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### Behavior Management Methods for Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorder: A Comparative Study

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**Ed 400 Senior Research Project**

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**Trinity College**

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**Title: Behavior Management Methods for Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorder: A Comparative Study**

**Introduction**

The accommodation of students with special needs is a topic in need of extensive research and reflection. No matter how much time and effort is put forth towards understanding special education, the dynamic nature of the topic makes finding unified theories very difficult. Nonetheless, there are growing numbers of children being identified as “special needs” in school districts nationwide. The urgency to find the services necessary for these students to excel scholastically is rapidly climbing. This urgency has recently elevated in cities across the country where inclusion has become mandated by government officials. Hartford is no exception to the numerous schools that are being forced to re-evaluate their methodology of teaching. Publics school teachers and administrators are now being asked to modify their classrooms to include students that they may not have had experience working with in the past. This shift in policy has caused much controversy and created inquiry into the implementation methods to ensure its success.

One of the first label groups to be transferred to inclusive classrooms is students with Emotional-Behavior Disorders (EBD). While these students aren’t always physically impaired, their different situations make it difficult for students to focus and remain in large classrooms

just like most special needs students. One of the most important services needed by special needs student, and one of the most effective services for EBD students, is behavior management.

According to Farrell, Smith and Brownell (1998) “the behaviors of students with emotional or behavior disorders (EBD) can be so disruptive to others that they seriously impair their relationships with parents, peers, and teachers. To complicate matters, students with EBD are often the most difficult to teach, are increasingly segregated, and often fail in school.” (pg. 89) Statistics strongly support this theory stating that students with EBD have higher drop out rates than not only their regular education peers but also compared to other disability groups. Pushing this idea even further, research shows that students with EBD also pursue post secondary education less often than their regular education peers and other disability groups. This struggle that EBD students face is clearly a large concern for the educators responsible for their success.

The ways in which teachers structure their classroom should often differ when dealing with EBD children. This includes not only the actual physical placement of EBD students in their classrooms (in terms of placing them in an arrangement that will promote learning, not distract the child), but also implementing different methods to ensure their positive behavior is being reinforced while teaching them that their negative behaviors are not acceptable. These methods are a large focus in special schools whose main objective is to help mold these special needs students in all aspects. But what does research say about regular classroom teachers? Hocutt (1996) found that within general education classrooms “Disruptive student behavior is a major concern of teachers (many would prefer to have disruptive students removed from the class). Further, when observed, teachers demonstrate a limited range of techniques to modify disruptive behavior.” (p.82) She also claims that while special education teachers prefer to create or adopt detailed programs ensured to create appropriate lesson plans with modified objectives, general

education teachers preferred methods that did not include extra planning, such as adapting their current lesson plans to incorporate positive reinforcement and praise. But then what methods could be/are being used by educators, despite their classroom type, that adjust to the needs of EBD students?

Plenty of research has been conducted, and will be conducted for years to come, on the range of behavior management methods within special education classrooms. But what researchers have failed to evaluate is the range of behavior management within inclusive classrooms. My research will encompass both sides of the spectrum, as well as neatly compare and contrast the implementation of these methods for EBD students. My research questions are:

- How do behavior management strategies for Emotional/ Behavior Disorder students used in public inclusive classrooms compare or contrast to the methods used within special education classrooms in private settings?
- What factors influence any differences between methods used in the two different settings?

Hopefully the findings of this research will shed light into the many options of behavior plans that educators have to choose from and show how different school settings implement those options. Teachers may take notice and re-evaluate their own practices to make sure they are being as efficient as possible for all students within their classrooms.

### **Thesis Statement**

Upon further investigation, it was not the contrast between an inclusive classroom and a special education classroom that was the biggest concern rather it was whether or not there was a variation between classrooms within the two settings. Therefore, I began looking into the reasons

for variation or unification in behavior plans within classrooms in the two settings. I argue that without a school-wide commitment to behavior management plans, classroom structure relies too much on the individual classroom teacher's initiative. The private, special school setting provides a well structured, cohesive behavior management system in which all classrooms are required to participate while the inclusive public school studied is lax in terms of ensuring each classroom has a plan.

## **Literature Review**

One method of behavior management that is widely used amongst special education teachers is the concept of Time Out. According to Costenbader and Reading-Brown (1995), at least 80% of special education teachers report using Time Out in their classrooms. (p.353) Their research continues by broadening the term Time Out to anything varying from "planned ignoring" to "exclusion time outs" to "seclusion time outs". (p.353-354) These practices in which teachers try to either re-direct the student's attention or physically remove them from the distracting environment are used constantly by not only these special education teachers but also by parents of EBD students. (pg. 353)

However, this method of behavior management is criticized constantly for its disruptive nature. Grskovic, Hall, Montgomery, Vargas, Zentall, and Belfiore (2004) paint a perfect picture of the average Time Out procedure: "Following a disruptive behavior, a typical TO [Time Out] sequence consists of (a) a teacher mand (e.g., 'you have a time-out.');

(b) a latency period between the end of the teacher mand and the initiation of student compliance to the mand; (c) the students engaging in the TO behavior; (d) the termination of TO, usually indicated by a teacher

cue or prompted by appropriate student behavior; and (e) student reentry into classroom activity or task.” (p. 26) While each of these steps is necessary to effectively instill into the children the negativity of their actions and the consequences of those actions, the sequence is often critiqued for being too long and drawn out. It is also disruptive to the teacher’s flow of teaching, the other students’ ability to concentrate and behave and the disruptive student’s learning process. (p. 27) It will be interesting to see if teachers in either setting use this method and how they implement it.

Another method widely used more commonly by special educators as well as inclusive classroom teachers, is the concept of level systems. Farrell et al. (1998) surveyed educators from both types of classrooms and found that level systems were widely in practice, especially amongst classrooms holding students with EBD issues. (p.89) This idea of a hierarchical system in which students have to work towards rewards and privileges is often very successful in terms of controlling disruptive behavior, especially with students with hyperactivity or attention issues. Students have a careful framework in which they can see their progress as well as see the goals that they are working towards. This seems to be one of the more overall successful methods out there. But will teachers at both schools have knowledge of this method or opt to use it properly?

In the Hocutt’s article (1996), *Effectiveness of Special Education: Is Placement the Critical Factor?*, she discusses the differences in practices between the two classroom settings for all special needs students. She found that teachers in regular education settings preferred to remove behavior problem children (often EBD students) from their classrooms and used smaller range of behavior management methods than special education teachers. She also touched upon the idea that school systems play a large role in implementation of classroom behavior management. She states that many classrooms are lacking behavior plans due to a lack of teacher

training, lack of resources, and an emphasis on punishment rather than positive reinforcement. This research was reflected greatly within the findings of my own work.

## **Methodology**

### *Context*

Greenwell Medical School<sup>1</sup> is a privately owned special school setting in which students with all types of learning disorders, emotional disorders, behavior disorders, and handicaps are referred by their public schools. Students are referred here from schools all over the neighboring states to receive services. Students are placed in small classrooms (in this case a classroom of 8 students) and given classroom instruction as well as weekly therapy sessions, occupational therapy sessions and speech therapy sessions. Each student is placed on an IEP (individualized education plan) and adopts goals and objectives that are individual and descriptive of his/her own needs. The classroom being studied is supplied with a primary instructor as well as two full time paraprofessionals. Students within the classroom have EBD ranging from Bipolar Disorder to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Rodriguez Elementary<sup>1</sup> is a public school located in Hartford which is an all inclusive environment due to the recent systematic changes following the No Child Left behind Act and state regulations. All special needs students are placed in regular education classrooms for all class periods or referred out to other private school better equipped to handle the most severe cases. Therefore the classroom in question contains EBD students as well as regular education students. In most cases, there is only one teacher in the room, the primary instructor. Students are

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of individuals and organizations involved.

provided with IEPs when appropriate and are often provided the assistance of a paraprofessional or special education teacher for a couple hours a week.

For the purpose of my study I chose to focus on fourth/fifth grade classroom at the Greenwell Medical School<sup>2</sup> and three fifth grade classrooms in Rodriguez Elementary. I found that due to the homogeneity of the classrooms in Greenwell Medical School, focusing on one classroom was sufficient. I chose Ms. Chestnut's fourth/fifth grade classroom due to accessibility (I was already set to intern as a teacher's assistant within this classroom). However, I found Rodriguez Elementary was running each classroom almost autonomously. Therefore, I chose to focus on three different fifth grade classrooms in order to have a better representative sample of the school: Mr. James' classroom, Ms. Little's classroom, and a co-teaching classroom. These classrooms were pointed out to me due to their number of EBD students.

### *Data Collection*

My research began with the observation of each classroom setting. I have spent at least two hour blocks a week in each setting for a month's time. This allowed me to personally observe which behavior management methods are actually being implemented, how well in depth they are being implemented and how often they are being implemented. Field notes were kept in order to ensure the validity of findings. I was also able to gain access to some of the EBD students' records (i.e. behavior plans and labeling). This allowed me to get a better understanding of the main problem areas for those students and what their intended goals are. I also was able to speak informally with their teachers and school professionals about their needs and goals. This provided them with medium to speak more freely and familiarly about the

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of individuals involved.



students and their everyday struggles rather than referring to the symptoms of their generic labels and the information on their plans. Teachers were more than happy to point things out throughout the observations which they thought I should take notice of, mostly to let me know that these behaviors happened often. I began to hold very good relationships with the teachers, providing me with more rich data through these informal conversations regarding their schools in general, their perceptions of the special education field and their opinions on the way things were.

I then also began interviewing these primary teachers and paraprofessionals more formally about the methods being used for behavior management of these students. Their interviews were held at their respective schools for the sake of their comfort. The interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes each. Interviews were held with the four classroom teachers at Rodriquez Elementary as well as with their special education teacher. At Greenwell Medical School they interviews were held with the primary instructor, and the two paraprofessionals. The questions asked during these interviews are laid out in Appendix I.

### **Thesis Statement and Evidence**

Within this research process I've learned a lot about the systematic working of schools and the effect this has on the workings of individual classrooms. Therefore one of the biggest issues that came up was mandating a school wide behavior management system Greenwell Medical School, being an institution established to deal with special needs students, is based on the goal of modifying student behavior in order to transition their students back to regular education classrooms. Their behavior management plan revolved around the consistent implementation of a level system. The level system used by Greenwell is a large-scale organized

framework in which students have distinct expectations placed upon them dependant on the level in which they are at, as well as varying privileges and support given to them. This level system is based on three distinct levels (Level I, II, III) as well as a extension of the final level (Level III Honors). Students are automatically placed on the lowest level (Level I) upon entering the school and can only advance to the next Level after twenty days of "proper behavior" on their current level. "Proper behavior" is measured by another behavior management technique called the points system. The points system is based on students following the school's ten most important rules:

1. Start work when asked,
2. Continue working throughout the class period.
3. Wrap up when asked.
4. Keep your hands to yourself.
5. Use appropriate language.
6. Have good manners.
7. Ignore other students' inappropriate behaviors.
8. Do not distract others.
9. Follow directions the first time you are asked.
10. Be safe.

Each classroom is provided with these same ten rules which all students are expected to obey. Students are given one point for every rule they adhere to (with the exception of safety which equates to two points) within a fifteen minute time block. Therefore students are provided with twenty six time block opportunities in which to gain points. These points are added up at the end of the day and teachers establish what percentage of their daily points each student has earned. Students are required to reach certain percentages of their daily points in order to remain on the

level which they are standing. If they do not reach these percentages for a certain amount of days in a week, they will be demoted. The percentage needed increases depending on which Level a student is on. By advancing to new levels students are expected to have more control over their negative behaviors and are therefore given more freedom to move around the building as well as better incentives. The complete layout of level responsibilities, support, and privileges is listed in Appendix II.

On order to ensure that this behavior plan is being implemented school-wide, teachers are required to: fill out daily logs of points/ percentages being earned by their students, have their entire class participate in incentive programs used to reward the level systems (i.e. going to the school store, Friday afternoon level based activities) publically display in their classroom student level progress. This ensures that all classrooms in the building are active and consistent with their implementation of behavior management techniques. All staff members are required to be educated on these systems and to actively participate, regardless of their standings. When interviewing the paraprofessionals in the classroom they indicated that they were very familiar with this process. They listed them in detail when prompted on which behavior management systems are used in their classroom and referred me back to my prior observations of them filling out points forms, or constant reminders to children about their standings on levels.

Contrary to this organized system, Rodriguez Elementary has decided to allow room for classroom autonomy. According to the special education teacher, Ms. Smith<sup>1</sup>, Rodriguez used to have a very organized system involving training on creating a “responsive classroom”. This responsive classroom created a better learning environment meant to focus on behavior academics and self-motivation. However, since the induction of their newest administrator, they have done away with such concepts and provided a visibly different program. Teachers were

given a new training manual with suggestions for how to deal with different types of special education students. The cohesive dynamic of classroom discipline was thrown away and left up to the initiative of the individual teachers. Unfortunately, this was also around the time that Rodriguez became an all inclusive environment. So now some teacher's who are unfamiliar with special needs students, especially EBD students, are being forced to incorporate them full time into their classroom.

While most teachers implement some form of behavior management, there is too much variation amongst classrooms to make an overall statement about the school setting. When asked about the existence of a school-wide behavior plan, one teacher claimed "Not really. I mean there are the general rules, like no running in the hallway. But I tend to do my own thing. I mean, every kid is different and then my student could go into another classroom and be completely different" (Mr. James<sup>1</sup>). What Mr. James is saying here is that he has his own plan, which includes individualized behavior charts and time-outs, his students may travel to another teacher's classroom during the day and be receiving totally different messages about behavior. This is especially hard to EBD students to handle. These students need repetition and routines in order to effectively shape their behavior. For example, one EBD student travels between Mr. James' classroom and the co-teaching classroom during any given day. He is first given an individualized sticker chart in Mr. James' classroom focusing on behaviors specific to his IEP. He receives one sticker a day, based on his overall behavior. The chart continues until he fills up his sticker chart and has no evident prize at the end. Then when entering the co-teaching classroom he is given a point chart on his desk, for which he is forced to evaluate his behavior on a scaled of 0-1 in six different behaviors twice a day. This chart is constructed to keep track weekly and provide reinforcement on Friday afternoons.

Another variation found between teachers at Rodriguez was in terms of their methods of dealing with severely disruptive behavior. In the co-teaching classroom, when one student became aggressive towards another student and began yelling, the teachers waited a minute for him to calm down, and asked him to move to the back of the room. After allowing him a moment to regain his composure one of the teachers went back to talk him through the situation while the other teacher continued on with her lesson. In Mr. James' classroom when a student was becoming aggressive and misbehaving, Mr. James kicked him out of the classroom sending him to find one of the special education teachers. When the student returned with the special education paraprofessional, Mr. James assumed the situation had been taken care of and moved on without confronting the child about what had happened. Lastly in Ms. Little's classroom, when a student made a comment about a bomb in the school he was told to take a two minute time out in the hallway. No adults were sent to see him and he did not return after the two minute mark. After approximately fifteen minutes of class time, Ms. Little opened the door and told him to come back in, never addressing the negative behavior. These are three very different approaches to reactive behavior management.

Stemming from this systematic difference and factoring into the variation amongst Rodriguez teachers was difference in the amount of teacher preparation or training in dealing with EBD students obtained. I was finding that Rodriguez Elementary teachers were feeling unprepared and anxious about dealing with their EBD students while Greenwell employees were confident in their methods and training. One paraprofessional reported "Everybody who is hired here has experience in special ed[ucation]" (Ms. Stuart<sup>1</sup>) When this issue first came up, I asked directly what type of training or resources teachers in both schools were receiving to help them deal with their EBD students. At Greenwell, I was told that they receive training days on all

aspects of the school as well as separate training sessions on behavior management, restraint, and IEP implementation. Within my time there I also witnessed firsthand the amount of time teachers were spending in training because one of the paraprofessionals was going through the training. She was gone for full days at a time just to assure that her training was done properly. She told me afterwards that they must log twenty four hours of training time on behavior management alone before the completion of the training period.

On the other hand, Rodriguez was lacking in sense of community regarding behavior management of special needs students. I had teachers claim that they had received no training and were still trying to deal with understanding their students. Mr. James claimed his biggest challenge was “knowing what triggers the child” and how to adjust his approaches accordingly. While this will differ for every individual EBD student, “common triggers” is a regular topic of discussion that would occur in any type of meeting regarding the child’s label. The teachers concern probably stems from a lack of education on the students label and the common ways to deal with them. Another teacher even admitted to being insecure in her abilities due to her lack of training. She claimed that she took one special education course during her undergraduate studies but that was all she had done. She claimed this lack of preparation as not only her biggest challenge in the classroom. When asked what she wished she could change about the system she claimed “school support” as the number one thing she wishes she had. She asked that they spend more time on development of the skills needed to deal with EBD students and their behaviors. She summarized her frustration with the school by stating: “They can help you find ways to teach reading or math but not what to do when your class is being disrupted” (Ms. Little<sup>1</sup>).

Concerned about this, I asked the special education teacher about their teacher preparation. She also seemed concerned. While she had had extensive training and experience in the field due to prior work, she claimed that the preparation program of the school was insufficient. She showed me the small book that they provided each teacher at the beginning of the year entitled “How to Handle the Hard-To-Handle Student”. While the resource handbook is very helpful in terms of discussing different disorders and helpful tips to use within your classroom, not a single teacher mentioned having it. I asked the special education teacher about this and she claims that this is due to teachers’ attitude that special needs students can just be sent to the special education teacher when the regular education teacher cannot deal with him. She was upset by, what she referred to as “a distinct line being drawn between our kids [special needs students] and their kids [regular education students]”, due to the obvious reason that this does not in fact help the student. It sends them out of instruction time and shows them that they are hard to handle.

### **Conclusions**

Based on the findings of my research, creating an organized school wide behavior management plan schools helps provide teachers with the tools and resources needed to help prevent negative behaviors associated with Emotional and Behavior Disorders. By making them a school-wide policy, administrators are ensuring that all students in their schools will benefit from structure provided by them. Providing a uniform system of behavior management allows schools make transitions between classrooms and grades easier for EBD students and regular education students alike. Familiarity with expectations of classroom behaviors is extremely beneficial in terms of understanding rewards and punishments. These plans are also beneficial to teachers, who when lacking direction are often unconfident in their implementation of behavior

management. By providing guidelines as to how to implement certain strategies, teachers will not only have a better idea of what to do, but gain confidence in their abilities to implement such plans. I would suggest providing not only the guidelines for a systematic plan but also providing training for teachers in classroom application of the plan.

My research does, however, leave a few concepts unclear. Upon further study, I would be interested to see how many public school settings in Hartford do have system-wide behavior management plans. It is unclear at this point whether this amount of variation is unique to the school I was studying or whether comparisons could be found elsewhere in the district. Also it would be interesting to look back further in Rodriguez's history to see what their old behavior management plan was, prior to the induction of their new principal.



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## **Appendix I**

### **Interview Questions for Teachers / Paraprofessionals**

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. How long have you been working with special needs students?
3. How long have you been working with EBD students in particular?
4. Have you always taught in a public/private school setting?
5. How many EBD students do you have in your classroom at the present time?
6. Are there any behavior management methods that you use on a large scale within your classroom?
7. Are these methods changed or altered at all for your EBD students? If so, how?
8. What is the biggest challenge in having EBD students in your classroom?
9. Are there any school-wide behavior management methods in place at your school?
10. If you could change one thing about your behavior management plan what would it be?

## **Appendix II – Level Systems**

### **Level I**

#### *Responsibilities*

1. Submits completed classroom assignments within designated time frame.
2. Cares for school materials.
3. Follows staff directions with prompts.
4. Learns school rules.
5. Demonstrates good school behavior.
6. Dresses according to dress code.
7. Uses acceptable language.
8. Attends school regularly.
9. Identifies problem areas.
10. Maintains safety of self and others.
11. Completes homework assignments.

#### *Support*

1. Needs to be with staff member at all times.
2. Verbal prompts given before points are taken with the exception of safety points.
3. Sits with staff in cafeteria.
4. Staff reviews rules and expectations frequently.
5. Does not regress with slip ups.

#### *Privileges*

1. Can participate in classroom-based incentive programs.
2. Can use cafeteria.
3. Can use school store – Level I shelves.
4. Can participate in educational field trips and outdoor activities.
5. Can participate in Level I activity if weekly average has been earned.

## **Level II**

### *Responsibilities*

1. Completes assignments within designated time frame.
2. Participates in class discussions.
3. Cares for school materials and school areas.
4. Follows staff directions with limited warnings or prompts.
5. Adheres to school rules ( including dress, behavior, language)
6. No unexcused absences.
7. Identifies and processes problems as they occur.
8. Maintains safety of self an others.
9. Seeks opportunities to be helpful to staff and peers.
10. Completes homework assignments.

### *Support*

1. Eats at designated area in cafeteria.
2. Gives limited warnings before points are lost.

### *Privileges*

1. Can participate in classroom-based incentive programs.
2. Can use cafeteria.
3. Can use school store – Level I and II shelves.
4. Can visit in other classrooms 2 xs per week (15 minutes).
5. Can participate in Level II earned activities, educational field trips, and outdoor activities.
6. Can travel on own floor without staff escort.

## **Level III**

### *Responsibilities*

1. Completes all classroom and homework assignments within designated time frame.
2. Actively and constructively participates in class discussions.
3. Cares for school materials and school areas.
4. Is prepared for all class activities.
5. Follows staff directions without warnings or prompts.
6. Adheres to school rules (including dress, language, and behavior)
7. Helps peers to learn school rules.
8. No unexcused absences.
9. Identifies, processes, and applies skills to problems as they occur.
10. Helps others to maintain a safe school environment.
11. Consistently helps staff and peers.

### *Support*

1. May travel anywhere (except the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor).
2. No warnings.

### *Privileges*

1. Can participate in classroom-based incentive programs.
2. Can use cafeteria.
3. Level I, II, and III shelves of school store.
4. Can spend time in game room during incentive period (with staff).
5. Can spend time in computer lab/resource room for games (with staff).
6. Can use walkman and electronic games during incentive time.
7. Can visit other classrooms daily.
8. First choice for off-ground level activities.
9. Eligible to be a tour guide or new student guide.
10. Can participate in any level activity (student's choice).