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Can School-Wide Positive Behavior Support Be an Evidence-Based Practice?

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Researchers invested in school-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS) have been attempting to answer an important question: Is SWPBS an evidence-based practice (EBP; e.g., Sugai & Horner, 2007)? Given the context of educational policy, this question appears to be reasonable, as its answer could significantly influence funding and adoption of SWPBS both nationally and internationally. However, is it the *right* question to be asking at this time?

We believe that before this question can be asked, a more fundamental prerequisite question must be addressed: Can SWPBS be an EBP? To present our view, we will briefly examine the relationship between the SWPBS model and EBP standards by (a) reviewing the fundamental components of the EBP standards, (b) reviewing the fundamental components of SWPBS, (c) demonstrating how SWPBS does not completely meet the EBP standards and (d) explaining why SWPBS is better conceptualized as a school/student support framework that employs evidence-based practices.

The Fundamental Components of the EBP Standards

Standards have been established to evaluate the effectiveness of applied interventions or practices in educational, medical, public health, and clinical settings. In the field of education, comprehensive standards for evaluating EBPs have been outlined by Odom et al. (2005). We agree with Sugai and Horner (2007) that these standards, composed of a set of criteria and assumptions, should be used to evaluate SWPBS.

EBP Criteria

The EBP criteria are explicitly stated quantitative and qualitative benchmarks for evaluating methodologies and evidence. These benchmarks are used to determine to what degree a study has been conducted with scientific soundness and rigor, as well as to what extent a given

practice is supported by such studies. Because documenting effectiveness requires a range of research questions, and since different research questions require different methodologies (Odom et al., 2005), the EBP standards delineate methodology-specific criteria for studies that are group experimental and quasi-experimental (Gersten, Fuchs, Compton, Coyne, Greenwood, & Innocenti, 2005), single-subject (Horner, Carr, Halle, McGee, Odom, & Wolery, 2005), correlational (Thompson, Diamond, McWilliam, Snyder, & Snyder, 2005), and qualitative (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). Probing the particulars of these criteria is beyond the scope of this paper; for our purposes we need only to affirm that such criteria are sufficiently comprehensive and progressive to evaluate most studies.

EBP Assumptions

Before a *study* can be evaluated using the EBP standards, the *practice* it investigates must be checked against and found to meet a set of prerequisite assumptions. Perhaps the first question that needs to be addressed is "what is a practice?" The generally accepted definition of a *practice* is the direct application or use of ideas, beliefs or methods as opposed to general theories about such (Jewell & Abate, 2001). A practice includes behavioral interventions, curricula, and school or systems change approaches designed to assist families, teachers, and students in improving educational, social, or behavioral outcomes (Horner et al., 2005).

The next question to consider is "what is an evidence-based practice (EBP)?" Within the SWPBS literature, Sugai and Horner (2007) have proposed that for a practice to be considered evidence-based, it should meet the following assumptions:

> Any claim that a practice or procedure is "evidence-based" should be framed in the context of (a) explicit description of the procedure/practice, (b) clear definition of the settings and implementers who use the procedure/practice, (c) identification of the

> population of individuals who are expected to benefit, and (d) the specific outcomes expected (p.1).

Although important, these assumptions are typically implicit and thus rarely checked before the EBP criteria are applied. These assumptions ensure that a practice is capable of replication, which is essential for two reasons. First, EBP status can only be achieved over time, through multiple studies investigating the *same* practice. Second, when EBPs are used in various applied settings, it is assumed that people are using the *same* practice (not derivatives of it). Thus if a practice does not meet one or more of the assumptions, then any study investigating it—no matter how rigorous the methodology or significant the results—is precluded from EBP consideration.

These two fundamental components of the EBP standards, the assumptions and the criteria, combine to function as a quality control device. The assumptions ensure replicability and consistency, while the criteria ensure effectiveness. Used in this sequence by researchers and practitioners, the EBP standards are an efficient mechanism for determining the EBP status—or inability to obtain such status—of any practice.

The Fundamental Components of SWPBS

SWPBS is a systems-level approach to facilitating positive school environments, with broad interrelated aims: preventing and reducing problem behavior, while promoting and supporting the academic achievement and prosocial development of all students (Turnbull et al., 2002). Like many large-scale educational initiatives, SWPBS is commonly implemented by school personnel with the help of outside support staff (e.g., practitioners and researchers). But unlike many educational practices, SWPBS is not characterized by a set of prescribed procedures. Instead, it is loosely structured by a set of three flexible and adaptable fundamental

components: (1) the "guiding elements" (Sugai & Horner, 2006), (2) the three-tiered continuum of student support (Turnbull et al., 2002; Walker et al., 1996), and (3) the "core elements" (Sugai & Horner, 2007).

Guiding Elements

The guiding elements are four foundational, interactive processes to be implemented when initially establishing or recalibrating SWPBS. Grounded in behavioral science, these processes are (a) establish measurable and achievable long-term outcomes, (b) identify empirically supported practices to achieve those outcomes, (c) use data-based decision making to identify needs and monitor the progress of interventions, and (d) establish formal system supports to increase sustainability (Sugai & Horner, 2006). Given that these processes can be accomplished through various practices and procedural combinations, as they are adapted to individual school, classroom and/or student needs, SWPBS is expected to look different from school to school.

Three-tiered Continuum of Student Support

Three tiers are delineated to represent a scope of students and the intensity of support needed to meet their idiosyncratic needs (Turnbull et al., 2002; Walker et al., 1996). *Primary* represents low-intensity support targeting all students, to decrease the number of new cases of social or academic difficulties and to enhance general resiliency. *Secondary* represents mid-intensity support targeting groups of students not responding to primary efforts, to reduce the number and intensity of current cases of student difficulties. *Tertiary* represents high-intensity support targeting individual students not responding to secondary efforts, to reduce the intensity and complexity of overwhelming student difficulties. Together, these tiers form an organizational schema for effectively *conceptualizing* students' needs.

Core Elements

A set of "core elements" associated with each tier have also been developed to provide guidelines for effectively *responding* to students' needs (Sugai & Horner, 2007). The core elements are administrative processes that characterize each tier, outlining how an appropriate response should be administered. *Primary* should include defining and teaching behavioral expectations, reinforcing appropriate behavior, providing a continuum of consequences for problem behavior, and engaging in data-based decision making. *Secondary* should include school-wide screening of students, monitoring progress of at-risk students, linking academic achievement with behavioral performance, enhancing environmental structure and predictability, and establishing contingent adult feedback and home-school communication. *Tertiary* should include functional behavioral assessment, team-based comprehensive assessment, and individualized function-based intervention. These processes can be accomplished through various practices and procedural combinations, allowing SWPBS to be adaptable.

Taken together, the three fundamental components of SWPBS—the guiding elements, three-tiered continuum, and core elements—indicate that SWPBS is quite context dependent. Unlike most practices, which rely on a *standard* set of procedures, personnel, and outcomes, SWPBS relies heavily on the discretion of the people implementing it to determine what specific procedures, personnel, and outcomes will be involved. For this reason, SWPBS is incredibly flexible (which in our opinion is highly desirable) but it is also highly variable.

The Relationship Between SWPBS and the EBP Standards

To properly assess the fit of SWPBS within the EBP standards, we must first determine if it meets the EBP assumptions. Does SWPBS have specific and consistent

1. procedures,

2. settings,
3. implementers,
4. populations of interest, and
5. expected outcomes?

SWPBS meets Assumption 2 because, as the name implies, it occurs in school settings. It also meets Assumption 4 because the population of interest is students.

However, SWPBS does not meet Assumption 1 because instead of prescribing specific procedures, it outlines *processes* (i.e., the guiding and core elements) that can be accomplished through various practices and procedural combinations. For example, a system for reinforcing appropriate behavior is a component of SWPBS. However, there are many practices that schools may use to achieve this goal, such as schoolwide praise notes, use of verbal praise, or token economy systems.

It is also questionable whether SWPBS meets Assumption 3 because the implementation of these processes, along with the practices and procedures associated with them, is not always tied to specific personnel. Some processes are likely to be implemented by general education teachers: e.g., teaching behavioral expectations in regular education classrooms. However, others can be carried out by interchangeable combinations of school faculty and staff: e.g., data-based decision making could be implemented in various forms within each tier by special education teachers, administrators, school psychologists, or other school personnel.

Finally, SWPBS does not appear to meet Assumption 5 because as an approach it can target any or all of three broad interrelated aims: decreasing problem behavior, improving academic achievement, and promoting prosocial development. Within SWPBS, *context-specific* outcomes are established according to the needs of each school, classroom, and individual

student. For example, for a school in a high crime area the specific outcome may be to decrease acts of physical violence on school grounds, whereas in another school the primary focus may be to decrease rates of student truancy. Such flexibility should be viewed as a strength not a weekness of SWPBS. Therefore, we suggest that, applied across various school settings, the fundamental components of SWPBS are inherently inconsistent with the EBP assumptions.

Because SWPBS does not appear to fit within the boundaries of the EBP standards, the criteria cannot be used to determine its effectiveness. If SWPBS cannot be an EBP, then it is unnecessary to inquire after its current EBP status. This dilemma cannot (and in our opinion should not) be remedied by simply revamping SWPBS to eventually align with the EBP assumptions. While researchers are working to further specify and define SWPBS procedures, personnel, and expected outcomes, such an enterprise can only go so far or SWPBS will lose its flexibility in meeting the individual needs of students, classrooms and schools. Although the guiding and core elements of SWPBS will likely be refined, they will still remain processes. And though the three-tiered continuum of student support might be clarified and improved, it will always be a schema. For these reasons, the details of SWPBS will always be left up to the judgment of the implementers. Thus SWPBS gives schools a great deal of discretion, which we view as one of its strengths; we suggest it should not be considered an EBP.

SWPBS as a Framework

Therefore we propose that SWPBS be more fittingly conceptualized as a complete school/student support *framework*. Others have also referred to SWPBS as a *framework* (see e.g., Bohanon, Fenning, Eber, & Flannery, 2007; Scott, Park, Swain-Bradway, & Landers, 2007). Conceptualized in this way, SWPBS is much more comprehensive than a practice: It helps school personnel to effectively and efficiently identify, select, and implement a variety of

practices designed to meet students' behavioral, academic, and social needs. As a framework SWPBS can employ EBPs without having to fit within the EBP standards. We propose that SWPBS employ the EBP standards (i.e., Odom et al., 2005) as its means for selecting practices, but leave this decision to the discretion of those facilitating this framework in each school.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper we have expressed our position that SWPBS does not fit within the boundaries of the EBP standards and thus should be more fittingly conceptualized as a school/student support framework that can incorporate EBPs. As a framework, SWPBS maintains the flexibility of application needed by schools, which we consider a major strength. We propose that SWPBS should be refined as a framework and strengthened to more effectively provide direction for meeting individual, classroom, and school needs. In addition more research is needed to design and evaluate potential EBPs that can be selected and used by schools based on their individual needs within all three tiers of SWPBS. We hope this paper will promote more dialogue on these critical issues.

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