

# THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS IN TEACHING STUDENTS APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR

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*The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees the right to a free and appropriate education for students with disabilities. Meanwhile, school discipline procedures disregard IDEA requirements by removing students from the classroom for inappropriate behaviors without providing instruction on how to improve these behaviors. This lack of instruction compared to the lack of emphasis on social and emotional behaviors is largely responsible for this school failure. Improving discipline practices will lead to equity and future success for students with and without disabilities. Effective strategies for teaching appropriate behaviors include explicit instruction, a school-wide positive behavioral intervention and support system, interactive games, and integration into the academic curriculum.*

**T**he Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the primary law that regulates special education in the United States. Under this law, students with disabilities are entitled to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment (Stone, 2019). The debate on inclusion and self-contained classrooms will not be discussed here. However, it is important to note that a classroom of some sort is a less restrictive environment, while an out-of-school placement is more restrictive. Students are legally required to receive their education in a classroom. Since many students spend so little time in the classroom, there is a distinct discrepancy between policy and

practice.

Strict discipline policies, including zero tolerance, lead to removal of students from the classroom and reduce their access to the curriculum. Students miss out on instructional time due to office referrals, in-school suspensions, and out-of-school suspensions. Specific student populations tend to be targeted more than others. Students with emotional and behavioral disorders and students with other health impairments, including students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, are suspended at a higher rate than their typically-developing peers (Sullivan, Van Norman, & Klingbeil, 2014). High levels of suspension for students with

disabilities reveals disproportionality within schools in regard to exclusionary discipline policies.

Many suspended students are not removed from the classroom solely due to academic difficulties. While poor academic performance might be a factor, the underlying cause of many students' removal is a behavioral problem (Hoge, Liaupsin, Umbreit, & Ferro, 2014). The previously mentioned statistic about suspension reveals that students with disabilities, particularly those with emotional or behavioral disorders, are suffering the most from a lack of social skill instruction. School officials, social service providers, and parents can come together to agree upon a shared set of expectations for their students. With clearer definitions and expectations for behavior, these students can begin to overcome their difficulties and succeed by remaining in the classroom.

### **Academic vs. Behavioral Expectations**

There is a nearly universal agreement that the purpose of school is to educate by teaching children the skills that they need to succeed (Tyack & Tyack, 2003). Unfortunately, the skills taught often fall solely under the academic category, evidenced by the popularity of "teaching to the test". Because state and national tests tend to focus narrowly on a few academic standards, teachers begin to exclusively teach those standards. As a result, teachers are forced to exclude the remaining content and soft skills that may be present in the curriculum (Jennings & Bearak, 2014). While it is important to prepare students for a professional life beyond the K-12 setting, a balanced focus between learning academics and socially acceptable behaviors provides students

with the ability to find future success (Algozzine, Wang, & Violette, 2011). Social norms and expectations can be subjective and exclusive, but a school that does not guide its students to improve their social skills is failing its students and community.

Students are taught academic skills in school because they do not possess these skills and strategies yet. In contrast, social and emotional behavior skills are often overlooked, since typically-developing children are expected to already have them or to naturally acquire the skills over time (Mpella, Evaggelinou, Koidou, & Tsigilis, 2019). Many students with disabilities lack behavioral skills by definition of their disability, meaning they do not follow the developmental trajectory of typical children. For example, students with emotional or behavioral disorders are classified as exhibiting "inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances" (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). The law clearly outlines how children with disabilities are genetically disposed to fail to meet the behavior expectations that are assigned to the general population. If students with disabilities are born with an inability to perform certain skills, then it is unrealistic to assume that these same students will or should overcome unobtainable behavior goals without support from schools.

Typically-developing students also require specific instruction in regard to behavior, as behavior expectations in schools and more formal settings vary widely from the expectations at home. Delinquent behavior is a socially constructed label based on cultural rules, so behavior that is acceptable in one cultural setting might be seen as disrespectful to

members of another culture (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). Therefore, teachers must model and instruct which behaviors are specifically appropriate for the school setting in order to avoid confusion or internal dissonance regarding what actions students need to take. Without sufficient exposure to the diverse rules and customs that make up their worlds, children may not adopt the flexibility that is required to move from one unique situation or setting to another.

Returning to the teaching of behavior in schools, explicit instruction is generally regarded as the most effective method for students to learn a new skill (Gersten et al., 2009). If students struggle with a particular academic skill, they are provided with additional support and instruction like resource rooms, tutoring, or extra homework. Students are not typically taught social and emotional skills in school, yet a student who does not possess the appropriate behavioral skills is often removed from the classroom where learning takes place. Consequences of inappropriate behavior include suspensions and office referrals, but this relocation does not usually occur alongside further instruction. Unfortunately, educational placement decisions are often made based on behavioral need. However, the student receives little to no behavioral instruction in order to help them transition back into an environment that is less restrictive (Hoge et al., 2014). Schools are doing their students a disservice by promising a high-quality education but only providing instruction in limited areas that are deemed necessary for professional success. Communities need to shift the mindset from prioritizing high percentages and advanced placement to emphasizing self-expression and autonomous action.

Doing so could provide substantial social and emotional benefits for students as they progress through life.

### **Downfalls of Current Discipline Practices**

Students are often punished for inappropriate behavior even though they are not taught the desirable behaviors beforehand. Alternatively, students without disabilities who behave appropriately are rewarded for actions that their peers with disabilities cannot physically or mentally perform. The punishments that students receive for inappropriate behavior are often punitive, driving a wedge between the teacher, school, and student, while reinforcing aggression in both the punisher and the victim (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). The student does not see the teacher or school as capable or willing to help them improve because the main interactions center around punishment. Students with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to these types of exchanges, resulting in learned helplessness or the expectation to fail (Jones & Jones, 2016).

As mentioned previously, punishment does not necessarily teach desirable behavior. A student is told to stop doing an action, but is not taught what to do instead. The student is not learning why their behavior was inappropriate and why the replacement behavior is appropriate. Specific feedback that outlines the desired behavior is more effective than simply telling a student to stop (Myers, Freeman, Simonsen, & Sugai, 2017). When faced with a child who is disrupting the class, it is easy for a teacher to focus on shutting down the behavior as quickly as possible and trying to move on. Ignoring a student's desire to know why they need to behave in a certain way could be an additional

causal factor in the cyclical pattern of failure for students with disabilities.

IDEA guarantees students the right to accommodations and modifications for their academic work (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). Another well-researched issue surrounding behavior in schools is the expectations set by the teachers and administrators. Teachers often hold lower expectations for students with disabilities as compared to their typically-performing peers (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). These low expectations include easier assignments and strict behavioral plans, without stopping to consider if any support could be provided to help the student reach his full potential. Many teachers and administrators interpret the idea of modifications and accommodations from IDEA to mean that the student is incapable of performing the same task as other students in the class (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). While there are explicit accommodations available and required for academics, support systems for behaviors are not as prevalent. Moving beyond academics, low expectations for behavior can have a similarly negative impact. If a teacher anticipates that a student will fail, the teacher might display less patience and provide fewer warnings before giving a more severe consequence. All students deserve a chance to prove themselves and make mistakes, but low expectations can reduce the opportunity for students to learn and improve.

### **Potential Solutions**

When considering ways to address the discrepancy between instruction for academic skills and instruction for behavioral skills, the most logical solution would be to

simply teach behavioral skills more frequently. School officials may believe that increasing time for social skills could be too invasive towards other curricular topics, but it does not have to be the case. Many schools follow a weekly rotation of music, gym, art, and library/technology classes. Social-emotional learning could take place as a fifth rotation option with a guidance counselor, or during weekly morning meetings and assemblies. At the secondary level, health and physical education courses are the most logical area to incorporate behavioral instruction as part of the mental health curriculum. Forming strong social relationships has a strong correlation with reduced levels of depression and suicide in adolescents, particularly those with autism spectrum disorder. This point highlights the importance of finding time for behavioral instruction at all age levels (Schiltz et al., 2018).

Increasing the amount of time that is allotted for behavioral skill instruction would address the previously mentioned concerns, but also open the door for more in-depth practice of these skills. A school-wide behavioral intervention and support system can provide the necessary proactive framework to accomplish academic and behavioral goals during the school day. Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) reduces subjectivity in decision-making by outlining clear expectations for all students and staff (Sugai & Horner, 2009). When every member of the school community uses the same terminology and consequences for behavior, students have multiple opportunities to attempt and refine their actions throughout the school building. Because children have a tendency to disengage from academic tasks that are too difficult or uninteresting to them, many behavioral problems occur when

students are expected to complete academic work. While many teachers choose to focus solely on correcting the behavior or solely on the academic task, a more comprehensive approach would address both of these needs. Instead of providing feedback for either behavior or academics, the teacher should utilize strategies that target both. Strategies that simultaneously target behavioral and academic goals are more time-effective for teachers and students (Ennis, 2015).

An example of a technique addressing both behavior and academics would be a teacher who provides students with a choice on where to complete a task. Rather than expecting all students to read their book at their desks or forcing students with disabilities out of the classroom during reading time, the teacher would allow students to choose where they can read. The teacher would model and provide time to practice, before inviting students to select the spot that is most effective for them. This strategy is utilized by the research-based Daily 5 reading workshop because providing students with choice helps them develop self-regulation skills but ensures that students complete the required task (Boushey & Moser, 2014). Examples of these choices could be allowing students to read while lying down or fidgeting with something in order to improve focus. With this, the behavioral component of the learning goal is addressed. Additionally, since the child is more comfortable and behavioral issues are reduced, they will also spend more time reading.

While the main focus of this paper is on what teachers can do to help students in the classroom, academic skills are often reinforced outside the classroom as well. Imagine if a child was given a weekly homework

assignment to call a friend on the phone, practicing oral communication skills while also forming genuine relationships with peers. Alternatively, a student could play matching card games with a parent, guardian, sibling, etc. to work on identifying emotions in faces. Special educators, counselors, and therapists currently use similar strategies when working with children in their specialized settings and areas of expertise. The hope is that these experts will share their knowledge and methods to make behavioral strategies more accessible to all children. If adapted properly, it is easy to see how children with and without disabilities could benefit from instruction and practice in a variety of settings, rather than learning a specific skill in isolation.

Interactive activities, such as games, are an effective way to teach behavioral skills in a non-threatening manner. Role-play allows students to violate a behavior expectation in a reenacted scenario before testing out solutions to resolve the problem (Jones & Jones, 2016). Through role-play, students learn how to label their emotions, which can help them identify how to control that specific emotion. Working with students one-on-one or in small groups during lunch and recess reduces the likelihood that students will feel singled out while still providing individualized instruction. While the students and teacher are acting out scenarios, the teacher can incorporate strategies for self-control. Butler, Guterman, and Rudes (2009) recommend using puppets during role-play, because children are able to express their feelings more openly to a playful object compared to an authority figure, such as the teacher. Role-play can be used to support a variety of behaviors in a subtle way that does not mirror academic work, which is often

seen as boring or difficult to the child.

The effectiveness of using theatrical activities to teach behaviors is partially attributed to the social and creative nature of performing arts. Activities that require a student with behavioral difficulties to interact with others are promoting social development by design. Mpella and colleagues (2019) found that children with autism spectrum disorder showed improvement in reducing conflict, expressing emotions, and paying attention after participating in theatrical play sessions. These theatrical activities required imaginative entry as well as gross motor engagement and were a part of a physical education program. Combining movement with creative expression holds benefits for social and academic behaviors; therefore, teachers should search for ways to implement similar activities into all aspects of the curriculum. For example, a student with a disability could be placed in a group with typically-developing peers. The teacher could then ask this group to create a song and dance about the water cycle as a science lesson or compose and perform a script for a wordless picture book as a reading lesson. While these types of activities do not explicitly teach appropriate behaviors, collaboration and physical movement require impulse control and self-awareness that are reinforced through social interactions with peers.

For older students, role-play remains effective as long as it is presented in a developmentally appropriate format. Adolescents may find puppets or games to be immature, so teachers should be direct with students and hold open discussions about behavioral expectations. Morrissey, Bohanon, and Fenning (2010) advise teachers to ask students to act out the nonexample first (i.e.,

how students should not behave), since high school students are often more willing to role play disrespectful behavior in front of their peers. The behaviors and social skills required in a secondary setting are similar, yet more sophisticated, than those at the elementary level. This is why it is crucial that these essential skills are taught. Students at an urban public high school were taught initial behavioral expectations through a schoolwide assembly, and they watched videos of staff members displaying desirable behaviors as follow-up instruction. Paired with role-play activities, these positive interventions correlated with a reduced number of total office referrals (Morrissey, Bohanon, & Fenning, 2010). Knowing how to behave in a variety of situations is a lifelong skill that is important for students of all ages to practice and work towards.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of schooling as a place to learn academics has been well-documented throughout the course of history. Schools around the world teach students how to read, write, and solve math problems, with other content areas represented as well. Some specialized schools, including magnet schools in the United States, emphasize scientific inquiry, the arts, or foreign language. However, the instruction of behaviors, other than how to follow a list of rules, remains largely absent from the global curriculum. Special education policy provides basic rights to students with disabilities, but a well-rounded education should include more than rigid academic skills. In order to serve students, regardless of ability, with fidelity and integrity, schools should incorporate PBIS into every classroom. Until that day comes, students with disabilities will not receive the full

benefit of what the educational system could provide.

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