MANAGING STUDENT BEHAVIOR:
HOW READY ARE TEACHERS TO MEET THE CHALLENGE?

AUTHOR

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ABSTRACT

Educators face the dilemma of zero tolerance versus zero rejection. The pressure to maintain safe classrooms while simultaneously educating all students is a challenging proposition. This article is used to share data that were collected as part of a larger study on teachers’ beliefs about their own self-efficacy regarding general classroom management skills and their readiness (ability and willingness) to differentially implement specific behavior management techniques to meet the needs of individual students. Secondary educators reported being significantly less able, willing, and ready to manage challenging student behaviors than their colleagues at lower grade levels. Suggestions for supporting teacher needs are offered.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

Today’s educators are asked to meet the diverse needs of all students, including those with emotional or behavioral disorders (EBD). The movement towards the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom combined with recent mandates requiring all learners to meet or even exceed established curricular guidelines, makes it increasingly challenging for educators to meet their moral and ethical responsibilities. Providing reasonable accommodations to support the progress of all learners is both a legal and ethical responsibility (Howell & Nelson, 1999). Educators have been examining the need to provide different classroom instruction to better meet diverse learning needs for
decades; yet, such accommodations must extend beyond the academic realm and into the behavioral realm if students with EBD are to be provided an equal educational opportunity. Generally, a learner with an emotional or behavioral disorder is placed in a more restrictive setting than learners with other disabilities (Bradley, Henderson, & Monfore, 2004). Secondary learners with EBD are more frequently suspended or expelled from school than their non-disabled peers or than students with other disabilities (Bradley, et al). Additionally, secondary learners with EBD have been arrested more than learners with other disabilities (35% to 13%, respectively). It is essential to use effective strategies to support the social and academic progress of all learners, especially those who have typically fared poorly in school, if an effective education for learners with challenging behaviors is to be realized.

Nelson (2003) stated that the need for highly qualified personnel to teach students with EBD has reached a critical level. He emphasized the need for a receptive host environment if success for these students is to be facilitated. Teachers frequently report experiences of discipline-related stress when attempting to manage student misbehavior (Lewis, 1999), but they also report that holding the belief they can effectively educate their students increased their willingness to persevere through challenging tasks (Bandura, 1993). Similarly, with a strong sense of self-efficacy, teacher willingness to try new strategies (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bishop, 1992), and the teachers’ use of a variety of classroom management techniques (Woolfolk, Rosoff, and Hoy, 1990) were enhanced. It is valuable to have a wide repertoire of options when dealing with a wide variety of student needs because no single intervention is effective with all children or in all circumstances (Walker & Shea, 1998). This concept rests at the foundation of differentiating discipline.

Treder, Morse, and Ferron (2000) investigated the relationship between teachers’ perceptions about their own self-efficacy and their willingness to include students with special needs. These authors noted that teachers often reported specific behaviors that would negatively impact their willingness to include such a student in class. The students in today’s classrooms have increasingly varied needs not only academically but also behaviorally and socially (Curwin & Mendler, 1997). Additionally, when teachers felt supported and confident they were willing to accommodate for a greater variety of student needs (Hamill & Dever, 1998). Yet teachers tended to consider techniques they could implement on their own to be easier to use than those requiring consultation (Martens, Peterson, Witt, & Cirone, 1986). Teachers who are trained to use different strategies, both
instructional and disciplinary, may be more ready to educate a variety of learners. Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson (1996) suggested that leaders who use differing techniques, based upon the readiness (ability and willingness) of the worker, could more effectively support the needs of that worker.

Bandura (1993) suggested that teachers are more likely to engage in the tasks they feel competent to execute successfully. Use of self-reporting techniques to ascertain these perceptions would allow researchers to plan professional development activities in alignment with participants perceptions of their own readiness levels. Even though these measures may not always be true, they do allow a glimpse into the mind of the respondent (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). Friend and Pope (2005) emphasize the importance of examining one’s beliefs about teaching, collaboration, and differentiation relative to student learning. Determining which teachers consider themselves more ready, defined as able and willing, to implement a task such as differentiated discipline (Hersey et al., 1996) provides the foundation for situational intervention designed to benefit the often marginalized EBD learner. When teachers experience better preparation for building inclusive environments supportive of all learners, greater confidence to persevere through challenging behavioral encounters would be expected (Bandura, 1993; Welch, 1996). Thus, the concept of differentiating general classroom management expectations and specialized behavior intervention techniques to better meet the needs of varied learners merits investigation.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY
The purpose of this study was to examine teachers’ beliefs about their interpersonal self-efficacy regarding general classroom management skills and their readiness (ability and willingness) to differentially implement specific behavior management techniques to meet the needs of individual students. Subjects were selected from a region in central Ohio using a stratified cluster random design. For this study, 885 surveys were distributed to teachers in small-district lower-level schools, small-district upper-level schools, large-district lower-level schools, and large-district upper-level schools. Upper-level schools were rated as Middle Schools, Junior High Schools, or High Schools according to the state directory, whereas, lower-level schools held Primary or Elementary designations. Each cell group represented approximately 25% of the target population. Secondary educators represented 49% of the target population while lower level educators were 51% of the targeted participants. A total of
345 surveys were returned for an overall response rate of 39%; the teachers from lower-level schools returned at a higher rate than their upper-level counterparts (47% and 30% respectively).

The respondents reflected a wide range of teaching experience with approximately 50% of the participants having more than 15 years of teaching experience. The next highest category of experience reported was by teachers with five or less years of teaching experience (21.3%). Almost 18% of the respondents reported being licensed to specifically teach students with E/BDs. This type of expertise was relatively high given that only 21.9% of those participating reported licensure in any aspect of special education (special education only or both special/general education). Additionally, 11% of the respondents reported holding no teaching license at all. Approximately 82% of the participants reported their primary teaching assignment to be in the general education setting as opposed to the 18% who had primarily special education assignments. The respondents were approximately 80% female and 20% male.

Data were gathered using the Teacher Readiness Scale for Managing Challenging Classroom Behaviors (Baker, 2002), which was administered to teachers in central Ohio (N = 345). The survey was based on two previous studies. The assessment of the independent variable of self-efficacy was measured by adapting Brouwers and Tomic’s (1999) Teacher Interpersonal Self-Efficacy Scale. This scale measures a teacher’s perceptions of self-efficacy for general classroom management skills and for consulting with colleagues and administrators. The dependent variable of readiness was measured by adapting an instrument by Bullock, Ellis, and Wilson (1994) that addressed the same two categories, management and consultation, from a more individualized behavioral perspective. Objective statements from those categories were used to construct questions about ability and willingness to use specific techniques. These two subscales were used to build an overall readiness score.

Because the instrument designed for the present study was a combination of portions of existing studies, validity and reliability could not be assumed based upon the previous results. Prior to the pilot study, the instrument was presented to four experts in the field of education for content validity assessment. These experts included recent practitioners and scholars with an understanding of the nature of learners with varying needs. Two were specifically trained in special education while two held licenses in general education areas. Feedback from the expert review provided suggestions for clarifications and format adjustments to heighten validity and reliability potential.
The instrument was then piloted with a group of graduate students currently teaching within or near the target population region. Of the 28 individuals who participated in the pilot, 26 provided usable data. Two were excluded after a visual review of response sheets indicated that more than one half of the questions were unanswered. Following the pilot of the instrument, face validity was assessed by discussing the structure and content of the survey with the pilot participants. The participants found the procedures clear but offered concern regarding repetition and length, each of which was necessary to establish instrument reliability. Construct validity was examined by exploring the variance in individual responses by subgroups based upon the demographic data collected. An exploratory factor analysis was completed to examine constructs related to self-efficacy and behavioral interventions. No clear factors emerged in either self-efficacy or readiness based upon the 26 pilot respondents. Because a compilation of items was used to obtain both a self-efficacy level and a readiness score, reliability was assessed by Cronbach's alpha. The overall reliability for the instrument, exclusive of the demographic questions, was .9579. Additionally, the two main scales of self-efficacy (.8813) and readiness (.9566) were very reliable as were the readiness subscales of ability (.9343) and willingness (.9458).

The relationship between self-efficacy and readiness was assessed using a correlation analysis. Additionally, t tests and one-way ANOVAs were used to further explore the significance of the variance between groups relative to overall readiness. Descriptive data regarding specific techniques teachers preferred and resisted were compiled. Groupings based upon Hersey et al.'s (1996) quadrant for readiness were developed to indicate teachers who were able-willing, able-unwilling, unable-willing, and unable-unwilling.

**Descriptive Findings and Grade Level Differences**

This study yielded descriptive information about teachers' perceptions of classroom management techniques and specialized behavior intervention strategies. Participants rated themselves using a Likert scale with 5 being the highest and 1 the lowest. In Table 1, a summary of the three highest and lowest responses for each subscale can be found. The mean for the portion of the survey that examined teachers' perceptions of their own self-efficacy for overall classroom management was 3.37 with a standard deviation of .34. The range of means for specific questions was 2.88 to 3.62. The areas in which teachers reported the greatest sense of self-efficacy were in establishing appropriate rules for students and accessing...
colleagues for support. However, when challenges arose from difficult and defiant students, teachers reported far less confidence in successfully remedying those situations.

The mean of responses representing ability to use specific behavior techniques was 3.10 with a range of means for specific skills of 2.63 to 3.60. The willingness responses were slightly higher with a mean of 3.31 and a more narrow range of means for specific questions of 2.91 to 3.62. Teachers reported being most confident in their ability to use a variety of nonaversive techniques such as voice modulation, facial expressions, planned ignoring, proximity control, and tension release. They also reported being very willing to use such strategies. Teachers reported being able to implement a consistent classroom routine and implement clearly stated classroom rules describing what students are expected to do and a means for enforcing these rules. These two areas were also at the top of the willingness ratings.

Teachers reported high willingness to use collaboration and consultation with colleagues and administrators. However, they were least confident in their ability to develop and implement a reinforcement hierarchy for each student or to use different reinforcement schedules such as fixed-ratio or variable-interval. Documenting student behavior systematically using charts, graphs, and logs was also an area of concern. Other areas of

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<th>Teachers Report High Self-Efficacy to:</th>
<th>Teachers Report Low Self-Efficacy to:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Know appropriate rules for students</td>
<td>Keep defiant students involved</td>
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<td>Ask colleagues for advice</td>
<td>Reach most difficult students</td>
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<td>Ask colleagues for assistance</td>
<td>Keep problems from ruining class</td>
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<th>Teachers Report High Ability to:</th>
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<td>Use nonaversive techniques such as</td>
<td>Use varied reinforcement schedules</td>
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<td>proximity control, planned ignoring</td>
<td>Document for systematic evaluation</td>
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<td>facial expressions, etc.</td>
<td>Individualize reinforcement hierarchy</td>
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<td>Use a consistent routine</td>
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<th>Teachers Report High Willingness to:</th>
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<td>Use a consistent routine and</td>
<td>Individualize reinforcement hierarchy</td>
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<tr>
<td>implement clear rules</td>
<td>Vary reinforcement schedules and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consult with others</td>
<td>document for systematic evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaborate with colleagues</td>
<td>Implement a behavior intervention plan</td>
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Table 1. Summary of Descriptive Findings: Top Three by Category
concern, reflecting low willingness means, were in the implementation of a systematic BIP and the use of crisis management techniques.

Remediation of these weaknesses is important for successful support of students with behavioral needs. Yet, the area of ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers has also presented challenges for workshop coordinators, building administrators, and higher education professionals. Creating meaningful training opportunities will undoubtedly become critical for meeting the stated and unstated goals of continually evolving legal mandates.

Teachers in this study reported a strong sense of confidence in accessing colleagues as needed for support. They indicated high ability and willingness for consulting with colleagues and administrators to address problem situations. Interestingly, this finding could challenge previous results offered by Martens et al. (1986) whose research indicated that teachers prefer to use strategies that can be implemented independent of consultation with a specialist. Perhaps the use of the term colleague (current study) versus specialist (former and current studies) changed respondent perception of the nature of the interaction enough to vary the results. An infusion of both phrases within the structure of another sampling might yield valuable comparisons, especially since Ohio currently uses the phrase intervention specialist to describe special educators. Maybe the term itself may inhibit the effective development of co-teaching partnerships designed to enhance inclusion experiences.

Table 2 shows one stratification area in which clear differences emerged with regard to instructional level. Respondents from lower level schools reported being significantly more ready to manage difficult behavior than their upper level counterparts, \( t(343) = 3.096, p < .01 \), two-tailed. Similarly, lower level teachers were more able than teachers from upper level settings, \( t(343) = 2.452, p < .05 \), two-tailed. Likewise, participants from lower level schools were significantly more willing to support differing behavioral needs than were those from upper level schools, \( t(343) = 3.115, p < .01 \), two-tailed. No significant differences in perceptions of self-efficacy were apparent in the stratification area for level of educational setting.

The differences in ability and willingness between lower and upper level teachers may relate to perceptions of the potential severity of the challenging behavior. Perhaps the image of an aggressive 7-year-old is substantially different than the image of an aggressive 17-year-old. Another possible explanation may rest in the fact that primary and elementary teachers spend a lot more time each day with a smaller
number of children. Therefore, lower level teachers may feel more comfortable intervening since they have had more opportunities to develop rapport and gain greater knowledge of that student. Providing teachers with techniques they consider age appropriate may be important for increasing ability and willingness for managing upper level students with challenging behaviors.

### The Relationship between Efficacy and Readiness

A significant correlation was found to exist between perceived self-efficacy for classroom management and teacher readiness for managing challenging behaviors, \( r(343) = .558, p< .001 \). This indicates that as teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy for managing a classroom environment increase, so does their overall readiness (based upon the subscales of ability and willingness) for utilizing specific behavior intervention techniques. This level of a positive, mutual relationship accounts for approximately 31% of the variability in one variable as determined by its relationship to the other variable. Subsequently, a categorical delineation for the independent variable of self-efficacy was made. Because the standard normal distribution includes one standard deviation above and below the mean as reflective of an average respondent (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005), the cutoff between high and low self-efficacy was set as one stan-
dard deviation (SD = .34) below the mean (M = 3.37). This total of 3.03 was then rounded to the nearest tenth to establish the conservative cutoff score of 3.0. Therefore, respondents with a mean greater than or equal to 3.0 were placed in the high group whereas those with a mean less than 3.0 were placed in the low group.

A comparison of respondents with low versus high self-efficacy was conducted for means of ability, willingness, and overall readiness. When examining one's ability to manage students with challenging behaviors, subjects with low self-efficacy indicated they felt significantly less able than those subjects with high self-efficacy, t(343) = -8.599, p< .001, two-tailed. An examination of willingness for managing challenging behavior indicated that subjects with low self-efficacy indicated they felt significantly less willing to implement specialized behavioral strategies than were subjects with high self-efficacy, t(343) = -5.644, p< .001, two-tailed. Finally, when comparing the means for those with low self-efficacy to subjects having high self-efficacy for overall teacher readiness for managing challenging student behaviors, a significant difference was found, t(343) = -7.984, p<.001, two-tailed.

Collectively, these results indicate that as a teacher's perceived self-efficacy increases, so does that teacher's ability, willingness, and readiness for managing challenging student behaviors. Several conclusions can be drawn regarding teacher readiness for differentiating discipline to better meet the emotional and behavioral needs of students. First, facilitating the development of a strong sense of self-efficacy should be viewed as a critical component for the successful implementation of differentiated discipline to support challenging students. This conclusion aligns with the research of Bandura (1993) and Welch (1996), indicating that teachers are more prone to take actions they feel competent to complete well. Administrators need to support skill development for teachers, but they must also provide external validation and guidance in an effort to build both competence and confidence as teachers try new techniques. Such support can be directly from the administrator or aided by mentoring and teaming opportunities.

Gibson and Dembo (1984) suggested that teachers tend to persist through challenging situations when they believe in their potential to make a difference. Therefore, this research supports the concept that when teachers feel confident in their overall effectiveness for structuring and maintaining a positive classroom environment, they also feel more ready, able, and willing to support challenging students with specialized behavior management techniques. This finding has strong implications for
the concepts of zero-reject, equal educational opportunity, and inclusion. Without the ability to better meet the needs of varied learners, attitudes of acceptance and willingness to educate all children may never be a reality. Thus, having a teaching force who believes they are ready to handle challenging students is a necessity for legal and ethical premises to transcend simple responsiveness to mandates into a realm of substantive systemic change.

**Differing Needs for Situational Intervention**

By consistently applying the 3.0 cutoff previously established as the mean of the independent variable less one standard deviation, it was also possible to categorize ability and willingness to obtain a practical description of teacher readiness. The teachers from this sample could then be placed into the following groups: (a) 55% of respondents were reportedly able-willing, (b) 4% were able-unwilling, (c) 23% were unable-willing, and (d) 18% were unable-unwilling to use specialized behavior management techniques.

Such differences in group affiliation generate leadership implications in a variety of areas. Primarily, the teachers from this sample showed differences in their own needs for support and preparation. Hamill and Dever’s (1998) research indicated that when teachers feel supported they are more willing to accommodate for learner differences. From the current study, the findings indicate that support efforts need to be differentiated in order to be successful. Hersey et al. (1996) described a model for situational support based upon interactions between leaders and staff who were able-willing, able-unwilling, unable-willing, or unable-unwilling.

In each of these four cases, Hersey et al. (1996) suggested that different strategies are needed to maximize performance noting that interventions move from more directive to more supportive depending upon one’s level of readiness. Table 3 shows that when applying this model to the current study, it becomes clear that teachers should be afforded different opportunities for emotional professional development and ongoing support.

Clearly, the teachers who are able-willing should be able to access different options than those who are unable-unwilling. For instance, teachers who are unable-unwilling may need to have an administrator tell them clearly what expectations exist and what supports are available. The administrator may need to formalize this process with an action plan and frequently document progress. For teachers who are unable-willing, the administrator may need to organize a conference-style professional devel-
opment program where teachers can seek effective ideas and strategies that they feel would be helpful. Frequent and timely follow-up sessions should be provided so that teachers can ask questions and get feedback as they attempt to implement new techniques. This would afford opportunities for building both competence and confidence, thus selling these teachers on using more effective techniques.

When addressing the needs of teachers who are able-unwilling, an administrator should offer the opportunity for participation in the change process. Administrators should invite these teachers to be committee members as solution seekers. They could then share ideas, be challenged to support or refute initiatives offered, and participate in the decision-making process.

Finally, those in the able-willing group can be models for others by providing training and support in professional development situations. Administrators should delegate responsibility and resources to this group while maintaining a willingness to listen and problem solve. As leaders in education, it is critical to provide meaningful professional development opportunities. Perhaps consideration of individual learner needs has become important for teachers as well. These findings may suggest that as teachers are challenged to better meet the individual needs of students, they may come to expect that their own individual needs for support should be met as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

Since the findings indicate a relationship between self-efficacy and readiness to manage challenging students, it is incumbent upon educators to find ways to help teachers become more confident in their own ability to meet the needs of their students. By establishing partnerships among
higher education, regional special education resource centers, and local education agencies, the potential for creating more effective learning environments for all learners may be enhanced. Such partnerships could potentially connect large districts with small districts and upper level schools with lower level schools.

Local education agencies should facilitate opportunities for professional growth that are teacher centered with multiple options for development activities rather than the more typical in-service activity that is one-size-fits-all. For instance, offering a conference-style format during which teachers can choose sessions they might find helpful may be a viable alternative. Another possibility would be to create a menu of professional development offerings, based upon a needs assessment done with teachers, so that sessions provided could be more relevant.

The needs of administrators should not be overlooked. As they seek to better meet the needs of their teachers, administrators may need support in utilizing a more situational leadership approach. Perhaps using annual reviews as an opportunity to build a professional development plan could open the necessary dialogue to assess what type of support each teacher really needs in order to be more successful with challenging situations.

Another opportunity afforded by such partnerships rests in the collaboration of individuals from different backgrounds with varied perspectives to support students with differing emotional or behavioral needs. Establishing a program center that can offer personalized tactical support to teachers could create avenues for problem solving that would address very specific needs of students via their teachers. Such a center could offer a variety of services ranging from phone consultations to classroom visits.

Having individuals actually model specific behavioral techniques to address challenging situations may help teachers add skills in a nonthreatening environment. By creating a situation-specific payoff, teachers may be motivated to embrace the service. Based upon some of the descriptive data, such support may be particularly valuable for creating initial Behavior Intervention Plans, which the staff could then implement on their own. Since such plans are required for students exhibiting chronic behavior problems, this service may be very useful in the future.

Finally, the descriptive findings from this research suggests that spending time with colleagues as a vehicle for problem solving is valuable to teachers. Local education agencies should consider creating opportunities for dialogue that allows for a genuine exchange of ideas to occur. Structured professional development activities should not be
viewed as the only way to enhance the effectiveness and readiness of teachers. Administrators should seek ways to schedule joint planning time for teachers who could support each other. Establishing teacher assistance teams to provide internal instructional and behavioral support may be an opportunity for enhancing teacher competence and confidence. Allowing time to access the resources within individual buildings and districts may provide unimaginable growth in ability and willingness to support the varied behavioral needs of students.

REFERENCES


