Spring 2007

Time Out!: Behavior Management for Children with Special Needs

Katie Brewer
Trinity College

Trinity College
HARTFORD CONNECTICUT

Time Out! Behavior Modification for Children with Special Needs:
The Case of the Elizabeth Woodford School

Katherine Brewer

Educational Studies Senior Research Project

Trinity College

December 14, 2006

Introduction:

It is vital to conduct research in the field of special education because it benefits the children who are most in need. Whether they are physically, emotionally, or developmentally impaired, special needs children are at a disadvantage and need our continued support (through both practice and ongoing research) to succeed. Without that help, many special needs children could not function within society or achieve their highest potential. But rather than add to the myriad of research about failing systems and what *not* to do, I am interested in analyzing schools and elements that have been proven successful. It is critical to recognize and, if possible, replicate situations that have proven effective.

The Elizabeth Woodford School[1] was created in 1968 to provide an educational and therapeutic environment to students K-12 from all over central Connecticut. Its students are low-functioning due to special needs ranging from Emotional-Behavioral Disorder (EBD), learning/ developmental impairments, autism and more. The small therapeutic school connected to the Hillside Hospital[1] provides its students with a unique environment in which educational and clinical plans are equally important. Additionally, all students participate in clinical groups and individual therapy and have teachers, administrators, and clinicians ready to meet their emotional, developmental and academic needs during the school day. The ultimate goal is for students to be transitioned back into their regular public schools and to be able to thrive in that environment—and the EWS has a reputation for success. Each year, the EWS makes a difference in the lives of children who need assistance learning the academic, emotional and social tools they will need to thrive in public school.

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[1] All names have been changed to protect participants' privacy.

Research Questions:

One thing that makes the EWS[2] an even more fascinating place to study is that it has earned an excellent reputation in the field of special education. Because of this, public schools from all over central Connecticut continue to refer children there. As someone with a background in education and child development, I was particularly interested in the kinds of teaching, therapeutic, and behavior modification techniques used at the school. I wanted to learn more about what made the school so unique. Therefore, me research questions became:

1. How does the school provide a unique educational environment to special needs students?

2. What methods/strategies do teachers and staff perceive to be particularly promising for success with this population of students?

Literature Review:

My thesis is particularly relevant and important to the field of educational studies for several reasons. According to Farrell and Smith (1998), little research has previously been done reviewing teacher perceptions of effectiveness and satisfaction with many special education methods, including behavior modification strategies. Furthermore, Farrell and Smith (1998) researched one of those strategies used with a population of students who, like many at the EWS, suffer from EBD (emotional/behavioral disorders, or emotional/behavioral disturbances)—the level system. They describe the level system as a kind of token economy in which students "learn appropriate behavior through a series of steps. Each step has clearly defined behavior expectations, schedules for

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[2] My research took place on the elementary level of the school, and I had no experience working with the high school or middle school. Therefore, note that my references to "the school" or "EWS" always refer exclusively to the elementary school.

reinforcement, and specific rewards, privileges, consequences, and criteria for advancement to the next hierarchical step" (Farrell and Smith, 90). Some of the questions the researchers asked related to reasons for using the level system and perceptions about its effectiveness. Farrell and Smith found that there was a high level of satisfaction among those teachers who used the system, and that in the section where respondents were encouraged to write comments, many noted the ability to "change student behavior and increase motivation through systematic rewards, student knowledge and understanding of expectations and goals, and opportunities for student self-management and decision making" (95). I feel that there is a critical problem in the construction of Farrell and Smith's research method, however. Ignoring the fact that level system rewards, effectiveness, and teacher usage may vary considerably between implementation sites (in this case, schools), the authors chose to survey a random sample of 200 teachers from various *different* schools. Therefore, the authors were only able to make very basic statements about the benefits of the level system in general, but could not touch upon specific factors in a given school which may interact with the system and affect its outcome and teacher perceptions thereof. My research is beneficial because it discusses behavior modification methods in the specific context of one school, thus allowing me to address issues that affect teacher perceptions of the Level System *within* the context of the EWS. Therefore, I will be able to better understand any teacher dissatisfaction with the Level System by placing it in the context of the school in which they work.

Cook et al. (2003) conducted a similar study to that of Farrell and Smith (1998) in that it used a large-scale teacher survey in order to summarize a framework of general

strategies that have been proven effective in educating students with learning disorders (LD)—similar to some of the students at the EWS. For example, they suggest "controlling task difficulty, teaching students in small, interactive groups… [using] direct and explicit instructional practices… ongoing progress monitoring… [and] ongoing and systematic feedback" (200). While their suggestions were important and their article gave me interesting insight into special education, Cook et al. do not illustrate their findings in a real school setting, nor do they attempt to suggest ways to implement them in one. I feel that it is important to highlight actual examples of schools where practices are deemed as successful and highly regarded by teachers and staff who work there.

Larrivee et al. (1997) conducted a study that partially addresses my first research question. They investigated how variations in the instruction at six different schools for children with mild disabilities accounted for their relative effectiveness, and looked for a link between one central feature and over-all school effectiveness. Like me, they hoped to find that teachers and staff at special needs schools would agree on the aspect that most contributed to the school's overall success. Additionally, their study was similar to mine because it was based on interviews. However, they found that no such consensus did exist. Among the factors that teachers stressed in interviews was the notion that they felt particularly supported. For example, at the La Venta School, teachers "credited [the principal] for establishing a workplace where they felt safe—to experiment and fail as well as to succeed" (41). I hoped to find that teachers at the EWS would also report a great deal of positivism and a supportive atmosphere in their explanations of the school's overall success. Unlike in Larrivee et al.'s study, however, I expected that in a school as

small as EWS, there would be little variation in teacher and staff responses and that I would be able to make a successful claim about one factor in particular.

Burton and Parks (1998) conducted research at a community based intervention center for conduct disordered youth in New Brunswick, Canada. They were called upon to perform an intensive evaluation of the time out program being implemented, to assess the program's in-school use as compared to its theoretical concepts, and to make recommendations as needed. Among their recommendations were improved and expanded training for staff and teachers, development of a Personnel Information Package which would more clearly outline time-out procedures, and a greater number of human resources. Similarly to my study, Burton and Parks (1998) conducted their research in one small setting. However, the purposes of our two studies (and therefore their value to the education community) are quite different. While Burton and Parks hoped to make recommendations to improve a system which was deemed to be in need to revision, I have chosen to focus upon a school setting which is considered to be thriving. Therefore, my research will shed light upon subtler changes (if any) that can be implemented in order to improve an already functional system.

Thesis:

While no one at the Elizabeth Woodford School contests the fact that it has earned an excellent reputation for success, teachers and staff have different interpretations of what makes it so. In fact, disagreements about the need to make changes often arose regarding the behavior modification system. Furthermore, these disagreements frequently centered on the need to make changes based on the extent to which teachers and staff viewed aspects of the system as overly "punitive."

Methodology:

In order to best answer my research questions, I needed to spend a considerable amount of time at the EWS itself and to perform an ethnographic study. I secured an internship at the school in September 2006 and over the course of the fall semester spent roughly 100 hours there. Based on my preference for working with elementary-age children, a decision which I did not feel would necessarily affect my research, I was placed in Miss Maria's[3] 4th/5th grade classroom. I came to learn that Miss Maria was new to the EWS (Elizabeth Woodford School) but had many years' experience with special education in the public school setting. I volunteered in her classroom three times a week, varying my time between mornings and afternoons in order to be able to view different activities. My role was to work one-on-one with her five students in their academics as needed. Over time I gathered that these boys, Nick, Corey, Aaron, Steve and Brandon had various levels of function and special needs. Privacy issues prevented me from knowing exactly what each of their special circumstances were, but through observations and interactions with them over time, I gained insight into their personalities and behaviors. Although it did not directly relate to my thesis, this information about the students helped me to better understand the school as a whole.

During my internship at EWS I spent the most time in the classroom doing one-on-one work and assisting Miss Maria during reading and math lessons, but I also joined the class when they went to "specials" such as gym, music and art. Twice a week, I ate lunch with them in the cafeteria, after which we sometimes went to recess on the playground. I observed the boys' behaviors and interactions, as well as their teachers—the general teaching style and technique, the atmosphere of the classroom and the school

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[3] Teachers and staff at the EWS are referred to by students and each other as Mr./Miss and their first name.

at large, and how the students seemed to respond. I also observed the ways that teachers responded to inappropriate behavior from the children, and made note of programs and techniques as well as informal methods. I also came to understand the behavior modification program used at the school—knowledge which would help me later in my study. I was also able to help Miss Maria and her assistant Miss Carmen by reminding the boys to behave and being "another set of eyes" in the classroom. Additionally, I took extensive field notes on the events that took place. I created separate areas in my notes for observations and impressions, and expanded upon my "impressions" section in a short journal that I created for more personal reactions.

In addition to these observations, I conducted seven interviews. Three of my interviews were with teachers, two were with clinicians, and two were with administrators. With permission, I tape recorded these interviews and later transcribed them. Participants were selected on a voluntary basis, and were informed that they could stop the interview at any time and that their real names would be changed to protect their privacy.

Early in the course of my research, I made the choice not to interview parents or students. I felt that this would be inappropriate given the nature of the students' disabilities, as well as the many privacy laws which I would have had to face. Also due to privacy laws, I was not given access to students' academic or medical records.

Through these interviews with teachers and staff, I hoped to discover their opinions about the methods that they felt were successful or unique to the school, and also asked them which programs or other aspects of the school they felt strongly about. Initially, the format of my interviews was lengthy and highly structured. I tried to ask interviewees about each aspect of the school separately, hoping to gain information about their impressions of the behavior modification, therapeutic, and academic programs in use at the EWS. As the interviews went on, however, I realized that my guide was too rigid and did not always allow participants to speak about things that they felt were

important but which were not included in my questions. I also worried that I might have been indirectly shaping their answers, and in a way, misrepresenting the school. I found that during those first few interviews, I often deviated from the guide because the interviewee wanted to discuss something else. Rather than continue with an imperfect guide, I made the decision to update it. The rest of the interviews were conducted in a more loosely structured way, and although they were shorter, they allowed for richer answers. I was able to follow my guide but also to allow the interviewees to answer questions freely and to stress subjects that they felt were particularly important. I also allowed for responses regarding topics that I had not previously thought to ask about, such as overarching school philosophy and climate, and asked follow-up questions as needed.

Finally, I performed academic research including a review of literature on special education teaching, behavior modification, and therapeutic methods/programs used with children who have special needs. For example, I read educational journals, articles, and a book to obtain a greater understanding of the special education system in general, as well as the specific programs and issues I learned about at the Elizabeth Woodford School.

The Elizabeth Woodford School:

During a class that I took at Trinity College on special education, the director of the Elizabeth Woodford School, Amy Cruise, came to tell us about it. She described it as a highly successful school for children who suffer from a range of special needs. What particularly stood out in my mind about her talk with us was the way that she described the school's atmosphere. Unlike other special education settings where teachers can become easily burnt out, discouraged or frustrated, Ms. Cruise told us that teachers at the EWS were so happy there that most of them never wanted to leave. Her description of the

school intrigued me. According to her, the EWS was a unique example of a school where teachers were highly supportive and caring, and where students enjoyed going each day.

On my first day volunteering at the EWS, I did not know what to expect. After signing in at the front office, I took the elevator to the second floor and entered a short hallway with locked doors on either end. Soon, I was greeted by one of the administrators, Amelia Young, and given a tour. Our first stops were to the high school and middle school sections of the building. As Amelia took me through the labyrinth of corridors and stairways, I could not help but notice that there seemed to be a considerable number of doors separating sections of the school—one to get into the hallway, another to get into the stairway, another at the bottom of the stairs, and so on—and that each of the doors were locked. Before unlocking and opening each door, Amelia peered through a glass window to the other side. She explained to me that this was "just a precaution." Next, Amelia showed me around the elementary school where I would be volunteering. At each of the five elementary classrooms, she introduced me to the teachers and explained that I was interested in volunteering. The teachers seemed welcoming and friendly, and were impressed to hear that I would be volunteering three days a week— "the kids really need that consistency," they explained.

Over my time volunteering at the school, I came to learn a great deal about how it functions. Not having had much background in special education, I asked questions whenever I could. I came to learn that it is a private school for children with a range of special needs, and that the primary goal is to give the students the skills (academic, emotional and social) to be able to transition successfully back into their normal public school. In many ways, the school is structured similarly to a regular public school. In the

mornings, children are bussed in from their homes, and they study subjects such as reading, social studies, and math throughout the day. They also attend "specials" such as computers, gym, art and music. That is where more of the similarities end, though. Most children are not at grade level in all subjects, and instruction is at a slow pace. In math, for example, much time is spent reviewing basics such as multiplication tables. In addition to classes, children also attend group and individual therapy sessions throughout the week. The classrooms and teacher-student ratio are very small—most classes contain approximately 5-7 students, one teacher, and one assistant teacher. The main role of the teacher is to instruct classes, while the role of the assistant teacher is behavior management. Between the two of them, each individual student in the class is monitored almost constantly. In fact, the children's days are quite structured in that they are supervised nearly 100% of the time. The children go everywhere as a class and are even required to sit together with their teacher at lunch.

Since most of the children at the school suffer from behavioral/ emotional disturbances, behavior management is an important part of the EWS system. The school implements a point system, a level system, a check system, a token economy, and time-out rooms (TOR). Learning how these methods work within the context of the school was critical for me as a volunteer and will be important as context for the rest of this paper. Therefore, allow me to define them.

The Point System: Students at the EWS are constantly monitored in three areas: Behavior (how they behave individually or towards adults), Social Interaction (how appropriately they interact with each other), and Task (whether they complete or refuse academic work; notice that Task is *not* related to the grades a child receives on

schoolwork). Every 30 minutes, the assistant teacher scores each student in all three of

these areas on a scale of 0-5. The criteria for receiving each score is clearly spelled out,

and posters outlining them hang in each classroom. Students are made aware of the

points that their behavior has earned throughout the course of the day, and teachers

reference these points in their frequent reminders and warnings in order to help direct

students' behavior. At the end of the day, scores are added up and given as a percentage

point out of 100.

The Level System: Based on the average percentage that a child receives over the

course of the week, s/he is assigned a level as follows: level 1 (0-59 points), level 2 (60-

73 points), level 3 (74-87 points) or level 4 (88-100). Children are encouraged to

improve their behavior in order to ascend to a level where they will enjoy more

privileges. For example, according to their level a child may or may not be allowed to

walk independently in the school, sit with another class at lunch, play non-academic

games on the computer, or attend field trips.

The Check System: At the EWS, "checks" are given out like demerit points to a

student who misbehaves even after reminders have been given. The checks are written

on a board in the front of the classroom where every student can see them. According to

the number of checks given during the day, children may receive negative consequences.

The most common of these consequences results after three checks have been given, and

is called a "stay-back lunch." This means that the child has lost the privileges to join their

class in the cafeteria, choose their own lunch, and eat with the group. Instead, they are

brought a lunch and must eat in a supervised classroom.

The Token Economy: This term refers to the practice of rewarding students for good behavior with "bonus points." These bonus points can be earned and saved up as a class in order to earn group rewards such as pizza parties, or can be earned individually and spent at the school store. Children can spend their bonus points as they like, but many learn to save them over time in order to "buy" a larger prize, such as a game or toy.

Time-Out Rooms: The time-out method is used by over 70% of teachers with students who suffer from EBD (Grskovic et al., 25). In the elementary wing of the EWS, there are eight time-out rooms (TORs)—one in each classroom and three in the hallway. These are small, approximately 5x6 ft. rooms with bare walls and a latching door. Children may elect to enter a TOR if they are feeling overwhelmed or upset, and will often use the phrase "I need to take space." However, a TOR may also be used to isolate a child who is being unsafe towards themselves or others. If the door is closed and latched on a child who is being physically dangerous, a teacher may observe the student by looking through an observation port at an eyeball mirror in the top of the TOR in order to be sure the child is being safe. At the EWS, children are never left in a TOR unattended.

Findings:

After conducting my interviews, I looked for patterns in the responses. I discovered that there was *not* a strong consensus among interviewees on which aspect of the school they found to be most important. In fact, I found that practices that some participants found to be most important were actually the ones that other reported wanting to change. For example, while some interviewees pointed to creative, well-trained teachers as the most important element of the school's success, others stressed the

importance of their structured behavior modification system. Furthermore, others felt

that the behavior modification system (including the point system, level system, check

system, token economy and TORs) were the elements they would most like to see

changed. Interestingly, this showed that even in a school that is considered highly

successful by the outside community as well as those who work there, opinions vary

about methods used.

One of my interviews was with the new principal of the school, Principal Laurie.

Although at the time of the interview she had held that position for only one week, she

had several years' experience both teaching and evaluating at the EWS, and had worked

in every classroom. Principal Laurie reported without hesitation that she felt the EWS

had an outstanding reputation. "I think it's highly successful, highly regarded. You know,

we are state approved. We draw from all over the state of Connecticut… and I think we

have been very successful with many kids."[4] Then, when asked what she felt was the

most important element to the school's overall success, Principal Laurie's main response

was excellent teachers and their grasp of the strong crisis intervention plan.

> And that meaning how we deal with a particular student
> and/or students when they are in a crisis, how we get them
> to be safe again… The teachers are quite good with the
> techniques… and I think that makes our program successful.[3]

Another interviewee, Mr. Walter, also mentioned the importance of the crisis intervention

program as playing a large role in the unique environment of the EWS. As the student

support coordinator for seven years, it has been Mr. Walter's job to teach crisis

intervention, "which is very important here because it's the kind of place where knowing

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[4] Interview, Principal Laurie, 11/7/06

how to handle crisis situations is really, really important. So that's a big thing we do here."[5]

Another interviewee, Miss Christine, had had six years experience in the EWS, and three years experience teaching 4th/5th grade there. Miss Christine gave a different answer when asked what she felt was the most important aspect of the EWS. "First, I think providing a safe environment for the kids to come to. I think the environment needs to be warm, inviting, opening—a place where they can come and feel comfortable. I think we do a great job [at that]." Miss Christine went on to explain that many of the children experience intense emotional stress at home, and that it is crucial for them to see school as a place where they can "share their problems and their issues that are at home and feel like we're not gonna turn against them, or we're not gonna judge them."[6]

Miss Maria, the teacher with whom I had most closely worked during my academic internship, also reported the school's overall success. When I asked about student learning at the EWS as opposed to other special schools, she said,

> A lot of them have school phobias, you know, they have
> encountered difficulties in other schools, and they begin to
> enjoy it here. These are kids that have fought learning
> elsewhere. And we make it as pleasant as possible… we have
> a lot to offer… I am really happy to see how well it all works.[7]

However, when asked to *explain* the school's unique success, I received yet another, different answer. Miss Maria reported that having a plethora of "resources" was critical to the school's day-to-day functioning. She said that it was important to have a large enough staff, even for such a small school. "I would almost say two students per adult; it's very high. So we have personnel for stay-back lunch, we have personnel to walk

[5] Interview, Mr. Walter, 11/3/06
[6] Interview, Miss Christine, 11/8/06
[7] Interview, Miss Maria, 12/6/06

children to the bathroom, we have personnel if we have to do time out. And I think that works in their favor because they see the continuity."[6] Miss Maria also sited specific resources, such as access to two clinicians (social workers) who work exclusively for the EWS and are available to the students throughout the school day. She said that when students are having a problem during the day, "they have issues, and we can dialogue and get them someone who will listen and address their needs during school. We didn't have that in public schools. When a child had a need, I had to meet it."[6]

Another aspect which Miss Maria felt was equally important to the school was the behavior modification system. When asked whether she felt that one aspect (the level system, TORs, etc.) stood out as being particularly important, Miss Maria reported that she felt that the *combination* of methods which comprised the EWS behavior modification system was unique and important. "Here they have a phenomenal piece in work. I think the strategies have always been out there but they have been able to put them together and make them work."[8]

I was fascinated and surprised to find that almost every person I interviewed reported a different aspect of the school as being the key to its success. I had suspected that in such a small school, there would have been a stronger consensus on this issue. But perhaps this expectation was unrealistic. In a school like the EWS, how *could* there be one singular element which contributed more than any others to the school's uniqueness or overall success? Replicating a school like the EWS would take much more than adopting their one greatest method—it would probably require an adaptation of all of their methods as well as their professional context, such as their teachers and staff.

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[8] Interview, Miss Maria, 12/6/06

Viewed in this way, it is less surprising to find that each interviewee reported something different.

What is still surprising is the fact that when asked which aspect of the school could most benefit from change, the behavior modification system was often the answer. Furthermore, I noticed an interesting pattern in the way that many interviewees spoke about this system. When I first arrived at the EWS, I had never heard the word "punitive" before. But it is an everyday word in the vocabulary of the teachers and staff at the EWS. Specifically, their discussion of the legitimacy of the various behavior modification techniques seemed to always revolve around the extent to which these methods were viewed as "punitive."

The person who spoke most candidly about the need for a change in the behavior modification system was Principal Laurie. When I told her that part of my study was about the time-out method, she told me in an informal conversation that it was "definitely too punitive." During our interview, Principal Laurie explained that she felt that the behavior modification system needed to be changed to be more positive and less punitive.

> We want to start looking at different ways, actually more
> positive, more individual techniques that can be used. Right
> now, I think our system is if you do something wrong, you
> know, you get this taken away. And you earn these points
> and yes we do give rewards… but I think it's more punitive.[9]

Like others I interviewed, Principal Laurie used the term "punitive" in reference to the behavior modification system. She went on to stress that not only is the behavior modification system too punitive as-is, but that there are better, more creative ways of dealing with bad behavior.

If a student does something, say for instance rips up a paper.

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[9] Interview, Principal Laurie, 11/7/06

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Instead of saying, okay you automatically lose your level, you automatically lose your points… we would try to figure out something a little bit more creative. And saying, okay you know what? Let's pick the paper up, let's make a mends to think and figure out what we could do that would've been a better way to handle a situation.[8]

She suggested talking with children to try to discover their motivations for bad behavior, rather than handing out consequences. However, in my short experience working at the EWS, my opinion is that Principal Laurie's suggestions for changing the behavior modification system seemed unrealistic. Discussing every behavioral incident with a child who acts up will only reinforce the behavior by giving it positive attention. Not only that, but teachers at the EWS already spend enough time each day dealing with behavior issues, and despite the small student-teacher ratio, it would be impossible for them to teach lessons *and* do what Principal Laurie suggested in our interview.

Miss Melissa, one of the clinicians whom I interviewed, had a similar opinion to my own on this subject. She began by telling me that the school's overall goal was to "stabilize kinds' behavior but to do it in a therapeutic way. You know, non-punitive."[10] Again, she had used the word "punitive" without being prompted. But unlike Principal Laurie, Miss Melissa told me that the behavior modification system at the EWS was *not* punitive. According to her, it is necessary for children who misbehavior to receive consequences. "We're not helping these kids if we're not holding them accountable for their behavior."[9] This idea was reinforced by the other clinician with whom I spoke, Miss Nancy. She told me that the main goal of the EWS behavior modification system was to "reinforce the positive choices that kids are making, [but] there are natural

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[10] Interview, Miss Melissa, 12/6/06

consequences for negative choices that children make."[11] Here it is interesting to note the subtle difference between the uses of the words "punishment" and "consequence," where one is unacceptable and the other is absolutely necessary. Perhaps disagreements over the degree to which the behavior modification system are "punitive" are a result of different definitions of the word.

Another person who agreed that the behavior modification system was definitely *not* punitive (according to his definition) was Mr. Walter. As the student support coordinator at EWS for the past six years, Mr. Walter had dealt with the most behavior issues out of anyone in the school. His role was to teach crisis intervention at the school, but his other main role was to deal with students who had behavioral problems throughout the day. During my internship, I noticed that teachers often called him when they were having a problem that they could not handle alone—for example, if the child needed to be removed from the classroom setting. Mr. Walter reported feeling strongly that the methods that the school uses were not punitive. Specifically, Mr. Walter mentioned one of the most controversial elements at EWS (and one of the most widely-debated topics in education for children with EBD), the time out rooms. According to him, "the thing is, it depends on how you use them… we don't do anything punitive here. A major component of our behavior system is that we aren't punitive… Regardless of what happens, we don't punish them. And that includes the time out room."[12]

Mr. Walter, like several others whom I interviewed, went on to discuss the ways that the TORs in particular can be a positive, valuable component to the behavior modification system and thus the school's overall success. His comments lined up with

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[11] Interview, Miss Nancy, 12/13/06
[12] Interview, Mr. Walter, 11/3/06

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observations I made during my internship. Initially, I was put-off by the presence of these small, empty rooms with the stark white walls which adorned every classroom and hallway. I hoped I would never have to see the day that a child became so uncontrollable that s/he would have to be subjected to this seemingly barbaric tool. Mayerson and Riley (2003) illustrate this very debate in their short article about time-out rooms. While Mayerson writes that time out rooms are inherently "punitive, aversive and stigmatizing," Riley counters that when used wisely, they can help students and should never be used as a punishment (Mayerson & Riley, 4). Like the debate over behavior modification and "punitive" at EWS, Mayerson and Riley's argument included not only a disagreement about the need to use TORs, but more importantly, an apparent disagreement about the *function* of a TOR. While Mayerson had observed them being used as punishment, Riley said that they should *never* be used that way, and that when used properly, they can help students.

For example, as time passed I came to see that in Miss Maria's classroom students *willingly* went into the TOR. As Miss Maria explained it to me, over time the hope was that the child would begin to learn to identify their emotions and the stressors that caused them to lose control. Eventually, they would be able to use the TORs as a space to cool down, to be alone, and to regroup before rejoining the class. I saw the rooms used this way often. For example, I noticed that Miss Maria's student, Corey, would often ask to "take space" in the TOR when he was feeling overwhelmed or stressed. As I checked on him through the observation port and mirror, I often saw him doing work, reading, or playing with a stress ball when he felt antsy. On other occasions I noticed a different student, Brandon, using the TOR when he became angry or frustrated. The fact that he

was able to identify his emotions and make the choice to enter a TOR rather than take out his anger elsewhere showed maturity and growth. For him, the TOR was a place where he could go to relax and cool down in privacy.

For other students, though, the TOR was a place where they could be directed to spend time if they were "being unsafe, like when they are kicking… trying to run away, if they're really agitated or you're worried that they could potentially go after another kid or become physically aggressive."[13] Although I never witnessed a child being physically aggressive during my time at the EWS, I was always aware of the possibility that even the sweetest child had the potential to lose control or have a "bad day." As a volunteer, I felt safer knowing that the TORs were there to help students who might have become a physical threat to themselves, the teachers and staff, or other students.

But when I asked Principal Laurie her opinion on the use of the TORs as a safe space, she seemed puzzled. "You mean to have a kid go in and sleep in a time out room?" "Yeah," I replied, "I've seen that." She seemed to think for a moment. "Yeah. Huh. I, you know, I don't know." In her opinion, she said, "Ideally, I would like to not have the time out rooms at all."[14]

Miss Sarah, the head teacher, also agreed that aspects of the behavior modification system should be changed. In our interview, she mentioned that students who do not understand the system or how to succeed within it will inevitably see it as punitive, and therefore will learn nothing from them. "They are not always capable of understanding why something is happening."[15] Miss Melissa also recognized this possibility, but she said maintained, "my hope is that *not* all kids see it as a punitive

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[13] Interview, Miss Melissa, 12/6/06
[14] Interview, Principal Laurie, 11/7/06
[15] Interview, Miss Sarah, 12/5/06

thing, that it's a way to help them regain control."[12] However, Mr. Walter suggested that

a child who is incapable of understanding the behavior modification system at EWS

might not be right for the school. He said

> What we look for in kids who come here and integrate well
> into our program is somebody who has the ability… to
> understand that. So that they can work toward things and
> really be invensted in the program and want to be a part of
> that. 'Cause we have had kids that weren't able to make it here
> because they weren't able to fully understand our [behavior
> modification] system… take advantage of it… [and] to
> internalize it sooner or later.

According to Mr. Walter and others, a child [or staff member, for that matter] who sees

the behavior modification system as punitive is one who does not fully understand that

system's true purpose, and therefore may be implementing it incorrectly.

Conclusion:

Upon commencing my internship and research, I expected to find that at a small

school with a good reputation there would be little disagreement among teachers and staff

about the legitimacy of methods used. While overall I found that teachers and staff

worked incredibly harmoniously and that the school functioned extremely well, ongoing

discussions about implementing changes were clearly underway. The fact that most of

my interviewees used the same language (the word "punitive," in particular) in regards to

the behavior modification system shows that there is a healthy discourse going on within

the school, and that employees are informed, enlightened, and opinionated on the subject.

In fact, this constant revision of methods and exchange of ideas is probably the biggest

contributor to EWS' excellent reputation and unique success with special-needs students.

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