

**The Effects of Positive Behavior Strategies with Students that are Behaviorally Challenged  
or Diagnosed with an Emotional Disability**

**By Deidra Fellows**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of positive behavior support and behavior specific praise on Emotionally Disabled or behaviorally challenged students and determine if those supports would result in an increase of school appropriate behavior within the classroom setting. The measurement tool in this study was a behavior point sheet and behavior specific praise documented on the point sheet. This study, which included four participants (N = 4) used a pre-experimental design with a pretest-posttest design to compare points earned for baseline data and points earned for post-intervention data. There was no significant difference [ $t(3) = 2.60, p = .08$ ] between the points earned during the baseline period (Mean = 541, SD = 278.30) and during the intervention period (Mean = 727.25, SD 166.96). Research should continue to be conducted on the effects of positive behavior support and behavior specific praise and whether this praise is able to increase the appropriate behaviors of Emotionally Disabled or behaviorally challenged students.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Overview**

The nature of the students that are entering the classroom is changing. There are more and more students that are exhibiting disruptive behaviors in the classroom that result in those students being removed from the classroom for a length of time, suspended, or sent to an alternative learning environment. These students are behaviorally challenged and in more and more cases, students are being diagnosed as Emotionally Disabled. The problem that is occurring is that teachers and even school administrators are not trained or properly equipped to deal with these students. As a result, students are being removed from school and are not receiving the education to which they are entitled.

Students who are behaviorally challenged or that are being diagnosed with an Emotional Disability exhibit behaviors that include “acting out and rule violating behavior” (Wood, 2001). This leads to disruption in the classroom, and can lead to a power struggle between the student and the teacher. In some cases, the teacher approaches the student in a negative way and immediately moves toward getting the student out of the classroom and down to the principal’s office. This leads to that student not receiving classroom instruction. Many of the teachers inside the classroom have not received the proper training or professional development to handle these types of students. This has become a problem because the nature of the students that are entering the classroom is changing.

The purpose of this study is to test the effectiveness of positive behavior supports specifically, behavior specific praise, with students who are Emotionally Disabled or behaviorally challenged. By identifying and praising appropriate behaviors, students are made aware of desired behaviors and are also receiving positive reinforcement. In addition, a goal of behavior specific praise is to change the teachers' mindsets and have them focus on something positive with the students that are exhibiting the most aggressive and disruptive behaviors. Ideally, if the teachers change their manner in interacting with the students by increasing their focus on identifying appropriate behaviors, there will be a decrease in the amount of negative interactions and an increase in student on-task behavior and an increase in the time spent within the classroom. This would result in less referrals for these students and less negative interactions with the teacher, resulting in a more positive relationship, which allows students to feel safe in the classroom and not miss out on instruction they deserve.

### **Statement of Problem**

The purpose of this study is to determine the impact of behavior specific praise on helping students that are Emotionally Disabled or behaviorally challenged to behave appropriately.

### **Hypothesis**

The null hypothesis is that there will be no statistically significant difference in points earned on a behavioral point sheet by Emotionally Disabled or behaviorally challenged students during the baseline period and during the intervention period in which students receive behavior specific praise.

## **Operational Definitions**

***Emotionally Disabled*** students are students who have been identified as needing special education services under the Emotionally Disabled category. There are a range of criteria that are used upon which to base the decision of diagnosing children as Emotionally Disabled. These factors include: (1) an inability to learn that cannot be explained by sensory or intellectual factors; (2) difficulty maintaining relationships with peers and adults; (3) inappropriate types of behaviors under normal situations; (4) a general mood of unhappiness or depression; and (5) a tendency to develop physical fears associated with personal or school problems (MSPA.org, 2013).

***Behaviorally Challenged*** students are students that present with significant behavioral difficulties but have not been identified with an Emotional Disability.

***Positive Behavior Supports*** are reinforcing strategies put in place by the special educator and/or general educator to increase the amount of time students spend in the classroom and increase on-task behavior. They include behavior point sheets and behavior specific praise.

***Behavior specific praise*** are praise statements, shared orally and on the behavior point sheet, that compliment specific observed behaviors (e.g., “I like the way you raised your hand instead of calling out the answer”).

***Behavior point sheets*** refer to the accountability sheets on which target behaviors expected for students to exhibit within the classroom are listed and observations are recorded. These point sheets also include notes on the specific behavior praise utilized by the teacher with the student. The point sheets serve as positive behavior supports in that students receive rewards based on the points they earn on the point sheet.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

#### **Overview**

The strategies that are being used to respond to behaviors of challenging students in the classroom are something that requires additional examination. The behaviors that some of the most challenging students are exhibiting are unlike any that have been present in the classroom before. The behavior is noticed in students that are younger than ever before, sometimes starting as early as pre-kindergarten. Students are coming into schools displaying behavior that most teachers are not prepared to deal with, so the solution has been to get them out of the classrooms and out of regular schools through expulsion or suspension. This approach is not beneficial for the schools or the students that are being excluded from an education. As educators, it is important to understand how to support students with behavioral challenges in order to keep them in the classroom so their academic performance can improve, not set them on a path to failure before they reach the age of seven. With the dynamic of students changing and the difficult behaviors that they are showing, it is important to understand how the use of positive behavior supports for these students will work at increasing their academic success and keep them in the classroom.

#### **Introduction**

There are more students than ever before coming into schools and exhibiting behavior that is unlike any other that have been identified in the past. These students are coming in and becoming physically aggressive to themselves, other children, administrators, and teachers. “These students are characterized by acting out and role violating behavior” (Wood, 2001, p.60).



Their only way to deal with anger and frustration is to lash out by physically attacking other people (i.e., biting, kicking, hitting, hair pulling). Not only do these students become physical in their coping strategies, they also become verbally abusive and resist authority. In resisting authority, such students will not listen but use vulgar language or gestures and blatantly disregard what they are being asked to do, if there is a task that is presented to them that they do not choose to do.

Not all teachers have received the kind of training that is necessary to deal with children with behavioral challenges. More of these students are being diagnosed with an emotional disability for their inability to deal with certain situations and classroom routines in a socially appropriate manner. These students are being brought to the attention of the special education staff and the school psychologist for diagnosis of a behavioral disability. These staff members will then provide the necessary assessments to determine if these students are truly exhibiting an emotionally or behaviorally-challenged disability. Once the diagnoses is put into place, the support staff will provide the general education teacher, as well as administrators, strategies to help deal with these students so that they can receive the academic instruction that they are entitled to.

The challenge within the educational system is that it does not provide strategies to help these students become successful within the classroom. The solution is to remove these students from school or send them to an alternative educational placement. As a result of this, there is a new goal that is being worked on in education today. “We recognize the need for an educational agenda that will enhance students’ social-emotional competence, character, health, and civic management. By teaching these things within the classroom, this will help students with emotional disturbance stay in the classroom and increase their academic achievement”

(Greenberg & Jennings, 2009, p. 491). In order to do this, many steps need to be taken within the school system to better support students. As educators continue to survey the definition of learning disabilities, they must also start including children's "emotional needs, as well as educational needs" (p. 496).

Research has shown that "educators are not aware of the best practices that are available for teaching students that are diagnosed with an emotional disturbance" (Jordan, Nelson, & Walling-Rodriguez, 2002, p.17). There is a lack of understanding among general education teachers as to the best way to teach such students. Teachers understand that they must teach students content to reach the identified standards, but, due to their behavior issues, they are unsure as to which strategies will allow them to be successful. Research has also shown that there is a "failure to identify students at risk for early development of ED" (Jordan et al., p.18). More and more schools are receiving these students, but their special education programs are not equipped for them. Educators and administrators are at a loss as to how to deal with acting out behaviors so, often, academic standards are reduced to stop the disruptions in the classroom. Often, these decreased academic demands result in an increase in violence and concern for school safety when these students transition back into the classroom after an emotional outburst.

Research is discovering many new approaches to help students that with a diagnosis of ED or are behaviorally challenged. First, there needs to be more recruitment of teachers with background knowledge and effective practices to work with students with ED (Nelson, 2000). Second, school professionals are waiting too long to diagnose students with well-established behavior problems, which, in turn, causes them to become less responsive to intervention. Third, punishment strategies are not working with these students and are causing more behavior problems instead of lessening them.

The literature review sections that follow stress important information and research that shows how positive behavior supports and behavior specific praise helps students that are diagnosed with an emotional disability or have challenging behaviors. It is also important for teachers to have the resources and tools that would allow proper support for the students that are entering the classroom. Research and evidence shows that teacher burnout is on the rise because teachers do not have the support or resources put into place to allow for success. Research also shows that when teachers have a negative attitude it directly affects the relationship that it is important for teachers to form with these students.

The sections below show research that implemented school-based positive behavior support programs and the results that were achieved based on that study. It is important to look at studies like these to determine if the success rate is worth implementing a program like this in schools with high populations of ED and behaviorally challenged students. Important information that also needs to be gathered for administrators and staff that would implement these programs is how to train the teachers to correctly implement these programs.

Another successful piece that this literature review focuses on is behavior specific praise. This is an intervention that helps these ED students develop positive relationships with the adults that are working with them at a less extensive level. This is a program that would require not as much teacher training and resources. This intervention has proven to be effective for these students. The goal is to change the attitudes of the adults that are working with these students. They are entitled to an education and because there isn't as much training, educators are quick to move to the negative and suspend and expel. By presenting the following research and information, work is being done to change attitudes and help support these students in a more positive way.

## **How Teacher Well-Being and Attitude Effects Students with Emotional Disabilities**

Teachers have one of the most stressful jobs in the United States. Deadlines, meeting state and national standards, and student performance on assessments are all tied to their effectiveness as a professional. The added stress of dealing with students with emotional disturbances could lead to an emotional exhaustion of educators that will put them at risk for becoming cynical and callous and will make them feel that they cannot continue in the classroom (Greenberg & Jennings, 2009). If teachers experience this type of attitude, this will cause an increased disconnect with the students that they are teaching. It has been noted that teacher behavior is associated with optimal social and emotional classroom climate and desired student outcomes. There is a correlation of teachers' social and emotional competence and well-being and the development and maintenance of supportive teacher-student relationships, effective classroom management, and successful social and emotional learning program implementation.

With increased teacher burnout and the development of these cynical feelings, what constitutes an emotionally and socially competent teacher? Research shows that because students are being diagnosed with emotional disturbance at an earlier age, it is important to show positive relationships that are warm and inviting right at the beginning of the development of any relationship with a student (Greenberg & Jennings, 2009). Teachers are seen as being role models so some of the focus should be put into providing a model of the appropriate way of behaving in the classroom. A lot of these students that are ED lack the capacity to understand how to act in social situations if they don't have an appropriate model in the classroom.

## **How to Help Teachers Implement Positive Behavior Supports**

The next subject that needs to be addressed is positive behavior supports. Classroom strategies that work for most students in a classroom may not always work for students that are emotionally disabled or have a behavioral challenge. This is where the positive behavior support comes into place, and the change in thinking of the teacher on dealing with behavior problems as a whole. These positive behavior supports and healthy teacher-student relationships are allowing these students to be successful.

Educators have discovered what the problems are that are related to the decrease in success for students with an emotional disturbance. Research concludes that, by changing the way educators think and by incorporating positive behavior supports, teachers can increase academic success and keep ED students in classrooms. As was stated previously, teachers already have a heavy workload, so adding new interventions is causing increased teacher resistance (Wood, 2001).

The above dynamic could change if students begin to respond to positive behavior supports that are being implemented to allow them to stay in the classroom. These emotionally disabled students have a “lack of trust in authority roles and there is an increase in concerns of justice and fairness among these students” (Wood, 2001, p.61). They feel as though they are being targeted and singled out in front of their peers and that makes them question authority figures. We must now strengthen the capacity of staff working within the classroom to help work with the severely emotionally disturbed. Research has stated “we all must have shared goals in order for all of us to help these students become successful” (Adamson, Gage, Lierheimer, O’Connor & Mitchell, 2010, p. 300). Another thing that teachers are failing to realize is that not

only are these positive behavior supports helping their ED students, but students within the general population.

If there is a common goal and understanding from the people that we look to for guidance, and consistency, it is more likely that the teachers will be on board to help these students. All team members that are working with this challenging population of students need to be on the same page with the goals and objectives to help students become successful. The behavior teams should be working together with the teachers to create a plan for these students so that everyone knows what is expected of them. The team also needs to determine and focus on the strategies that will help the teachers of these students to develop the tools they need to implement the positive behavior supports and developing those positive student-teacher relationships to keep these students in the classroom and learning the content they need to become academically successful.

In order to help general education teachers become successful in teaching students and developing these relationships, the schools and school systems have to provide training for teachers. “The special education teachers should be working with their school administrators to create professional development for the other staff members that are not trained to work with these students. We cannot expect them to implement the positive support interventions without proper training” (Bellinger, Conklin, Hansen, Kamps & Wills, 2010, p.166). Research has shown that “instructional coaching can be an effective way to train general educators with educating students with a severe emotional disturbance” (p.167). These teachers would then begin a relationship with an expert in the field of teaching these students with ED and learning the strategies needed. One strategy that these teachers can learn is that self-monitoring can be an effective way for ‘changing a variety of behaviors in various settings’ (Anderson, Marchant,

Gibb,Prater & Thompson, 2010, p.522). That, along with training of how to use positive behavior supports is a recipe for success among these students. These teachers need to become aware of the targeted skill that they are working on and learn how to effectively collect data during that time period to determine what is working for these students.

Also useful would be to have a tiered continuum of ongoing teacher support accompanied by increased feedback so that the teachers are able to determine areas where they need to continue to work on increasing skills. It was noted “a positive behavior support study would take place in a school that was successfully implementing a school-wide positive behavior support program” (Anderson et al., 2010, p. 524). This would help teachers analyze the data and note the successes of students with an emotional disability in this type of environment. As a result of one of these studies, “it has been shown that increased praise resulted in increased student time on task and decreased their disruptive behavior” (p. 539).

Another type of support that could help teachers in dealing with students diagnosed with an emotional disturbance and allowing for their success in the classroom is increased family support. By having, a consistent support system and the support of family members, the success rate of these students in school would increase. There could be a type of extension of professional development and support to include the families and the school community as well.

### **In School Treatment Program to Help Students with Emotional Disabilities**

There have been research studies examining in-school treatment programs to help serve students with an emotional disability. Not only do these interventions use the positive behavior supports, they also help students with ED “evaluate their behavior and choices, which will result in less disciplinary actions, which will in turn allow for these students to remain in the classroom

and learn” (Moon, Passaro, Wiest, & Wong, 2004, p.503). As educators continue to see an increase in the population of emotionally disabled students, the use of the time-out strategy and the punishments that are used when dealing with children that misbehave are less effective in helping these emotionally disturbed students. The learning and shift of focus needs to be on a more of a therapeutic approach, to allow for use of the school psychologist as a resource in helping with these students” (p.507).

The study cited above included participants that were all male, diagnosed with ADHD, ODD, and depression. There is a slight removal from the classroom, but this removal is not looked at as a punishment. The students were taken into a positive and non-coercive atmosphere, to evaluate their behavior, learn responsible choices, and develop skills, which will in turn help them develop coping strategies and keep them in the classroom. (Bellinger, et al., 2010). Due to this study, there were changes in behavior and general education participation. There was a decrease in the total number of out-of-school suspensions. The participants also had a successful transition to a non-restrictive school environment, which resulted in the students being able to appropriately address their behavior and attempt to fix it, which then resulted in these students staying in the classroom for longer periods.

### **Strategies and Positive Behavior Supports to Help Students with ED Become Successful**

The ultimate concern among educators is how to help these emotionally disabled children regulate their behaviors, self-monitor, and acquire coping strategies that will help them become successful within the classroom. School staff is concerned with being able to reduce the number of inappropriate behaviors in the classroom. It has been noted, and research has been conducted to determine the best strategies for children with emotional disabilities, and they have found that



“these emotionally disturbed children require a structured and predictable environment” (Fecser & Walker, 2002, p. 111). That is why it is so important for all staff that are working with these children be on the same page with consistent behavior expectations. This allows for students with emotional disabilities to feel comfortable and safe in the classroom environment, which will help decrease the aggressive outbursts and disruptive behavior. It is important for teachers and administrators to communicate clear and consistent expectations when these students are in the school building. They should try to keep changes to routine at a minimum as such changes could disrupt how the student is feeling, which will cause them to become anxious, which could then lead to an aggressive outburst. The most important thing to remember is that the positive structures that are built with emotionally disabled students should start with effective classroom management. This should be something that should be taken into consideration when scheduling these students and placing them with the teachers that are an appropriate fit. Although it is important for teachers to have good classroom management skills, the significant behavior problems should be handled by frontline staff. These frontline staff should have a consistent plan in place when these students get out of control. This will permit students to know what to expect when that happens, and it allows for the people responding to the behaviors to know what to do when a crisis arises.

There has been a lot of focus with developing positive behavior supports when dealing with emotionally disabled students. It is, however, important that along with positive behavior supports, we develop some negative consequences as well. It is important for these students to understand that when they do not use the skills that they are being taught for coping and dealing with their feelings that there are going to be consequences that will result from these outbursts. The students will respond better if there are meaningful rules, rituals, and routines that

are in place. Staff that work with students with ED should also debrief and discuss the outcome after a crisis has happened.

Another effective strategy that has been used to help students with an emotional disability or a student that is behaviorally challenged is behavior specific praise. Behavior specific praise is a positive behavior support strategy that is used inside the classroom to increase the academic and social performance of students.

Behavior specific praise would be a specific phrase from the teacher, directed to a student specifically praising them for a behavior that they would like to see. For example, the teacher could have asked all students to sit on the rug for a story, the teacher notices a student doing exactly what they expected. Instead of the teacher simply saying to the student, “Great job,” a behavior specific praise that could be used would be, “Thumbs up Elissa for sitting crisscross applesauce on the rug.” The teacher has stated the student’s name and cited the specific behavior that the teacher was looking for, which works better than the blanket statement of “good job.” Research shows when behavior specific praise has increased instructional time, on-task behavior, and correct academic responses. It also decreases the teacher’s time spent on correcting inappropriate behaviors also increase. This method is working for the students that are in the classroom that have an emotional or behavioral disability, as well as students that are not diagnosed with a disability.

Copeland, Sutherland and Wehby, Copeland (2000) conducted a study on the varying rates of behavior-specific praise on on-task behavior of students with emotional and behavior disorders (EBD). The purpose of the study was to examine the effect of an observation-feedback intervention on the rate of a teacher’s behavior-specific praise of students with EBD and the effect of increased rates of teacher’s behavior-specific praise on the on-task behavior of a class

of students with EBD. The results of the study indicated that the number of behavior-specific praise increased to eight statements throughout the school day. Because of the increase in behavior-specific praise, there was an increase in on-task behavior that was demonstrated by the students in the classroom. Results also indicated a decrease in the amount of on-task behavior by the students when the amount of behavior-specific praise decreased as well. Results from this study would indicate that this is an effective positive behavior strategy that could be utilized in any classroom that has students with an emotional or behavioral disability.

In using effective practices, “that have proven to result in positive student outcomes with the students that we are targeting for intervention” (Nelson, 2000, p.17) the students that are the most behaviorally challenged are starting to see success with the use of these interventions. There has been more and more evidence that shows that Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) programs that are implemented in schools are more effective than the traditional methods that staff may be used to using. Educators are beginning to realize that these students need to be in school and that there needs to be a shift from just teaching academics to include teaching appropriate behavior within the classroom. When “effective universal interventions are in place, the office discipline referrals have been significantly reduced” (p.16). Studies are showing that if schools begin using a PBIS behavior intervention plan a more positive school climate results from which everyone can benefit.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of positive behavior support and behavior specific praise on Emotionally Disabled or behaviorally challenged students and the amount of time spent in the classroom setting.

#### **Design**

This study was a pre-experimental design with the use of a behavior point sheet and behavior specific praise documented on that point sheet. The study used a pretest/posttest study looking at points earned on a behavior point sheet. The study was based on a sample of four male students--three that were diagnosed with an Emotional Disability and one that was behaviorally challenged. The dependent variable was the amount of points the students scored on the behavioral point sheet. The independent variable was whether or not the behavior specific praise intervention was in place. Baseline data was acquired by adding up points scored on a behavior point sheet before the positive behavior intervention started. Once the pre-data were collected, the behavior specific praise intervention was introduced to students and teachers.

#### **Participants**

The participants in this study included three students that received special education services under the Emotional Disability classification and one that was classified as having Multiple Disabilities and was considered behaviorally challenged within the context of this research. These students were all Caucasian males and ranged in grade from one student in first grade, two students in second grade, and one student in third grade, in an elementary school in a suburban county in Maryland. One student was six years old, two students were eight years old,

and one student was nine years old. These students exhibited severe behavior problems that were so disruptive it often hindered the learning of these students and other students that were present in the classroom. All four of the students have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), all of which include multiple behavioral goals and supports. These students were each in different grade levels, all in an inclusion classroom setting. One participant was in first grade, two participants were in second grade, and the fourth participant was in third grade. Problematic behaviors exhibited by these students included destruction of property, calling out, throwing objects with the intention to hurt others, physical aggression toward teachers and administrators, eloping, and non-compliance.

### **Instruments**

The instrument that was used for the study was a behavior point sheet that set goals for these students to help them exhibit appropriate learning behaviors within the classroom setting. The point sheet focused on specific behaviors that each student exhibited in the areas of aggression, non-compliance, and disruption. In order to earn points in the aggression category, students needed to keep their hands to themselves, not destroy property, and not throw objects with the intent to hurt. In order to earn points in the non-compliant category, the students needed to start a task, even if they perceived it as difficult, and complete required assignments. In order to earn points in the disruption category, students needed to refrain from calling-out during a lesson and from talking disrespectfully to other students or adults.

The behavior point sheet had three boxes that focused on the specific behaviors mentioned above. Each student was able to earn three G's (G stands for good) for every subject. If the student was able to comply and show the behaviors that were expected of them during that

class period, the G was circled. If the student had trouble exhibiting those behaviors, they would not get a circled G. For scoring purposes, one G was awarded one point.

This point sheet was created by the school psychologist and tailored to each student. The point sheet was to be completed by the general education classroom teacher, the para-educator, or the special educator that worked with the student. The point sheet was used in every class as well as specials, recess, breakfast, lunch, and dismissal. Since the point sheet segments were based on different activities of the schedule rather than units of time, the segments were not of equal duration. The longest segments were 60 minutes for reading and math. The shortest segment was 25 minutes for lunch.

### **Procedure**

The point sheet had been used in the classroom from the beginning of the school year. At the beginning of the year, the behavior point sheet was shared with each student so that they understood what behaviors were expected of them and how they would be able to use the points earned for a break and reward at the middle and end of each day. Throughout the year, point sheets were discussed with the students if objectives and expectations changed as a result of the changing needs of the student.

Baseline data was collected over a six-week period from October 2016 until January 2017 prior to starting the interventions. The special educators and the general educators collected baseline data for the students by completing the behavior point sheets and calculating the number of points or G's that the students were earning throughout the day.

After the baseline data was collected, the special educator and the school psychologist came together to start a behavior specific praise intervention. The intervention was conducted

over a six-week period from January 2017 until April 2017. The classroom teacher, special educator, or para-educator that was working with the student provided behavior specific praise.

Teachers and para-educators were instructed on the correct way of using the behavior specific praise. Behavior specific praise consisted of complimentary statements that explicitly identified what desirable behavior had occurred. For example, a teacher could say “Thank you for coming to the carpet quietly.” This is in contrast to more general praise such as saying “Good job.” Educators were asked to give each child at least one behavior specific praise daily; however, a child could receive multiple behavior specific praises in one day depending upon their behavior.

Although the point sheets had already been explained to them at the beginning of the school year, they were again explained before the beginning of the intervention. Students were told that positive notes were going to be added to their point sheets. The team had decided that it was important to share this information with the children because they did not want the children to think that negative notes were being added to the point sheets.

The teachers and para-educators were asked to provide verbal behavior specific praise to each child when the desirable behavior occurred. The praise statement was written on the point sheet at the end of the segment or day depending on when it was convenient for the teacher. The point sheet was copied and sent home to parents at the end of each school day. Parents were requested to sign and return the point sheet the next day.

Other than the addition of behavior specific praise, the point sheet and reward system was the same during the intervention and baseline. The students had an opportunity to earn two rewards (one in the middle and one at the end of the day) depending on the amount of points

earned from circled G's, with the total number of possible G's (or points) being 18 for the entire day, 6 to 12 points need to be earned by the middle of the day and 12-18 points for the end of the day rewards with a total point value of 27 that could be earned in a day. Rewards included, Lego playtime, a walk around the hallways, computer time, book reading, and drawing. The student and staff members brainstormed a list of rewards to choose from at the beginning of the school year when the behavior chart was introduced.

Point sheet data was collected over the six-week intervention period. The mean number of points earned on the behavioral point sheets during the baseline period and during the intervention were compared by a non-independent sample *t*-test.



## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to test the effectiveness of positive behavior supports, specifically, behavior specific praise, with students who are Emotional Disabled or behaviorally challenged. The mean number of points per student earned over the 30-day baseline period (Mean = 541, SD = 278.30) was lower than the mean number of points earned during the 30 day intervention period (Mean = 727.25, SD = 166.96); however, the difference was not statistically significant [ $t(3) = 2.60, p = .08$ ]. See Table 1. Consequently, the null hypothesis that there will be no statistically significant difference in points earned on a behavioral point sheet by Emotionally Disabled or behaviorally challenged students during the baseline period and during the intervention period in which students receive behavior specific praise failed to be rejected.

**Table 1.**

**Means, Standard Deviations, and t-Test Results for Behavioral Points Earned During Baseline and Intervention**

Condition	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-statistic
Baseline	541.00	278.30	2.60 (NS)
Intervention	727.25	166.96	

NS= non-significant at  $p < .05$

N = 4

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of behavior specific praise, a form of positive behavior support, on reducing aggressive, non-compliant, and disruptive behavior among Emotionally Disabled or behaviorally challenged students.

#### **Implications of Results**

The current study did not provide statistical evidence that behavior specific praise was effective in improving performance on a behavioral point sheet that tracked aggressive non-compliant, and disruptive behaviors. Although a perusal of the mean scores under the two conditions could be interpreted as indicating that the intervention was effective but that the study did not have enough subjects to have sufficient power to provide statistical evidence, the observations of this researcher suggest it is more complicated than that interpretation.

When the behavior intervention started, there was a sharp increase in appropriate behaviors and decrease in inappropriate behaviors exhibited by the Emotionally Disabled or behaviorally challenged students. The students responded well to the praise and seemed to enjoy hearing the specifics of what they were doing. It was even noted that the parents were thankful for the positive comments. The students responded well to hearing positive things over negative. The behavior continued to improve for the first four weeks of the intervention. The teachers implementing the behavior specific praise were consistent with citing specific behaviors and saying the name of each participant.

During the last two weeks of the intervention, the children no longer earned as many points and behaviors tended to be worse than even in the baseline period. This researcher's

observations suggested that there potentially multiple factors contributing to the decline in this behavior and the apparent reduced effectiveness of behavior specific praise. One issue was the integrity of the administration of the intervention. During the last two weeks of the intervention, it was noted that some of the teachers using the intervention were not using it in the proscribed manner, This may be because as it was the end of April, the class structure was less rigid because of the latter part of the year fun activities such as field trips and field day. Some educators used the generic “Good job” or “Awesome Day”, instead of specifically saying the students’ names and praising them for the action that they were participating in at the time. During a time like this it is the most important to continue with consistency.

Another factor potentially causing the reduced effectiveness of the intervention was the time of year. Toward the end of the study, the inappropriate behaviors started to escalate despite the use of behavior specific praise and other positive behavior supports and rewards built in throughout the day. This was likely due to the fact that summer vacation was in the foreseeable future. These students know that the same structure and routine would not be in place in the classroom for the remainder of the year and that during summer vacation they would no longer be in the routine of going to school. In this special educator’s experience, this can cause an increase in escalating behaviors in students with an Emotional Disability or who are behaviorally challenged. A third contributing factor, which may be the most important factor when considering the effectiveness of the intervention if administered correctly, is that there appeared to have been a novelty effect. Observations during the intervention suggested that the students who were Emotionally Disabled or behaviorally challenged did not respond to the behavior specific praise when they were used to hearing it every day. Often times towards the end of the study, the students would respond to the behavior specific praise by saying, “I don’t care” or they

would walk away from the adult as the adult was telling them the specific positive behavior that they noticed.

There are several implications of the decline of the intervention's effectiveness over time. One implication is that behavior specific praise, at least for a short period of time, is likely an effective way to improve behavior. However, if it is not used correctly or consistently, it may lose its impact. In addition, the power of behavior specific praise does not appear to be sufficient enough to notably reduce inappropriate behaviors during times when there is greater student excitement and lesser classroom structure.

The impression of this researcher is that the behavior specific praise was successful when used correctly. However, as discussed above, it was not used correctly on a consistent basis. Consequently, an implication of the study is that there needs to be more support, training, and staffing in place in order for the intervention to be maximally successful. Even if teachers are well trained prior to the initiation of the intervention, there should be periodic reminders as to how to use behavior specific praise appropriately so that they are consistent in their administering of the intervention so that the quality of the intervention does not decline over time. Since it is important that the teachers "buy in" to using the intervention, it would be helpful to share the evidence in the literature that the intervention is effective.

Overall, the findings suggest that behavior specific praise is potentially an effective and inexpensive method of reducing inappropriate behavior among Emotionally Disabled or behaviorally challenged students. However, in order for it be effective, it needs to be used correctly and consistently. In addition, among children with significant behavioral difficulties, additional interventions need to be in place to help the children behave appropriately.

## **Theoretical Implications of the Research**

As the behavior of the students that are entering the classroom continues to change, more and more research is being done that demonstrates the positive and sometimes significant effects that positive behavior supports have on students diagnosed with an Emotional Disability or who are behaviorally challenged. Research has suggested that when used correctly and with the proper training, the use of behavior specific praise and positive behavior supports will significantly improve the on task and overall behavior of these students. The goal of the intervention is to try and focus on the positive things that students are doing, instead of them constantly hearing the negative. The students also may have a negative attitude about school because they are continuously known as the “bad” kid that no teacher wants. The current findings provide partial support to the theory that positive behavior supports like behavior specific praise can be helpful tools for educators in guiding students to more appropriate behavior.

In interpreting the statistical findings of the study, it is critical to keep in mind the very low number of subjects ( $n=4$ ) and the subsequently very limited statistical power. When reviewing the mean scores, it is evident that the average number of points on the behavioral point sheet earned per student during the intervention (Mean = 727.25, SD = 166.96) was higher than that during the baseline period (Mean = 541, SD = 278.30). However, the mean differences were not statistically significant in the context of a study with very low statistical power. The null hypothesis stated that there would be no statistically significant difference in the points earned on behavioral point sheets by Emotionally Disabled or behaviorally challenged students during the baseline period and during the intervention period, in which students receive behavior specific praise. The results from this experiment failed to reject the null hypothesis.

There has also been theoretical discussion as to how to better prepare teachers to work with children with emotional and behavioral difficulties. Current teachers have been having a hard time staying motivated in their profession when they are continuously given these behaviorally challenged students, but have had insufficient training and do not have the strategies necessary to help the children behave appropriately. This puts a strain on their relationships with challenging students and adds more fuel for the students to continue to misbehave because they know the reputation that they have within the school. The results of the current study support theoretical discussions about the importance of providing teachers training and supports in using behavioral interventions.

### **Threats to Validity**

An important threat to validity was the sample size in the current study. This limitation had a significant impact on the statistical power such that it would be extremely difficult to find a statistically significant difference. Since the study involved few subjects, the sample is not an adequate representation of the population. In addition, with that few subjects, any student with outlier behaviors would have a great impact on the overall findings of the support.

Another significant threat to the validity is that there was no control group. Without a control group, it was not possible to control for internal validity threats such as maturation or history. If there had been a control group, there would have been controls for the decline in behavior often seen at the end of the school year among children with behavioral difficulties. If there had been a control group, there would also have been a control for changes in behavior that could be associated with other interventions the students receive such as counseling.

A major threat to the internal validity of the study that has already been discussed, is the integrity in which the intervention was administered. There were many different adults that were working with each of the students, and the behavior specific praise differed between each individual. Some adults were correctly applying the intervention and using specific actions and the name of the student; unfortunately, others were using the generic “good job” statements. This could have been part of the reason the students lost interest so quickly, because some teachers were not using the specific statements. The adults in the study were all specifically trained in how to use the specific praise, but the fast pace of the day and all the activities that were planned, the praise got very rushed as the transition between activities took place. The integrity in which the intervention was administered declined over the course of the study.

There were also numerous threats to external validity. The group of students that was used for this study were exhibiting significant levels of maladaptive behaviors and most were identified as Emotionally Disabled. Not all children with an Emotional Disability will exhibit the same type and frequencies of behaviors. This limits the extent to which the results can be generalized because the intervention may have a different impact on students with less severe or different behavioral problems.

Another validity consideration is the timing of the intervention. Since subjects were used as their own controls, the baseline occurred in the 30-day period prior to the intervention. Although that is not a large difference, children’s behavior fluctuates throughout the school year and can be impacted by factors such as school closings for holidays and inclement weather or for events related to the academic calendar or activities (e.g., testing, differences in curricular content and activities). The quality of student behavior, even in settings in which the behavior specific praise intervention was not taking place, declined during the last two weeks of the

intervention, As noted previously, there could also be maturation and history effects due to the differing time periods. The intervention also started after half of the school year was over in January. The results can only be generalized to interventions that start in the middle of the school year.

The results are also limited to the extent to which they can be generalized based on other subject characteristics. All subjects were male Caucasian elementary school students. The intervention may be differentially effective with a more diverse set of subjects.

A threat to the external validity is that the results can be generalized only to point sheet performance. There are other outcomes that could be impacted by behavior specific praise such as student motivation, student self-esteem, parent satisfaction, and the amount of time students are able to remain in the classroom rather than in crisis.

A final threat to external validity was that the behavior specific praise was limited to behaviors that occurred within a classroom setting. The results cannot be generalized to an intervention that occurred throughout the school day and across settings such as transitional times, special area, or lunch. It was expected of the students to not be physically aggressive, non-compliant or disruptive during transition times, in lunch, or during recess. There could have been an increase in motivation if the students saw the adults noticing what they were doing outside of the academic setting.

### **Connections to Previous Studies**

Prior to this current study, there have been other studies done to show the effects of positive behavior supports and behavior specific praise and the amount of appropriate and on-task behaviors. “In a review of literature, Brophy (as cited in Copeland et al.,2000) determined



that teacher praise was most effective when it was behavior specific,” (p.5). As noted in the Copeland paper, Brophy reported that only 5 percent of teacher praise statements are behavior specific, this is similar to the observations of this researcher, because before the intervention, teachers in the school did not regularly use praise that was behavior or student specific.

In the study by Copeland et al., (2000), the intervention took place in a self-contained classroom for Emotionally Disabled students with both male and female students. There was one educator in the room completing the intervention, and this teacher focused on increasing the rate as to when he used the behavior specific praise. The study then examined the effect that this increased rate had on on-task behavior of the students with emotional and behavioral disorders. It was noted in the study that with the increased use of the behavior specific praise, the mean percentage of on-task behavior went from 48.7 to 85.6.

Although the current study provided tentative support for the use of behavior specific praise, the results were not as compelling as those from the Copeland et al., (2000) study. There were numerous differences between the two studies. The Copeland study differed from the current study because it had both male and female students. It is possible that females respond differently to behavior specific praise than males. The students in the Copeland study were also in a higher grade, fifth grade, which may have led to a better understanding of the meaning of the behavior specific praise and the intention behind it. The Copeland study also took place in a self-contained special education classroom setting with just one teacher providing the behavior specific praise. In the current study, students were in different inclusion classrooms and had varying skill levels. Children may respond differently to the intervention in different classroom settings. Multiple adults, varying in the degree to which they used behavior specific praise appropriately and consistently, provided the intervention in the current study rather than just one

teacher. Consequently, the behavior specific praise was likely used more consistently and appropriately in the Copeland study. Another difference was the way behavior specific praise served as an independent variable. In the Copeland study, the teacher used an increased rate of behavior specific praise, whereas in the current study, educators were systematically using behavior specific praise and recording it on the point sheet once daily. The greater frequency of the behavior specific praise in the Copeland study may have led to greater findings of the intervention's effectiveness.

### **Implications for Future Research**

In conducting this study, the researcher realized how important it was for the intervention to be applied accurately and consistently. In future research examining the effectiveness of behavior specific praise, there should be consistent training of how to use the praise and what it means to be specific. The teachers will be further instructed as to when to say it and how to properly communicate the praise to the student. They would also be encouraged to use the praise consistently. Children with emotional and behavioral difficulties thrive on a consistent routine

In order to help teachers to appreciate the value of administering behavior specific praise appropriately, a future study could compare two groups of students in which one group received the behavior specific praise intervention consistently and in the correct manner while the other group received the behavior specific praise in a less formal manner. Since recording the behavior specific praise to the point sheet added an extra time/effort component for the teacher, another study could examine whether using behavior specific praise orally, but not systematically recording it on a point sheet, is equally effective, and if teachers are more likely to use behavior specific praise if they are just expected to provide oral praise. Another possibility for future researchers would be to look at the behavior point sheet and the ways of documenting

the results of the behavior specific praise as well as the target behaviors that were being addressed in order to simplify the logistics of the intervention.

Additional research could also broaden the types of behaviors praised and the settings in which the intervention takes place. Behavior specific praise does not necessarily have to be focused on the categories of behavior that the students are working toward on their point sheets. It would be worth noting if there was a change in behavior if adults working with these students noticed when they were doing something noteworthy when they least expected it, not just in the academic aspects of the classroom. The praises could be noted at lunch, in special area, recess, or in the hallway.

Future research could also examine the impact of the intervention on a wider range of individuals. Studies could include both male and female students, students of different races, students of different grade levels and abilities, and students with varying behavioral problems.

A future study could also determine if there would be a more significant impact if the intervention was implemented at the beginning of each school year. Staff could receive training on how to utilize this specific praise and support in the summer, during professional development. By doing this, instruction on behavior specific praise would reach a larger group of people hearing the same directions, which will allow for everyone to deliver in a consistent way. Equally important to the training implications, starting the intervention earlier in the school year could also impact the consistency in which it is delivered as well as student responsiveness. Had the intervention started sooner, it might have become part of the classroom routine, along with the point sheets. If it had been something that the students were introduced to early on, it might have had a better reception and the students might have responded better to it.

One last idea is to determine the impact of this intervention if it is used on a school-wide basis. A study could examine if school-wide behavior specific praise would increase the morale and on-task behaviors of everyone in the school, which would in turn help the emotionally disabled students to feel like a part of a group. This in turn could help with their negative feelings and relationships toward adults, which in turn could lead these students with behavioral difficulties to have a more positive attitude toward school. This positive attitude could decrease the negative and maladaptive behaviors that they are exhibiting.

### **Summary**

The results of this study indicate that there was no statistically significant decrease in inappropriate behavior as measured by a behavioral point sheet when behavior specific praise was used with students classified with an Emotional Disability or who are behaviorally challenged. However, the study had significant validity concerns that may have impacted these findings. Previous research has indicated that the behavior specific praise, if done correctly, does have a significant impact on students with an Emotional Disability. Current findings suggest that while students did not respond consistently to the intervention throughout the entire time span of the study, there was some improvement, at least at the beginning of the study. Future research should address the limitations of this study and further examine the effectiveness of behavior specific praise. Hopefully, future research can determine a way to make the intervention more effective so that teachers will have an additional positive behavior intervention tool to help students that struggle with behavior.

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