Profiles of classroom behavior in high schools: Associations with teacher behavior management strategies and classroom composition

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ABSTRACT

Although there has been considerable attention to the issue of classroom management and processes in educational reform models, there has been relatively limited research on these factors in high schools. The current study utilized observational data from 1262 classrooms in 52 high schools to examine teacher classroom management strategies and ratings of student compliance, engagement, and social disruption. Latent profile analysis (LPA) was conducted to examine specific patterns of classroom-wide student behavior in relation to teachers' use of classroom management strategies and classroom composition. The LPA revealed three distinct classroom behavioral profiles where students consistently met behavioral expectations (71%), inconsistently met expectations (23%), and were noncompliant (6%). Analyses indicated a functional association between patterns of student behavior and teachers' classroom management. In classrooms where students consistently met expectations, teachers provided more opportunities to respond and less disapproval and reactive behavioral management. Classrooms with noncompliant students had teachers who used the most disapproval and reactive behavior management. In addition, classrooms characterized as consistent had fewer males and more White students than classrooms characterized by inconsistent and noncompliant behaviors. These findings highlight the link between student patterns of behavior and teacher classroom management and have important implications for screening and professional development.

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1. Introduction

Disruptive student behavior fosters a classroom environment that is not conducive to learning, limits time for instruction, and contributes to negative peer interactions in the classroom, therefore creating a cause for concern in schools. Much research has established that behavior problems such as classroom disruption often co-occur with poor academic functioning and low school connectedness (Bradshaw, Buckley, & Ialongo, 2008; Konishi, Hymel, Zumbo, & Li, 2010; Malecki & Elliott, 2002). However, disruption can also be problematic from an ecological perspective. A classroom environment characterized by a high rate of negative behaviors presents the risk that such disruption becomes normative, leading otherwise nondisruptive students to also engage in these behaviors (Barth, Dunlap, Dane, Lochman, & Wells, 2004). Although literature establishes the association between disruptive behavior and individual student demographics such as gender and race/ethnicity (Kellam, Ling, Merisca, Brown, & Ialongo, 1998; Kewel Ramani,

Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007; Pas, Bradshaw, Hershfeldt, & Leaf, 2010; Pas, Bradshaw, & Mitchell, 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002), less is known about how classroom-level characteristics relate to these behaviors. This focus on the classroom behavior profile as a whole is largely absent from extant research.

Research shows that teachers can promote a positive classroom environment through the use of specific classroom management strategies (e.g., Epstein, Atkins, Cullinan, Kutash, & Weaver, 2008), as well as interventions to improve classroom management (e.g., Ialongo, Poduska, Werthamer, & Kellam, 2001); although much of this research has focused on elementary school classrooms. Therefore, the current study examined the association between specific profiles of classroom behavior in high school settings in relation to teachers' use of classroom management strategies, teacher demographics, and classroom composition. This research will inform our understanding of different high school classroom environments, where students engage in positive versus negative behaviors, and the classroom management strategies that characterize these settings. The characteristics of classrooms with differing behavioral profiles can be later targeted through professional development models.

1.1. Promoting positive and preventing negative behaviors in the classroom

The foundation for effective teaching is classroom behavior management, which maximizes time for academic instruction, student engagement, and achievement, and instills proactive behavior management practices and clear expectations (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Prior research on classroom management has identified critical components which are associated with enhanced conditions for student learning and good behavior (e.g., Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Greenberg et al., 2003). Specifically, research regarding classroom management demonstrates the importance of clear expectations, consistent responses to behavioral infractions, adequate opportunities for students to respond, checking for student understanding, use of effective praise for positive behaviors, utilizing group behavioral contingency methods, and a classroom layout that allows for active movement around the room (Armendariz & Umbreit, 1999; Colvin, Flannery, Sugai, & Monegan, 2009; Evertson, 1985; Evertson & Emmer, 1982; Ialongo et al., 2001; Partin, Robertson, Maggin, Oliver, & Wehby, 2010). Taken together, research generally emphasizes the importance of proactive, rather than reactive, behavioral management as a means for promoting positive and preventing negative student behaviors within the classroom.

Intervention studies targeting teacher behavioral management as a means of improving student outcomes have provided further evidence of the link between student behavior and teacher practice. One widely-disseminated model, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS; Sugai & Horner, 2006), is a noncurricular prevention model that improves school systems and procedures for promoting positive behavior and responding to behavioral infractions through the use of data-based decision-making. Randomized controlled trials examining PBIS have demonstrated school-level impacts on student office discipline referrals, suspensions, behavior problems, and school climate (Bradshaw, Koth, Bevans, Ialongo, & Leaf, 2008; Bradshaw, Koth, Thornton, & Leaf, 2009; Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2012; Horner et al., 2009); however experimental impacts have only been demonstrated at the elementary school level. Emerging non-experimental studies also provide support for PBIS at the secondary level (e.g., Flannery, Fenning, Kato, & McIntosh, 2014). Similarly, the Good Behavior Game (GBG; Barrish, Saunders, & Wolf, 1969) uses social learning principles of peer and teacher reinforcement within classrooms to improve student behavior, demonstrating evidence of decreasing disruptive behavior and improving academic performance in elementary classrooms (e.g., Bradshaw, Zmuda, Kellam, & Ialongo, 2009; Ialongo et al., 1999; Kellam et al., 1998). Extant studies of behavior management focus on school-wide outcomes rather than classroom-level indicators though (i.e., the focus of the current study).

1.2. Support for the use of specific classroom management strategies

Praise and opportunities to respond (OTRs) are two related and specific teacher strategies for fostering appropriate student behavior that are frequent targets of research and training in classroom management (Conroy, Sutherland, Snyder, Al-Hendawi, & Vo, 2009; Partin et al., 2010) and were assessed in the current study. Teacher praise, when given purposively and when behavior-specific rather than general, can increase on-task behavior (Sutherland, Wehby, & Copeland, 2000) as well as reduce office discipline referrals (Peterson Nelson, Young, Young, & Cox, 2009). OTRs also can be useful for increasing students' appropriate academic and social behaviors (Partin et al., 2010) and decreasing disruptive behavior (Armendariz & Umbreit, 1999; Haydon, Mancil, & Van Loan, 2009).

There are limitations to the conclusions drawn regarding praise and OTRs, however. For example, praise is not effective in all classroom settings or for every student (Brophy, 1981), and some consideration of the mode of delivery may be needed (Blaze, Olmi, Mercer, Dufrene, & Tingstom, 2014). Students' preferences related to receiving praise may also change as they grow older (Elwell & Tiberio, 1994). Likewise, much of the literature on OTRs refers to students at risk for emotional or behavior disorders and utilizes case study methodology (e.g., Haydon et al., 2009; Sutherland & Wehby, 2001; Sutherland et al., 2000); thus the most effective way of engaging high school students in general education settings is still unclear. The inclusion of praise and opportunities to respond in this study, which focuses on the high school general education setting, will expand our understanding of these management methods.

An additional area of significance for student behavior is student–teacher relationships and student–peer relationships (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012). Studies have shown that improved classroom organization and management have been associated with positive student interactions with peers, as measured by teacher reports of aggression in the classroom as well as observed prosocial behavior (Luckner & Pianta, 2011). In fact, extant research studies in the middle and high school settings have shown that opportunities for autonomy and trusting relationships are important and perhaps more so for highly disruptive students (Gregory & Ripski, 2008; Hafen et al., 2012). In addition, there is also some evidence that high school teachers who emphasize relationships and connection with students experience lower levels of student defiance and that this association is explained by student trust in teacher authority (Gregory & Ripski, 2008). Taken together, these studies demonstrate the associations between relationships and behavior for older