

Fostering Intentionality and Reflection in Pre-Service Teachers' Use of Behavior Specific Praise

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Abstract: Explicit training is needed to support pre-service teachers in use of preventive behavior management strategies including behavior specific praise. This descriptive demonstration focused on a training process in universal prevention strategies, specifically behavior specific praise, to improve preservice teachers' use of classroom management strategies across consecutive field-based experiences. Two examples were utilized to demonstrate a multi-component process of video self-reflection and coaching with feedback to impact growth in praise use over time. Future directions and implications are discussed.

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Introduction

Teachers encounter challenging behaviors daily in the classroom. Novice teachers entering the field often see challenging behavior as a major hurdle, feeling underprepared and ineffective. Challenging behaviors exhibited, including common or nuisance behaviors, can disrupt teaching and consume more than 80% of teachers' instructional time (Scott, 2017; Simonsen et al., 2008). Teachers often lack management skills needed to handle challenging behaviors such as verbal disruption, noncompliance, and off-task behaviors, which are the gateway to other occurrences of behavior (Alter et al., 2013).

Challenging behaviors can hinder learning and impact social emotional development, although it is important to remember that they ultimately serve a function (i.e., are purposeful) for the student. Challenging behaviors can be viewed as a skill deficit (can't do) or performance deficit (won't do), both signaling the need for instruction or support (McIntosh et al., 2006). When teachers use common language to describe challenging behaviors and can pinpoint the function of the behavior, then linkages to effective behavior reduction instructional practices can be made (Alter et al., 2013).

Evidence-based classroom management strategies, used universally at school or classroom levels, are the most effective way to decrease challenging behavior in the classroom (Beam & Mueller, 2017). Often when teachers use evidence-based behavioral practices effectively, students' undesired behaviors decrease, and they are more likely to be engaged in learning. Though, research suggests that universal strategies meant to prevent or reduce challenging behavior are often not applied consistently or with fidelity (Owens et al., 2020). This could be as a result of the

lack of adequate training and support for behavior management.

Many special and general education teachers lack the preparation to select and implement effective behavioral strategies (Gable et al., 2012). In a study of the perspectives of special and general education teachers, both groups of educators acknowledged the importance and usage of large group classroom management practices as well as more individualized strategies, however both groups indicated that they were not prepared to implement classroom management practices, particularly individualized interventions. Simply exposing school personnel to various practices is not enough; school personnel must be instructed directly and systematically to a mastery level on each specific skill and demonstrate their competency in applied settings (Gable, 2004; Zoder-Martell et al., 2019).

The use of evidence-based practices to promote prevention and positive practices for students with challenging behavior has been supported for years and was included within the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1997. For example, in this reauthorization, IDEA was enhanced to promote a proactive approach to behavior by requiring the team to assess the need for positive behavior supports. It is well known that effective positive behavioral approaches within a tiered support framework are designed to meet the needs of students within schools by providing effective practices to all and systematically providing more support for the few students who may need increased intensity (McIntosh et al., 2023). The use of effective strategies for all students, commonly known as universal or Tier 1 strategies in a multi-tiered support framework, includes low intensity supports such as behavior specific praise, active supervision, precorrection, opportunities to

respond, and instructional choice (Beam & Mueller, 2017; Lane et al., 2015).

Use of Behavior Specific Praise and General Praise

Rooted in applied behavior analysis theory, specific contingent praise, also known as Behavior Specific Praise (BSP), has consistently been reported as a simple yet powerful strategy to acknowledge appropriate behaviors in a wide range of classroom settings (Alberto & Troutman, 2006). Recently, Royer and colleagues (2019) classified BSP as a potentially evidence-based practice when using The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) *Standards for Evidence-Based Practices in Special Education*.

Behavior specific praise is a low-intensity, teacher-delivered classroom management strategy that is used to decrease problem behaviors and even prevent them from happening in the first place while creating a positive and supportive learning environment. This form of praise has shown greater effectiveness in increasing desired outcomes than the use of general praise alone (e.g., on-task, academic, social/emotional; Hattie & Timperley, 2007) possibly because the behavior specific statement focuses on the exact behavior the student has performed well and ultimately reinforces that behavior to be repeated (Ennis et al., 2020). This reinforcement will likely benefit both the target student and classmates by providing an example of what the teacher wants intentionally. BSP is typically used in conjunction with a package of universal behavior strategies. When viewed in a package, increases in use of BSP were linked to heightened praise to correction ratios (e.g., 4:1 positive statements to corrections) and increased on-task behavior (Zakszeski et al., 2020).

Overall, teachers may perceive their use of praise as sufficient, although natural rates of praise are typically low. In addition, rates of BSP are consistently lower as compared to rates of general praise (Reinke et al., 2013). For example, Reinke et al. (2013) reported higher rates of general praise to BSP, 25.8 general praise statements as opposed to 7.8 BSP statements per hour in kindergarten through 3rd grade classrooms. Floress and colleagues (2018) found that teachers used more general praise (28.9 praises per hour or 0.48 per minute) than specific praise (5.9 praises per hour or 0.10 per minute), reporting this as a statistically significant difference. It might be one thing to implement frequent and immediate general praise in response to student performance during instruction, however, to go the step further and add in specific behaviors or skills does not typically occur without training and continual support (Zakszeski et al., 2020). This may be especially true for novice teachers in the field, as there are a myriad of tasks, responsibilities, emotions, and situations to work through in finding one's footing as a new teacher.

Need for Explicit Training

Given the context-specific nuances of different learning environments, student dynamics that influence the classroom community, and necessity for on-the-spot decision making to address challenging behaviors, the importance of training teachers in classroom management practices cannot be understated. When looking more closely at some of the pivotal universal/Tier 1 classroom management strategies, explicit training and feedback are often needed for teachers to not only acquire the skill but use it fluently. Training with fidelity and using effective methods are key ingredients that

support educators' acquisition and maintenance of BSP use.

Ennis and colleagues (2020) classified coaching teachers to use BSP as an evidence-based practice. The authors defined coaching as "any form of ongoing support to facilitate teacher implementation of a practice, including self-coaching" (Ennis et al., 2020, p. 149). Other researchers have also reported performance feedback to increase teacher use of praise as a potentially evidence-based practice (Sweigert et al., 2016). Overall, researchers have reported that training teachers in use of BSP has taken on a range of forms, where many effective interventions take on a package approach to training including methods such as didactic methods, immediate and delayed performance feedback, or self-reflection (Ennis et al., 2020; Nagro et al., 2017; Vanlone et al., 2022). Use of technology is often integrated into training approaches for content delivery due to its accessibility and adaptability as well as potential for ease of cognitive load through more recent multimedia tools for training in the field of special education such as Content Acquisition Podcasts (CAP-TVs) (Rodgers et al., 2017). Additionally, performance feedback as part of a training package has been increasingly delivered using various methods of technology ranging from live bug-in-ear feedback to visual or video performance feedback, including video self-analysis (Ennis et al., 2020; Nagro et al., 2020; Scheeler et al., 2018). Establishing reflection as a practice is often first introduced in pre-service teaching and can continue into future training. Reflection, as a skill to improve outcomes, needs practice and feedback, especially for novice teachers (Lew & Nelson, 2016). Guided reflection, with video analysis, can improve pre-service teacher (PST) efficacy, confidence, and skills (Nagro et al., 2017).

In addition to ensuring that effective training approaches are being implemented, Royer and colleagues (2019) have also promoted a need for training to criterion before implementation occurs in the field. Taking this knowledge and applying it to intervention criteria prior to implementation in the classroom is something that Royer and colleagues (2019) have argued could improve treatment fidelity and maintenance in the field. Various strategies such as checking for understanding, scenario or role-play-based exercises, or targeted opportunities for receiving feedback could be implemented to increase acquisition and fluency when used in the field (Roscoe & Fisher, 2008). Further, Ennis et al. (2020) have also noted that training needs to extend beyond one session in order to promote teacher behavior change. Although, training teachers to increase use of praise has resulted in decreases in challenging behavior in the classroom (Floress et al., 2018), overtime, improved rates are not always maintained, resulting in a regression to previous habits and decreased praise use (Hawkins & Heflin, 2011). When feasible, multiple touchpoint training approaches may help to address the lack of skill maintenance in teachers' sustained use of BSP to provide for more frequent feedback, self-reflection, and overall attentiveness to implementation of this effective and preventative classroom management strategy.

To enhance preparation and understanding, an embedded training on BSP utilization with feedback and reflection was created. This universal strategy was selected intentionally because it is practically feasible and effective, described as a low-intensity strategy to teach as a manageable approach to improving classroom management practices (Ennis et al., 2020; Lane et al., 2015). Initial use, with just a few pre-service teachers, has provided some important points to consider to

increase outcomes. The process and an example demonstration are provided.

Demonstration Overview

This descriptive demonstration focused on the application and maintenance of evidence-based instructional practices with two pre-service teachers towards improved outcomes for PK12 students in inclusive settings. The focus directly aligned with existing needs in the field related to pre-service teacher training in delivery of praise (Ennis et al., 2020). Specifically, pre-service teachers were trained on the use of BSP as prevention for challenging behavior and to support effective instructional practice. The training process emphasized evidence-based features including virtual training modules with checks for understanding, video tagging to find instances of BSP as well as missed opportunities, and coaching with feedback. Having an explicit focus on both fidelity of implementation along with integrating technology in meaningful ways to enhance use and maintenance has the potential to change the trajectory for teachers entering the field with increased preparedness and confidence in classroom management skills.

A training process was developed by the university faculty serving as course instructors and supervisors across the practicum and subsequent student teaching experience. The initial need for the training was based on the lack of preparedness seen in student teachers' observations on lesson plan implementation and based on internal data that were collected demonstrating this as a reported area of need by pre-service teachers, cooperating teachers, and supervisors in the past. The key components of the training process included the following:

1. Creation of an implementation checklist (See Appendix A)- The BSP strategy was broken down into key components for implementation with high quality indicators that support effective use and fidelity of implementation. These components were influenced by the collective literature supporting universal strategies within a positive behavioral support framework (Lane et al., 2015). The components included using a praise statement that is positive, states the specific behavior that is observable, is delivered immediately after the desired behavior, and is genuine or sincere with appropriate voice inflection. The checklist was used as a data collection tool to tally general praise and BSP, and to capture the presence or absence of the components of BSP.
2. Development of a virtual training module- To present key content on BSP, a modified Content Acquisition Podcast- for Teachers with Embedded Modeling Videos (CAP-TV) format was created (Ely et al., 2014; Kennedy et al., 2017). In the module, BSP was defined and modeled. For example, videos found in Vanderbilt University's Peabody College IRIS Center's materials of BSP examples and non-examples were used as guides. The training video gave direct feedback to demonstrate what BSP looks like and does not look like. Next the student answered questions related to the videos that were assigned. Comprehension checkpoints were integrated within

the tutorial along with short YouTube videos of teachers implementing BSP components. The tutorial was uploaded to Edpuzzle.com where comprehension questions were embedded as a check for understanding for the participants to respond to as they watched the tutorial. This was used to increase fidelity prior to implementation in the classroom.

3. Implementation of a coaching process- Following their first lesson, students took part in a coaching session focused on reviewing the BSP strategy and providing a visual resource to summarize the strategy and assist with future implementation.
4. Reflection and goal setting- As a reflection on their implementation, video tagging procedures using GoReact (video assessment software) were reviewed. Pre-service teachers tagged the second and third lesson videos for occurrence of BSP and general praise, and for missed opportunities of BSP. After both lessons, individual feedback was emailed to the students that included their number of BSP examples, number of general praise statements, number of corrections, and whether the praise to correction ratio of 4:1 (Knoster, 2014) was maintained. For students that did not make progress after training from their baseline BSP use (Lesson 1) to their Lesson 2 use, a booster was implemented. The booster consisted of an additional EdPuzzle Training

Module (a training and formative assessment tool) and a video tagging activity. Pre-service teachers reflected on their use of this classroom management strategy in a goal-setting meeting at the end of the semester as a culminating activity. The combinations of approaches used over the course of a semester and emphasized in this coaching process addressed recent research suggesting that training should extend beyond one training session to promote teacher behavior change (Ennis et al., 2020).

Two pre-service teachers pursuing dual certification in Special Education PK-12/Early Childhood Education PK-4 were completing an inclusion practicum throughout the semester before student teaching. Two full days each week were spent in their practicum setting. One of the pre-service teachers, Rose, was placed in an inclusive kindergarten classroom while the other pre-service teacher, Kendall, completed her experience in an inclusive 3rd grade classroom (Note: pseudonyms are used to maintain pre-service teacher confidentiality). In the practicum experience, the students completed three lesson plans that were implemented, and video recorded. Videos were submitted to GoReact.com, enabling students to tag and timestamp critical features of strategy use within the lesson video. These videos were used as tools in the training process to enhance their classroom management strategy use. Their first lesson served as a baseline (Lesson 1) and the subsequent lessons served as post-training measures (Lesson 2 & 3)

Table 1
Example Progress

| Name | Lesson | BSP | BSP + GP | 4:1 ratio met? | Booster * |
|----------------|--------|-----|----------|----------------|-----------|
| Rose | L1 | 3 | 19 | N | N/A |
| | L2 | 4 | 55 | Y | Y |
| | L3 | 7 | 33 | Y | N/A |
| Kendall | L1 | 0 | 8 | N | N/A |
| | L2 | 3 | 11 | N | Y |
| | L3 | 7 | 27 | Y | N/A |

Note. * Only available after L2 for students who did not show progress in BSP use after training.

This example in Table 1 shows the potential impact of video reflection on BSP use. Overall, Rose showed positive gains after intervention. At baseline, Rose started with more reaction to students' undesired behavior, thus not meeting the desired praise to correction ratio of 4:1. For example, Rose gave 19 praises to 25 behavior corrections to her students. After video reflection, which involved tagging personal examples of BSP and missed opportunities of BSP, Rose achieved a 4:1 ratio in Lesson 2. She increased her overall praise to 55 statements and reduced her behavioral corrections to 9, demonstrating her increased use of the desired universal strategy and possible response to the feedback and reflection process implemented. Rose's growth in BSP from her baseline to Lesson 2 and then again from Lesson 2 to Lesson 3, shows use of prevention and intervention within her instruction and awareness in the appropriate use of BSP, which could suggest an increased awareness in universal classroom management supports.

At baseline, Kendall fell short of meeting the 4:1 ratio. Similarly, to Lesson 1, Kendall also did not meet the 4:1 ratio in Lesson 2. In Lesson 2, she improved in providing more praise than in the first lesson and continued to work to improve this balance. Although Kendall was not able to meet the 4:1 ratio in either Lesson 1 or Lesson 2, she made significant growth from baseline to her Lesson 3. In her third lesson, Kendall increased by 19 praise statements to a total of 27 praise statements and used only five behavioral corrections. In this lesson she did meet the 4:1 ratio. This suggests that Kendall's awareness of BSP and how/when to possibly use it had increased from her baseline. In particular, Kendall shifted her use of praise to favor BSP as opposed to her early use favoring general praise. For example, of the eight total praises in her baseline lesson, all were general praise statements, none of them were BSP. However, in Lesson 3, Kendall showed growth in both her use of BSP as well as total praise.

Both Rose and Kendall shifted their practice in distinct ways. For

Rose, she came in with some use of both BSP and general praise and showed growth in these areas over time although still needing a booster for additional support after training. Looking at Kendell's response to training, she started with little to no use of BSP and general praise but was able to make growth over time while still needing the booster for additional support after the initial training. Overall, both pre-service teachers increased in effective implementation of the 4:1 ratio and greater use of praise, specifically BSP.

Summary, Limitations, and Future Directions

There is a clear need for training and support of new teachers in classroom management practices. Classroom and behavior management continue to be areas of challenge for novice teachers in the field and although teacher preparation programs and in-service training may touch upon universal classroom management practices broadly, comprehensive training on individual prevention strategies, including use of BSP, may be helpful in increasing skill acquisition and maintenance. Teacher preparation programs can bring greater awareness to the use of BSP given the significance of its impact on teacher behavior and student performance. Training in BSP can also give rise to an intentionality in delivering more praise in general, therefore supporting the implementation of the 4:1 ratio as an effective practice.

In the future, teachers need to be explicitly taught about effective fidelity of implementation in conjunction with feedback and

reflection for continued and improved use. Studies of this process fully used would help to better understand the strengths and needs of the process. The examples that were introduced give some preliminary information on use for these two pre-service teachers and give some initial context for implementation. In moving forward, and after iterations with larger samples, it may be helpful to add a self-checklist to be used in conjunction with the video tagging so the pre-service can unpack what was done and what was missing. It is possible that taking more video and having more data to utilize for feedback and reflection may yield stronger outcomes.

As an area of continued investigation, improvements in implementation and efficacy may depend on how much and what type of coaching or feedback is used. For example, in the future, investigations that help to understand the dosage of coaching that is minimally needed to see shifts in practice for increased use of BSP are needed. In addition, testing different methods for training associated with growth initially, when pre-service teachers have had less classroom experience, and then later in their field-based time when they are more fluid in their teaching, may show differences in BSP use. Another way to improve the process may be to look at the type of boosters or re-teaching implemented, including the timing this occurs, additional practice or feedback integrated, and the criteria/goals set in reference to the literature on praise rates to justify such follow-up.

This preliminary investigation had several limitations that need to be accounted for in order to understand

the context of the preliminary findings. First, two examples were identified to make specific points related to the strength of the process. The example cases were from a convenience group pulled from a setting used for placement of this practicum specifically. Within this descriptive demonstration, although there was some change in use of BSP and general praise with the use of just a few feedback points specifically tied to lesson plan teaching, pre-service teachers who were not responsive may have needed increased feedback and coaching. There was limited opportunity for continuous or daily feedback in this setting.

Integration of a training process with high impact components should be taken into consideration. In this descriptive demonstration, several evidence-based training methods such as CAP-TVs, performance feedback, and coaching were used. Pre-service teachers showed growth in their use of praise (whether it be BSP overall or general praise as a tangential effect), though it was difficult to target which training component impacted the results. However, the use of performance feedback through emailing post-lesson data tables did enhance pre-service teachers' ability to reflect and identify examples in their own practice through video tagging. Although goal setting in the specific area of BSP was not required during their practicum experience, when given the opportunity to reflect on goals for the future, pre-service teachers self-selected BSP as a part of their next steps for continued practice.

Training in BSP can easily be implemented within teacher preparation programs and strategic,

data-focused feedback opportunities should be situated in field-based experiences to support intentionality of use and future maintenance. By investing time prior to student teaching through repeated practice and with frequent feedback opportunities in universal classroom management practices such as BSP, teacher preparation programs can influence pre-service teachers' awareness and intentionality. Repeated self-reflection over time in these pivotal areas has the potential to impact their future decision making in assessing and responding to challenging behaviors using universal classroom management strategies.

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