally, each of these students only had one office referral during the school year. No student had more than one office referral. This limited number of students made it difficult to truly measure the perceived effectiveness of praise notes on students who had been referred to the office. Initially when setting up this research, the investigators anticipated a continuum of behavior problems, indicated by the number of office referrals. Because only 29 students had one office referral, this variable became a dichotomous variable rather than a continuous variable.

Another limitation in this study was that teacher perceptions were monitored only once during the school year. Not only were they monitored only once, but they were monitored at the very end of the school year. The way of understanding teacher's perceptions did not allow teachers to express concerns as they arose, as well as frustration to build up for an entire school year. This frequency also allows bad habits and mindsets to form and become implanted and ingrained until teachers are unwilling to change.

Recommendations for Future Research

Results from this research need to be communicated to the teachers, staff, and school administrators. The specific information gathered from this study would help the school specify professional development topics for teachers and staff. Further research could then be conducted to determine the effect that professional development would have on teacher's perceptions and buy-in regarding the use of a school-wide PBIS system. More specifically, additional data could

track the use of written praise notes to encourage the school's identified pro-social behaviors. Drawing upon teachers' recommendations, the praise notes could be further developed to align with more effective ways to motivate student pro-social behaviors. This would allow the school to make more data based decisions on how to implement the praise note system. Sugai and Horner (2002) indicate that this is a crucial aspect of an effective PBIS system in a school.

Future research needs to assist in determining which interventions and/or prevention strategies are more effective for students who receive ODRs. Data from this study show that these students receive less praise notes. Additionally teachers' perceptions indicate a dissatisfaction with using praise notes to address students' more challenging behaviors. The majority of teachers indicated that although the praise notes are motivating to the majority of students, praise notes are less effective with more challenging behaviors.

Further research needs to focus on the school environment as a whole, as opposed to individual group of students, or classrooms. In additional research, it has been discovered that when giving their perceptions on the effectiveness of praise, teachers tended to focus on individual student behavior and circumstances, rather than the student population as a whole. Thus, future research should be designed in order to rule out perceptions that are potentially skewed based upon an individual student population (Dutton, Tillery, Varjas, Meyers, & Collins, 2010).

Future research may also compare the perceived effectiveness of praise notes based on teaching experience, or how many years a teacher has been teaching. In the participating school, there was a wide range of teacher of experience, accompanied by a wide range in opinion of the effectiveness and feasibility of the participating school's praise note system. Future research can

study this difference to see the difference between new teacher's perceptions of the effectiveness of praise notes compared to seasoned teachers perceptions of the effectiveness of praise notes.

This study focused wholly on teacher's perceptions of the effectiveness and feasibility of behavior-specific written praise notes. It did not take into account student's perceptions of the praise notes they were receiving. Future research can investigate student's perceptions of praise notes and how they perceive them to help their behavior and the impact they have on the school environment.

This study did not attempt to manipulate the praise notes at all. It was purely a descriptive study. However, future research needs to analyze the content of the praise notes for completion as well as for behavior specificity. Once this data has been collected, changes to the praise notes can be made to the praise notes and then data can be collected on the impact that more complete, behavior specific praise notes have on student's behavior.

Recommendations for Practice

To maximize school-wide PBIS systems, teachers must implement interventions with fidelity. The goal of improved student behavior may be jeopardized when teachers begin moving away from the expected protocol. When offering praise, teachers must carefully consider the three important components of effective praise: sincerity, contingency and specificity. Data from this research indicate the tendency of teachers to gradually move away from the recommended best practice of offering praise. Furthermore, schools must constantly monitor teachers' perceptions in order to catch waning buy-in and associated critical attitudes. Periodically addressing teachers' criticism, those who implement interventions must problem solve ways to refresh and strengthen existing interventions. This is a critical piece of monitoring the fidelity and effectiveness of interventions.

This study supports the findings of Burnett and Mandel (2010), who performed a case study in an elementary school. They discovered that the type of praise used in elementary school classroom is very critical. Based on interviews from teachers and students, it was perceived that praise focused on their ability to perform the given task, rather than on their effort to perform the task.

The results of this study also go to show that students, especially with behavior concerns, do not receive very much teacher attention. These results confirm Nation et al.'s study reporting that Todd, Horner, and Sugai show that "teacher attention was functionally related to a decrease in the frequency of problem behaviors, and increase in on-task behavior, and an increase in task completion" (1999, p. 66). Thus, as teachers use behavior specific written praise notes, they can be a powerful way to provide teacher attention in order to see these desired behaviors in teacher's classrooms.

This study did not monitor teacher's perceptions frequently throughout the year, and did not gain the maximum effectiveness from their written praise note system. Thus it is important to monitor teacher perceptions across the year and make adjustments as needed, rather than gathering this feedback one time at year. If schools implement this practice, as problems arise, these problems can be discussed, solved and other options can be explored. If perceptions are monitored at the end of the year, it is too late to investigate the effectiveness and feasibility of praise notes.

One specific implication for practice that is gathered from this study is that schools must continue to search for, and implement other strategies for students with behavior concerns. Data collected from this study shows that students with behavior concerns received far fewer praise notes than their counterparts, and teachers do not perceive that praise notes positively impacted

the behavior of the more challenging students. Based on teachers' feedback, if they did not have a positive perception of the effect of the praise notes, they were much less likely to use the praise notes. Thus, more effective strategies to help students who struggle with challenging behaviors must be found. Additionally, teachers' input and support regarding the successful implementation of these interventions is imperative.

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Appendix A

Literature Review

In the United States, students spend approximately 1,400 hours at school during a school year. Considering the amount of time our students spend at school, the environment that is created is of the utmost importance. Within our nation's schools there continues to be serious incidents such as school shootings as well as gang and drug violence, which have necessitated "the development of effective methods for promoting appropriate social behavior in school settings" (Metzler, Biglan, & Rusby, 2001, p. 448). These serious incidents draw national attention. However, it is often the less intense behavior issues such as non-compliance, talking out and defiance (Spaulding et al., 2010) that create teacher exhaustion and burn out (Chang, 2009).

Behavior concerns, such as those described above, coupled with changes in educational environment place increasing demands on teachers. Schools are becoming more diverse in culture, academic ability and social and emotional behavior. Ways to address the growing diversity in schools is critical because a teacher's confidence in their ability to handle these diverse situations is related to their effectiveness as a teacher. Furthermore, researchers indicate that a teacher's confidence, and therefore teaching ability, directly relates to the success of the students. The correlation between teacher ability and success suggest that it is crucial for teachers to use evidence-based practices in their classroom to ensure they will be most beneficial for students' academic and behavioral success (Sugai, 2007).

It is common for teachers to use punitive methods to address problem behaviors in classroom and non-classroom settings. This approach focuses the teacher's attention primarily on students who are misbehaving, as well as problem behaviors, rather than the positive behavior

that is occurring in the classroom. There are several negative side effects of using punitive and reactive strategies to manage maladaptive or inappropriate behavior.

The first negative side effect is that these strategies often lead to animosity between the teacher and student. A second negative outcome is that they are not long term solutions to maladaptive behavior. While they may be effective in putting an immediate stop to these behavior concerns, they do not address the root of problem behavior. The third negative side effect is that they may lead to further behavior concerns in the future. Thus, it is vital to find a more positive way to focus on appropriate behavior and teach behavior expectations in the school environment.

Prevention

For this reason, “numerous sources have advocated for the adoption of more proactive approaches to shape individual and school-wide discipline” (Sugai & Horner, 2002, p. 26). Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004 provides for preventative interventions “to reduce the need to label children in order to assess the learning and behavioral needs of children.” At a general level, solving small problems is both more efficient and more successful than working with more intense and severe problems” (Batsche et al., 2006, p. 19). Reinke, Splett, Robeson, and Offutt suggest that “intervening early, before behavior problems develop or become entrenched, is likely to have a greater long-term impact on preventing and decreasing behavior problems in children” (2009, p. 33).

A fair amount of resources have been dedicated to prevention programs at a school because of the extended amount of time teachers spend with students and their influence on the school’s environment. Nation et al. (2003), summarize nine components of effective prevention programs: (a) comprehensive, (b) varied teaching methods, (c) sufficient dosage, (d) theory

driven, (e) opportunities for positive relationship, (f) appropriately timed, (g) sociocultural relevance, (h) evaluation component and (i) well trained staff. One type of prevention program schools can adopt is a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), specifically a positive behavior support system that can be implemented at varying levels of intensiveness based on the student's needs.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) use a problem-solving strategy that matches “high-quality, evidence based learning strategies to student needs according to data” (Thompson, Marchant, Prater, Anderson, & Gibb, 2011, p. 523). The central theme to an MTSS system is support for all students through ongoing collaboration between professionals with the following foundational components: (a) classroom management, (b) instructional strategies, (c) data-driven decision making, (d) professional development, (e) problem-solving teams, and (f) curriculum design (Dulaney, 2013, p. 55). Instruction that is provided in an MTSS system needs to be differentiated to meet each student's need in order to achieve “high rates of student success for all students” (Batsche et al., 2006, p. 19). The system is typically divided into three tiers: universal, targeted, and tertiary. Each tier “incorporates increasing intensities of instruction that are provided to students in direct proportion to their individual needs” (Batsche et al., 2006, p. 19).

MTSS systems are specifically designed to encourage schools to focus on individual student academic and behavioral performance. With the reauthorization of education law such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), schools and teachers have been required to be more accountable for their actions and the progress and performance of their schools. Within the MTSS model, the level of support given to each

student is determined by their response to intervention put in place by the school and the data collected from these interventions. To determine how students are responding to interventions, data must be collected on student performance, both academic and behavioral. The most common piece of behavioral data collected within this system to guide future decision-making is office discipline referrals (ODRs; Irwin, Tobin, Sprague, Sugai & Vincent, 2004). However, other pieces of data such as test scores, attendance/tardy and grades are also used in the data based decision-making process (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Using data, such as ODRs, to track and identify students' response to evidence based behavioral practices, has been shown as a "promising and practical means for identifying and improving outcomes" (Sugai & Horner, 2009, p. 225).

Positive Behavior Intervention and Support

Positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS) systems are one type of Multi-Tiered System of Support designed to use evidence-based practices, interventions, and preventative strategies at either a schoolwide, classroom, or individual level to attend to the social and emotional behavior of students. The primary purpose of a PBIS system is to teach and reinforce positive, appropriate behavior and thus prevent behavior problems (Sugai & Horner, 2002). This focus on positive behavior varies drastically from the reactive approach schools typically tend to take in addressing behavior concerns (Bradshaw, Reinke, Brown, Bevans, & Leaf, 2008).

There are four defining aspects of a PBIS model: (a) clear outcomes for both students and teachers, (b), implementing research based programs, (c) data-based decision making and (d) high fidelity implementation of programs (Sugai & Horner, 2002). These elements and focus on positive behavior create a learning atmosphere school wide that increases the effectiveness of teaching and learning (Horner et al., 2009).

Making decisions based on data is crucial to an effective PBIS system. This means that schools must collect accurate data, summarize and analyze data correctly and that a decision making process is clearly outlined (Sugai & Horner, 2002). This information is used to identify areas of concern, determine possible solutions to these problems, evaluate the impact of interventions and become the basis for long-term goal setting. Again, there are several sources of data schools can use such as test scores, grades, attendance and tardies, as well as the number of office discipline referrals (ODRs; Sugai & Horner, 2002).

Praise

One evidenced-based practice that is effective within a PBIS model is praise (Nelson, Young, Young, & Cox, 2009). Praise is used as a positive reinforcer to maintain desired behavior in the classroom. Praise has been discovered to be an effective approach that is proactive and positively impacts classroom behavior. Praise has not only been shown to maintain positive behavior, but also increases compliance to school and classroom expectations as well as improve academic performance (Chalk & Bizo, 2004). Praise has also been shown to increase students' self-esteem and build positive relationships between teachers and students (Burnett, 2002).

Brophy has defined praise as commending the “worth of or to express approval or admiration” toward something or someone (1981, pp. 5-6). There are three components that must be included in order for praise to be effective: contingency, specificity, and credibility (Brophy, 1981). Praise must be contingent or given only when the specific desired behavior occurs. Praise has been found to be more effective the more specific it is. Behavior specific praise is defined as praise that focuses on a specific behavior or student. An example of a behavior specific praise statement would be “I like how neatly you wrote that sentence” as

opposed to a generic praise statement such as “good job” or “fabulous.” The teacher must specifically state the behaviors that they wish to approve of, rather than just give a generic positive statement. Not only must teachers praise students’ specific positive behavior, their praise must be sincere and genuine.

Although it has been shown that praise has many positive effects and outcomes, this is the type of reinforcement that students receive the least from teachers. This disparity between data and teacher practice has led researchers to continue to research the effect of praise on student behavior and how to increase its use, especially behavior specific praise, among teachers.

Verbal praise. In 2007, Swinson and Knight conducted a study of the effect of praise on students’ classroom performance. Their findings indicated that the more teachers provided positive verbal praise, the more time students spent on task, including students at risk for behavior concerns. Not only does verbal praise increase students’ on task behavior, but verbal praise has also been shown to be very socially valid among teachers. In a study conducted in 2011, teachers reported that after focusing on using verbal praise in their classroom, they noticed a positive change in their classroom environment (Duchaine, Jolivete, & Fredick, 2011).

Written praise. Teachers can deliver praise in one of two ways, verbally as well in written form. Praise in written form can be referred to as a praise note (Nelson et al., 2009). Previous to Nelson et al.’s study, little research had been done on the effect of praise on individual students or a specific population of students. This study looked at the effect of verbal praise on students who received an ODR during the school year. The first observation made from the data collected in this study is that students who were referred to the office most often were less likely to receive praise notes from their teachers. However more research can be done to further study the effects of written praise on the student population as a whole within school-

wide PBS systems and, more specifically, the effects of written praise on individual students and specific populations of students.

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Appendix B

Teacher Focus Group Interview Questions

30-35 minute focus groups with participating teachers

Introduction: We are interested in how the “Book in a Bag” materials are being used and how well they are working for planned social skills instruction. We are also interested in your perceptions of the impact these lesson plans, stories, materials, and your instruction have had on your students’ social-emotional skills and behavior. Additionally, we want to discuss the “praise notes” and the impact of praise notes on student behavior, particularly students who have frequent office referrals.

- (1) Please offer your insights about using praise notes (all students in general)?
 - How much time and effort did it take to write praise notes?
 - Explain how writing praise notes did or did not flow naturally with your classroom routine?
 - How did praise notes impact the social skills of your students?
 - How did praise notes impact the social skills of students who are referred frequently to the office (Office Discipline Referral, ODR # of times)?
 - What recommendations would you offer
 - (a) to make praise notes easier to use?
 - (b) to make praise notes easier to use specifically with students who are referred frequently to the office (ODR # of times)?
 - (c) to increase the effectiveness of praise notes?
 - (d) to increase the effectiveness of praise notes with students who are frequently referred to the office (ODR # of times)?
 - Please offer your insights about using praise notes with students who are frequently referred to the office (ODR # of times)?

- (2) Describe your perceptions of classroom-based social skill instruction.

- (3) Tell me about your experience with Book in a Bag (BIB) this past year.
Describe your perceptions of the materials and books that were prepared for your use?
 - a) What worked well? Which one (BIB) worked best? Why?
 - b) What barriers (if any) made it difficult to implement BIB?
 - c) On average, how many minutes weekly did you use BIB with your students?
 - d) When (specific time and day) did you use the materials?
 - e) What extensions or modifications did you make so the lessons and activities aligned with your students’ needs?
 - f) What (if any) additional books or materials did you use to teach social skills?
 - g) Would training help prepare you to use BIB in your classroom? If so, what type of training would be most helpful?

- (4) How have your students responded to BIB? Please share specific examples describing your students’ responses to BIB.

- (5) Describe changes in your students’ social skills across this past year.

- (6) What changes would you recommend for next year’s BIB efforts?

- (7) In addition to the four identified social skills, what additional specific social skills are of concern to you and should be considered for BIB?

- (8) Do you have recommendations for additional books that help teach desired social skills?