

Understanding Educators' Implementation of an Equity-focused
PBIS Intervention: A Qualitative Study of Critical Incidents

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Abstract

With the emergence of interventions shown to reduce school discipline disparities, it is important to explore what variables influence educators to implement these approaches. In-depth interviews were conducted with a purposeful sample of 21 educators asked to describe their experiences implementing an equity-focused PBIS intervention. A qualitative method called the Enhanced Critical Incident Technique was used to generate 22 representative categories from 241 observable incidents reported. Findings included 14 helping categories, 4 hindering categories, as well as 4 categories describing what could have made implementing the intervention easier. Implications for enhancing educators' use of equity-focused disciplinary approaches are discussed along with current research, theory, and consultation models.

Understanding Educators' Implementation of an Equity-focused PBIS Intervention: A Qualitative Study of Critical Incidents

School discipline disproportionality remains a widespread issue affecting many students, educators, and communities across the United States. Although there is now evidence of interventions that can significantly decrease discipline disparities (Bradshaw et al., 2018; Cook et al., 2018; Gion, McIntosh, & Falcon, 2020; Gregory et al., 2016; Knochel, Blair, Kincaid, & Randazzo, 2020), implementation of school approaches have proven challenging in practice (Augustine et al., 2018; Gregory & Evans, 2020). Variables such as an individual's willingness to acknowledge racial inequities (DiAngelo, 2018; Singleton, 2015) and organizational and cultural factors within schools may limit educators' capacity or willingness to address disciplinary equity in their classrooms or school-wide (Bastable, McIntosh, Fairbanks Falcon, & Meng, 2021; Sander & Bibbs, 2020; Wiley et al., 2018).

Understanding what variables help or hinder educators' implementation of equity-based interventions is needed to optimize their use, fidelity, and effectiveness. A recent evaluation of the district-wide implementation of restorative practices found limited time for staff training, unclear expectations communicated from district leaders, and competing district initiatives negatively impacted staff adoption of this disciplinary approach (Augustine et al., 2018). In addition, educators can perceive equity-focused strategies as not well aligned with their existing classroom practices or teaching philosophies (Bastable, McIntosh, & Meng, 2019).

PBIS and Disciplinary Equity

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a preventative framework that applies a three-tiered model of behavioral supports to improve the whole-school climate, sometimes referred to as Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). PBIS Tier 1 core practices include (1) defining and teaching positively stated behavior expectations, (2) providing feedback

and acknowledgment for students who follow the behavior expectations, (3) establishing instructional responses to problem behavior, and (4) establishing efficient procedures for requesting assistance and professional development (Horner & Sugai, 2015).

Previous studies have examined enhancements to PBIS Tier 1 core practices aimed at improving equity in school discipline practice, such as school acknowledgment systems (Barclay, 2017), embedding cultural responsive practices into how behavioral expectations are taught (Fallon & Mueller, 2017), and reducing ambiguity in how office discipline referrals (ODRs) are assigned for unwanted student behaviors (McIntosh, Ellwood, McCall, & Girvan, 2018). Despite evidence that implementation of Tier 1 SWPBIS could lower disproportionality (Lee, Gage, McLeskey, & Huggins-Manley, 2021; McIntosh, Gion, & Bastable, 2018), there remains a need to understand how this school-wide framework can be implemented to improve equity across a school or district.

Evaluation of An Equity-focused Intervention

A multi-component intervention called ReACT (Racial equity through Assessing data for disproportionality, Culturally responsive behavior strategies, and Trainning to neutralize implicit bias) was delivered to four schools as part of a larger study (McIntosh et al., 2021). ReACT is a one-year professional development school-wide intervention that builds on components of Tier 1 PBIS to address discipline disproportionality.

During 6 ReACT professional development sessions (three full-day, three half-day), all school personnel are coached to disaggregate office discipline data to create a tailored plan to support all students. Specifically, school staff is coached to understand and interpret disproportionality metrics (i.e., risk rate, risk ratio) and create precision problem statements (e.g., African American students are three times more likely than all other students to receive a referral in the playground before school for physical aggression) to identify when discipline

disproportionality is more likely to occur. Educators also learn about implicit bias and its effects on school disciplinary decisions. Additionally, educators are introduced to the concept of vulnerable decision points, which are specific situations (e.g., classroom, hallway) or decision states (fatigued, stressed) during which educators may be more susceptible to the effects of implicit racial bias (Smolkowski, Girvan, McIntosh, Nese, & Horner, 2016).

ReACT training also provides school personnel with a menu of equity-focused strategies such as the Personal Matrix (Levenson, Smith, McIntosh, Rose, & Pinkelman, 2019; Muldrew & Miller, 2021), an activity to learn about students' home lives and connect expectations for behavior across settings. Other strategies include teaching educators to identify and develop neutralizing routines (McIntosh, Girvan, Horner, & Smolkowski, 2014). A neutralizing routine is a brief, self-regulation strategy used to respond to unwanted student behaviors. An example of a school-wide neutralize routine is S.T.A.R. (Stop, Think/breathe, And Respond Respectfully). Educators are also trained to help students identify "stuck points" (i.e., student version of the vulnerable decision points) to help them recognize situations or emotional states that could trigger challenging behaviors.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to understand what experiences may have helped or hindered educators' implementation of an equity-focused PBIS approach. An established qualitative methodology was used to examine specific, observable events experienced by educators in schools trained to adopt this school-wide approach. Specifically, the following research questions were addressed: What observable events or experiences helped educators to implement a school-wide approach to improve disciplinary equity? What observable events or experiences hindered educators to implement it? What observable events and experiences do educators report would have made it easier to implement from the outset?

Method

Participants and Settings

Participants were 21 educators, including 9 classroom teachers, 5 administrators, 4 para-educators, 2 school counselors, and 1 district administrator. Their racial/ethnic makeup was 16 White, 3 African American, and 2 Latinx. Participants worked in four elementary schools that implemented the intervention as part of a randomized controlled trial (McIntosh et al., 2021) in a district serving 9,600 students and 13 schools in the southeastern United States. The participating schools had enrollments of approximately 500 students: 28% Black, 44% Latinx, 37% English Language Learners. Each school was implementing PBIS during the 2018-19 and 2019-2020 school years. The participants had an average of 16 years of educational experience (range 3-28 years). To be eligible for the study, all interviewees needed to have participated in the complete series of professional development.

Methodological Approach: Enhanced Critical Incident Technique

A qualitative method called the Enhanced Critical Incident Technique (ECIT; Butterfield, Borgen, Maglio, & Amundson, 2009) was used for this study. ECIT has proven useful for interpreting how incidents or experiences described by practitioners inform knowledge or use of current practices or policies. ECIT integrates both qualitative and quantitative aspects to analyze participant data (Creswell, 1998). The method relies primarily on interviews to obtain participant accounts of observable and measurable events but also includes quantitative procedures to establish the credibility of findings reported. ECIT studies have included reliability and validity checks more common in quantitative analyses (Maxwell, 1992). Andersson and Nilsson (1964) have provided empirical support validating the method's capacity to generate reliable and comprehensive descriptions of a variety of psychological processes. ECIT has been used to understand what experiences increase educators' commitment to equity in school discipline

practice and assess the acceptability of ReACT classroom strategies (Bastable et al., 2021; Bastable et al., 2019).

The interview protocol and format used for this study were adapted from Bedi and colleagues (2009). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to elicit detailed descriptions of experiences that “helped promote or detract from effective performance of an activity, or the experience of a specific situation or event” (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005, p. 483). Specifically, interviewees were asked to describe critical incidents that helped or hindered their own or others’ implementation of ReACT in their classrooms or school-wide.

Participants were asked to respond to three main questions related to the implementation of ReACT. The primary questions were “what are the important events, strategies, or supports (i.e., specific behaviors, examples, or observable happenings) that [helped you or] you think might helped or hindered support teachers to implement ReACT with fidelity? These can be things you or another professional might do or things that might happen inside the school or outside the school?”

Participants were also asked about Wishlist items – the events, people, supports, information, or programs that were not present at the time of the participant’s experience but that participants believed—in retrospect—would have been helpful to them or other educators (Bedi, Davis, & Williams, 2005).

Procedure

This study was approved by the University of Oregon Human Subjects Institutional Review Board prior to enrolling participants. Interviews were completed between March-April 2020. Upon consent, interviews were conducted over the phone by the first and second authors, and all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Each interview lasted between 55 and

93 minutes. Based on guidelines for ECIT (Butterfield et al. 2009), data collection and analysis were conducted synchronously, and participants were recruited and interviewed until no new categories emerged from the data. Participants' interviews were analyzed in batches of three following a process used in prior ECIT studies (Butterfield et al., 2009). The coding process started with extracting CIs from each transcript, then forming categories of similar CIs.

Trustworthiness of data and interpretations. Throughout the data collection process, nine credibility checks were conducted to increase the trustworthiness of the data as outlined by Butterfield et al. (2009). First, all interviews were digitally recorded to allow for verbatim transcription of participants' words, utterances, and complete descriptions of CIs (Maxwell, 1992).

Second, every fifth interview recording was reviewed by the fourth author to ensure the interview protocol was followed. The fourth author provided feedback to the interviewers (first and second authors), including avoiding leading questions, asking more follow-up questions to elicit more specifics on incidents reported by participants, and asking clarifying questions to help determine the fit of CIs into emerging or existing categories. (e.g., "*What made it easier/harder for you? Was there something that your colleague did to make you act differently?*").

Third, two independent reviewers were recruited and trained to identify CIs in five transcripts (25%), a minimum percentage established by prior studies evaluating the reliability and validity of ECIT (Andersson & Nilsson, 1964). To assess intercoder agreement, the second and third authors extracted eligible CIs from five randomly selected interview transcripts. Initially, the overall intercoder agreement calculated for the extraction was 86%, determined to be adequate based on prior CIT studies. Next, reviewers discussed and reconciled disagreements by combining related incidents or removing CIs (e.g., insufficient description provided to be an eligible CI) through consensus.

Fourth, CIs were extracted until a point of exhaustiveness was achieved. Per ECIT guidelines, exhaustiveness was reached after the 13th transcript was analyzed (i.e., CIs extracted from transcripts 14 to 21 were found to fit into existing categories).

Fifth, to form viable categories, Borgen and Amundson's (1984) recommendation of a 25% participation rate was followed (i.e., at least 5 of the 21 participants needed to report CIs in a category for it to be valid). If the threshold participant rate of 25% was not met, smaller categories could be combined with other categories.

Sixth, an independent reviewer was recruited to sort CIs into final categories using category definitions and titles. Per ECIT guidelines, 25% ($n = 60$) of the CIs were randomly selected for independent review. The initial intercoder agreement (ICA) for sorting CIs into categories was 85%, above minimal percentage agreement based on prior CIT studies (Butterfield et al., 2009).

Seventh, all participants were emailed follow-up questions (i.e., member check; Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005) to solicit feedback on final category titles and definitions (e.g., *Are the helping/hindering categories correct? Is there anything missing?*). All 21 participants responded and reported the final categories were appropriate and fit based on their experiences.

Eighth, two content experts (i.e., a published researcher and experienced practitioner in school equity intervention) were recruited to review the final categories with the following questions: *Do you find the categories to be useful? Are you surprised by any of the categories? Do you think there is anything missing based on your experiences?* Both experts reported all final categories (22; 100%) to be useful and relevant (i.e., *"I thought the categories were well organized and easy to follow"*). Finally, all categories were reviewed to evaluate theoretical agreement based on prior research or theory related to this topic area (Butterfield et al., 2009).

Positionality. Conducting qualitative research requires considering how a researcher's worldview or experiences influence the research process (Brantlinger et al., 2005). The topic of this study emerged from seeking to support educators to improve racial equity in school disciplinary practices. The research team consisted of trainers who delivered the intervention. Each author possessed prior experiences and expertise in this topic area may be viewed as a strength for understanding and asking for more details from participants' responses. However, this familiarity with the subject matter and relationships with study participants may have influenced the objectivity in how CIs were extracted and final categories were generated (Butterfield et al., 2009; DeLyser, 2001).

Findings

Findings included 14 helping, four hindering, and four wishlist categories generated from 241 CIs. Table 1 shows the percentage of participants endorsing each category and the number of incidents reported across participants (differences between these numbers are due to multiple CIs provided by the same participants within categories). Of a total of 255 CIs extracted, 241 (95%) were retained to form final categories.

Helping Incidents

Participants reported a total of 166 helping CIs that were coded into 14 categories. The categories and their descriptions are listed below, along with a quotation that illustrates a typical response in that category.

Collaboration and teaming. This category refers to educators sharing experiences in ReACT training, staff meetings, or within team meetings with each other. The helpful aspect across incidents in this category is having time to collaborate with others to discuss and plan how to implement the intervention. Activities in this category include role-playing ReACT strategies, sharing approaches to increase equity through classroom practices, and witnessing others' use of

ReACT strategies. The following quotation is representative of participants' responses in this category:

With the teachers, it was that common vernacular in bringing those [ReACT] strategies to support each other. Because even like, in a lunch table discussion they [teachers] would say, "I'm really having a hard time with this," "Have you tried this?" "This works for me." (Participant 20)

Focus on strategies. This category refers to educators learning about strategies to improve equity in school discipline in practice, as opposed to awareness-raising or belief formation activities. Incidents include educators pausing to reflect before reacting punitively to unwanted behaviors, taking deep breaths, and having a plan to respond to potentially challenging situations (e.g., "if this happens, I will..."). An educator related her experiences using a neutralizing routine (i.e., self-regulation strategy) to help respond instructionally to unwanted student behavior.

Having a neutralizing routine from an adult standpoint made us stop and think before we reacted, and with us stopping and thinking, that helped the students' behaviors, because sometimes if we react too quickly that can change the whole outcome of a situation with the student as well. (Participant 16)

Implementation of school-wide strategies was also reported to contribute to a shared approach experienced as enhancing support among educators. As participant 20, noted, "there is that recognition that [when] you were in a vulnerable state...you might need to call in a buddy on this before you react. So, I saw people engaging, you know? It became a common culture."

Leveraging existing MTSS frameworks. This category refers to using MTSS as a foundation for addressing disciplinary equity instead of implementing a separate or standalone intervention. Educators described the benefits of having school-wide or classroom systems in

place to teach and acknowledge desired student behaviors. The category includes having shared language to describe and manage student behaviors, perceiving ReACT as enhancing existing school practices, and embedding ReACT strategies into school routines. The following quotation is representative of the category.

I think because it [Project ReACT] meshed so well with one of our school improvement goals, which was to improve climate, that it was really helping us...it had a big emphasis on improving staff and student relationships...It could roll simultaneously with PBIS because it's kind of the same type of thing in a sense. (Participant 5)

Visible administrator support. This category refers to school leaders (e.g., principal, assistant principal, district administrator) providing public statements of support to implement ReACT. Observable events included administrators publicly endorsing the use of ReACT strategies, modeling, and helping staff integrate ReACT into school routines (e.g., principal reminding staff to use strategies during morning announcements). The following quotation is representative of the category:

A big thing was the time dedicated to ReACT by our administration and higher-ups...as we were implementing strategies our administration reminding us both verbally and in writing to incorporate these into our daily routine, to show with their words and actions that this was important and needed to have a prime spot in our day. (Participant 5)

Disaggregating school discipline data. This category refers to sharing and viewing disaggregated discipline data to identify and address school discipline disparities. Activities include viewing graphs or charts displaying disaggregated data, learning about metrics of discipline disproportionality (e.g., risk ratios), and identifying equitable and inequitable trends in office discipline referrals (ODRs). Activities also include reflecting on how discipline disparities

may be influenced by racial biases. One participant described her experience viewing her school's discipline data disaggregated by race and ethnicity.

We have a group of individuals [African American students] that across the nation we're seeing the same pattern [of discipline disproportionality] but seeing that group of individuals and putting faces to the names that was the biggest thing. I'm trying to figure out a good way to say this—when we had our first training and we sat down and we came up with our data, that was eye-opening. (Participant 20)

External coaching. The category also refers to external trainers demonstrating skills viewed as helpful, such as, sharing and interpreting disaggregated data, explaining ReACT concepts and strategies, scaffolding training content to facilitate learning, and equipping educators with lesson plans and tools. External trainers were described as possessing the following characteristics: “encouraging,” “personable,” “calm,” “funny,” “approachable,” and “accessible.” Common incidents in this category described having access to trainers present in school meetings or on-site for coaching.

Having access to a [ReACT trainer] was always very helpful. I would call him and say, can you explain this to me again or just having him at our meetings was helpful versus us trying to remember every detail from the training and implement it when we don't see him for 3-4 months. (Participant 5)

Options in implementation. This category refers to offering educators flexibility related to selecting ReACT strategies for their schools or classrooms. Similar this category refers to providing students with choice and voice in selecting activities. Activities include educators customizing a menu of greetings for students (e.g., hug, handshake, fist bump) or asking students how they preferred to be acknowledged for expected behaviors (e.g., verbal, non-verbal, token).

A teacher described her experience allowing students to choose greetings when entering her classroom.

Mine had either four or five choices like the hug, the wave, high five, fist bump, or handshake. I think it did make it easier because every person [student] is different with how they respond to someone, and what is within their personal space or what they are comfortable with. (Participant 19)

Participant 16 described the benefits of tailoring praise delivered to her, “if you actually ask them how they like to be praised and then you start praising them in the way that they like, they receive that on a better note than just doing it the way we want to do it.”

Learning about students’ homes and communities. A few educators reported a ReACT strategy the Personal Matrix (see info above) helped them connect school and home expectations for students. The following quotation was representative of the category:

It [the Personal Matrix] gave us some insight into [our students] as to what’s important at home...It kind of helped us to see what we value at school is not necessarily what they [students] always value at home. (Participant 19)

Reflecting on implicit bias. This category refers to learning about the effects of implicit bias on discipline decision-making and perceptions of student behavior. Activities in this category include viewing examples of how implicit bias influences decisions made in various professions outside of schools (e.g., referees, attorneys, doctors). This category also refers to hearing stories from colleagues of color describing personal experiences with discrimination (e.g., racial profiling). Participant 4 describes how learning about the effects of implicit bias made her reflect on how she addressed student behaviors.

It [training on implicit bias] made me think...if I had the same little redheaded girl doing the same thing, am I going to approach it the same way as I would the others? So yes, it did make me stop and think.

Witnessing positive effects on students. This category refers to educators observing positive shifts in students' responses after implementing ReACT strategies. The category includes educators witnessing students acting calmer, more relaxed, and requesting more use of the strategies. In the following quotation, an educator described her students' responses to her use of a ReACT strategy called Positive Greetings at the Door.

I started doing that just to give us one-on-one time, you know, that was my way of saying, "I'm glad you're here, I've missed you, welcome back." And then the reason why I kept doing it was because I saw how much the kids enjoyed it. They really enjoyed the interaction. They looked forward to it. They would always ask me, can we do the greeting at the door? (Participant 18)

Visual cues to prompt implementation. This category refers to educators using posters, signs, magnets, and other visuals aides as reminders to implement strategies during the school day. Included in this category are educators using pencils, bracelets, or posted with printed reminders (e.g., phrase, image). The following quotation was illustrative of the category:

Having those signs [describing school strategies] kept it in the forefront of my mind. The support that the signs gave me I was able to turn around and use that to support others. (Participant 17)

Focus on equipping students with strategies. This category refers to educators training students to identify stuck points (i.e., vulnerable decision points for students) and how and when to use neutralizing routines to manage challenging situations or emotional states. A kindergarten teacher shared a quotation representative of this category:

I think implementing the STAR method [a neutralizing routine] with him [a student] was really beneficial after he understood [this strategy] he was more expressive with his feelings...There would even be times that he would come up to me and say, "*can we take a moment and talk about STAR?*" (Participant 18)

Repeated exposure to content. This category refers to educators benefiting from having multiple opportunities to apply knowledge and strategies presented during ReACT training. Repeated exposure to training content was reported to increase educators' familiarity, knowledge, and comfort with implementing the intervention. Activities included learning about the concepts of implicit bias by attending prior training and school teams previewing school disaggregated discipline before this information was shared with all staff. A district administrator shared an experience representative of the category.

When ReACT was presented that it [implicit bias research and data] made so much more sense, hearing it a second time. The first time you hear it, if you've never been exposed to something like that, your initial reaction is to be on the defensive. The second time you're kind of over the emotion, you've ridden out the emotional wave and you can look at it from a research/data perspective. (Participant 6)

Applying ReACT strategies to self before sharing with others. This category refers to educators trying out ReACT strategies on themselves before introducing them to students. The helpful aspect of incidents belonging to this category is trying out strategies (e.g., on self or others) before using them in a school or classroom with students. Activities included experimenting with strategies outside school settings (e.g., with a spouse or children). The following quotation exemplifies incidents in this category:

It started becoming more automatic. With us using it [a neutralizing routine] ourselves it made it so much easier for us to turn around and teach it to our students to help them

respond in better ways. Because we were in essence modeling the strategy, even when we didn't realize it. (Participant 19)

Hindering Incidents

A total of 39 hindering incidents were provided by participants. These incidents formed four hindering categories.

Competing responsibilities. This category refers to educators lacking time to implement ReACT strategies due to other school responsibilities. Incidents in this category include feeling conflicted about attending ReACT training instead of completing other school-related tasks (e.g., preparing lesson plans, grading, and struggling to embed components of the ReACT intervention in daily practice. The following quotation was illustrative of this category.

They [teachers] didn't have enough time. Like, I'm already supposed to teach 55 minutes' worth of material and I have 45. By the time they go to the classroom, I have 40 minutes and now you want me to do greeting at the door and the teacher-student game [both ReACT strategies]. They felt so pressured by the curriculum. (Participant 13)

Defensiveness regarding racial bias. This category described incidents in which educators avoided acknowledging personal or societal racial biases influencing school discipline practice. Incidents reference educators feeling personally attacked or unfairly labeled (e.g., "are you calling me/us racist?"), observing pushback from colleagues (e.g., eye-rolling), and withdrawing from conversations about race and discipline due to feeling uncomfortable. The following quotation is representative of the category: "I think there are some moments where the teachers were kind of like, hey, you know, so basically you're saying I'm racist and now I'm mad and so I don't want to do anything" (Participant 20).

Lacking skills in cultural responsiveness. This category refers to educators lacking experience teaching students from racially or ethnically diverse communities. Incidents in this

category refer to experiencing language barriers, having students conform to educators' cultural norms as opposed to modifying pedagogical approaches, and not having access to culturally diverse educational materials. In the following quotation, an administrator described an experience representative of the category.

A lot of our staff members have a hard time, I guess, having sympathy or empathizing with students who come from different backgrounds than them and I know you heard in some of our meetings, you know, that's not the way I was raised... there is a certain culture that they have a hard time getting past, so definitely a hindrance in there that makes it hard for us. (Participant 15)

Duration of training sessions. This category refers to experiencing the duration or timing of the ReACT training as challenging. Incidents refer to feeling pressure to lose professional workdays for ReACT training and experiencing fatigue after attending full-day ReACT workshops. Participant 10 commented on the time allocated for ReACT training, "It does take a lot of time, an investment. It takes all your days for professional learning. You think maybe this could be condensed a bit."

Wishlist Items

In addition to helping and hindering categories, participants provided a total of 36 wishlist items, suggestions regarding incidents that—if experienced early—might have increased their support for implementing ReACT from the start. These responses formed four categories.

Sustainability planning. Wishlist items refer to using ReACT strategies after external or district supports are faded. Activities include introducing some ReACT strategies (e.g., the Personal Matrix) earlier in the school year, reviewing ReACT strategies with existing or newly hired staff, and adding ReACT strategies into school calendars or schedules.

If you try to implement any kind of program, you can't just be a one and done, you have to come back to it and remind yourself, remind the staff that here's what we're doing -- here's the direction we're going, here is what is best for our students. (Participant 10)

Modifying the sequence or length of training. Wishlist items in this category include shortening training sessions (e.g., full to half-day) to be less taxing on educators' time and adjusting when ReACT trainings are scheduled (e.g., not scheduling a workshop immediately after winter break). Participant 5 suggested front-loading classroom strategies earlier in the training, "I wish I could have gotten all the strategies at the front, tried them out, and then had other chances to come back and report on them."

Clear intervention purpose. Wishlist items refer to having had a clearer understanding of the purpose of ReACT from the outset. Educators expressed the desire to clarify the language used to describe elements of ReACT (e.g., vulnerable decision points), presenting an outline of the complete training in advance, and differentiating the ReACT intervention from existing school-wide supports (e.g., PBIS). Participant 16 describes shared a quotation representative of this category:

I don't think [all school staff] understood that Project ReACT.... Just making sure everybody has a clear understanding of Project ReACT and how it will help you as an individual to help your students and your school improve, even with PBIS in place.

Increasing commitment to implement. Participants spoke of wishing administrators had established expectations for all staff to implement ReACT at the beginning of the year, having early and repeated exposure to data or case examples demonstrating the effects of implicit bias, and increasing staff opportunities for collaboration across the school (e.g., grade-level teams, paraprofessionals).

To follow up with each grade level and then each group of teachers, for example, our special ed department, our activity teachers, just all the different areas have a meeting with the paraprofessionals once a month so that we are all kind of on the same page and just using the same language with the kids and finding out what works and what doesn't work. (Participant 9)

Discussion

Given the prevalence of school discipline disproportionality, there is a need to explore the variable that could influence the fidelity of implementation of an equity-focused school-wide intervention. As prior research has indicated equity-based interventions can evoke ambivalence and even discomfort from educators that may render interventions ineffective or lead to the abandonment of effective practices (Bastable et al., 2019; Gregory & Evans, 2020). The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the observable experiences or events that helped or hindered the implementation of an equity-focused PBIS intervention. The final categories pointed to three areas for helping school personnel increase racial equity in school discipline practice.

A Focus on Strategies

Many educators noted the benefits of being equipped with a variety of strategies to address racial equity in school discipline practice. These responses aligned with research and theory on teacher change, suggesting that teachers' experience using strategies, as opposed to providing a rationale for their implementation, could have shifted their beliefs and attitudes favorably toward this equity-focused approach (Dunst, Bruder, & Hamby, 2015; Guskey, 2002). In other words, educators may have become more willing to use ReACT after they had perceived the intervention as feasible and doable. Responses also indicated observing positive effects of ReACT on students may have enhanced implementation fidelity.

Educators valued having more time to collaborate and discuss how to integrate ReACT strategies into their classrooms or schools. Their responses suggested having options to customize ReACT strategies with support from colleagues, administrators, and coaches may have increased use of the intervention. For example, having discussions with colleagues about how strategies could be adapted for different grade levels or to address an individual student's behaviors were perceived as enabling implementation. It is possible tailoring of ReACT strategies may have also increased ownership for the intervention and improved cultural responsiveness of this school-wide intervention. This was evidenced by educators' reports of modifying ReACT strategies based on their students' needs and interests (e.g., delivering acknowledgment or greetings based on students' stated preferences).

Educators also saw value in applying ReACT strategies to themselves before using them in practice with students. By testing out ReACT strategies in familiar environments outside of schools (e.g., home, community), educators may have been more willing to adopt ReACT strategies after experiencing benefits for themselves.

Normalizing Discomfort Exploring Racial Bias

Educators indicated that having repeated exposure to ReACT content (e.g., attending related training, previewing data) helped to tailor supports for colleagues to address potentially sensitive topics related to race and disciplinary practice. For example, educators appreciated previewing their school's disaggregated discipline data (in advance of sharing it with all staff) to prepare others to receive information that could be distressing or provoke defensiveness.

Educators reported on the importance of having time to reflect on their responses first, which may have allowed them to anticipate questions or concerns from colleagues. This was captured in the following quote, "the first time you hear it, if you've never been exposed to something like that, your initial reaction is to be on the defensive. The second time you're kind of over the

emotion, you've ridden out the emotional wave and you can look at it from a research/data perspective" (Participant 6).

Having school leaders share examples of their own implicit biases were also viewed as important to encourage others to do the same. This finding supports prior research showing that school principals who explicitly endorse equity through their words and actions have been associated with schools that have lower suspension and expulsion rates for students of color (Skiba et al., 2014). Responses also suggested self-disclosure (e.g., sharing publicly about a personal vulnerable decision point), especially from school leaders, may serve as a viable strategy for increasing other educators' willingness to address disciplinary equity. Additionally, school administrators or school teams (e.g., PBIS) could play a key role by supporting wishlist items, such as clarifying the purpose of ReACT and ensuring staff receives ongoing training on how to embed equity-focused strategies into school practices and routines.

Using School-wide Systems as a Foundation for Equity

Many participants viewed ReACT as aligned with features of their current PBIS Tier 1 system. ReACT was viewed as enhancing existing supports, not as a separate approach. Introducing school-based innovations that are perceived as philosophically or conceptually similar has been shown to influence school leaders' adoption of new approaches (McIntosh, Kelm, & Canizal Delabra, 2016; Rogers, 2010) and may help enhance the implementation of related practices or programs (Meng, McIntosh, Claassen, & Hoselton, 2016). This finding may suggest why educators reported it was easier to implement ReACT strategies as they were perceived to fit into existing school-wide systems already in use (e.g., acknowledgment systems, teaching behavioral expectations).

As equity-focused interventions are introduced into schools, it will be important to assess how educators view these approaches as acceptable and feasible (Gregory & Roberts, 2017).

Even though educators described ReACT as complementary to PBIS, there were concerns raised about the duration of the training sessions and juggling competing school responsibilities. These issues are not uncommon barriers to implementing school-wide approaches (Pinkelman, McIntosh, Rasplica, Berg, & Strickland-Cohen, 2015), but they do suggest this intervention could be improved by modifying the length of training sessions, offering some content asynchronously, and evaluating which parts of the intervention most contribute to improving racial equity in disciplinary outcomes.

Limitations

A qualitative approach was used in this study to explore what most influenced educators' implementation of a PBIS equity-focused intervention. The use of a purposeful sampling procedure (i.e., selecting informants from a known pool) allowed for the identification of information-rich participants, but it did not allow for controlling potential sources of known or unknown biases that could have influenced different phases of the study, such as data collection, extraction of critical incidents, and interpretation of the final categories (Palinkas et al., 2015). Also, ECIT relies on retrospective recall which is subject to bias and cannot be directly tested for reliability or validity.

A second limitation of the study was that four of the five authors served as trainers for the four schools implementing ReACT. It is likely that the researchers' dual relationship, as trainers and evaluators of this intervention led to some respondents holding back criticism or more a more robust description of variables that could have hindered the use of this intervention. Despite conducting nine credibility checks (Butterfield et al., 2009) which included rigorous and external reviews of all the data collected and categories formed, the findings should be viewed with caution for this reason.

A third limitation was that the research team was guided by a behavioral-analytic approach that favored the application of empirical, observable methods. Behavioral-analytic research is based on behavioral theory and focused primarily on the study of observable phenomena (e.g., critical incidents). Therefore, ECIT is not well designed to assess the intentions or motivations of the educators implementing ReACT. It is plausible educators could have remained skeptical or ambivalent toward addressing racial equity even if they implemented the intervention to fidelity. Different methodological approaches are needed to understand to what extent educators' attitudes or perceptions toward racial equity and disciplinary practice could have shifted as a result of implementing this school-wide intervention.

To address a few of these limitations, future studies could recruit a more diverse sample of participants. For example, the participants could include more racially diverse educators or individuals who may view themselves as “color-blind” or reluctant to engage in equity-based school efforts from the outset. There is also a need for external researchers (who did not deliver professional development to the participants) to evaluate this intervention. These steps could lead to the identification of other hindering or helping categories and reduce the potential of social-desirability bias, or participants responding to interview questions in a manner to be viewed favorably by others (i.e., research team).

Conclusion

Educators reported parts of implementing a PBIS equity-focused intervention were challenging, such as balancing competing school priorities and encountering defensive-ness from others. Understanding reluctance to address racial equity in schools, especially among White educators, is important to consider in general but may also have important implications for sustaining the fidelity of equity-based approaches in schools. As some responses indicated, educators can feel personally attacked (e.g., “*are you calling me racist?*”) or unfairly burdened

with addressing what could be perceived as systemic or societal issues (e.g., structural racism). Therefore, it may be important to have strategies to counteract defensiveness and respond to deficit-based thinking (i.e., assigning blame to students or families of color for perpetuating school discipline disparities).

The findings suggested a strategy-based approach, versus only relying on awareness-raising activities and belief formation may hold promise for motivating more educators to engage in school-wide efforts focused on improving racial equity in disciplinary practice. Offering a menu of equity-based strategies was viewed as an acceptable and effective approach by educators for enhancing implementation and the contextual fit of PBIS Tier 1 core practices. It was also plausible accountability and ownership for the overall intervention approach may have been bolstered by giving educators options for implementation rather than recommending a “one size fits all approach” or mandating how teachers apply disciplinary practices.

Finally, training provided to help educators identify personal and school-wide vulnerable decision points using discipline data appeared to have helped teachers and administrators to view a potentially complex problem (i.e., discipline disproportionality) as more feasible and attainable to address through enhancing existing school practices. It also seems to be the case that educators trying out and sharing experiences with equity-focused strategies increased their comfort level and buy-in with a new disciplinary approach. Having educators try out parts of this equity-focused approach may have helped address ambivalence toward implementing ReACT, especially for those educators who may not have perceived their school’s disciplinary system as biased or inequitable. Although discipline disparities remain a pervasive issue in schools today, the final categories offer feasible and actionable insights to consider to help educators advance racial equity in school discipline practice.

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Table 1

Total Percentage of Respondents Endorsing Helping Categories, Hindering Categories, and Wishlist Items and Number of Critical Incidents Per Category

Incident type	Categories	% total respondents	Number of Incidents
Helping	1. Collaboration & Teaming	66%	17
	2. Focusing on Strategies to Address Challenging Behaviors/Situations	57%	14
	3. Leveraging Existing MTSS Frameworks	53%	17
	4. Making Administrator Support Visible	53%	16
	5. Disaggregating Discipline Data	53%	14
	6. Receiving External Coaching	53%	13
	7. Providing Options in Implementation	53%	12
	8. Learning About Students' Homes & Communities	33%	11
	9. Reflecting on Implicit Bias and its Influence	33%	10
	10. Witnessing Positive Effects on Students	33%	10
	11. Using Visual Cues to Prompt Implementation	33%	9
	12. Equipping Students with Strategies to Manage Challenging Behaviors/Emotions	29%	8
	13. Having Repeated Exposure to Training Content	29%	8
	14. Applying ReACT Strategies to Self Before Sharing with Others	29%	7
Hindering	1. Competing Responsibilities	43%	10
	2. Encountering Defensiveness Addressing Racial Bias	38%	13
	3. Lacking Skills in Cultural Responsiveness	38%	9
	4. Duration of Training Sessions	33%	7
Wishlist Items	1. Developing a Sustainability Plan	52%	17
	2. Modifying the Sequence or Length of Training	38%	8
	3. Clarifying Intervention Purpose	29%	6
	4. Building Commitment to Implement	24%	5

Note: MTSS = Multi-tiered systems of supports; ReACT = Racial equity through Assessing data for disproportionality, Culturally responsive behavior strategies, and Training to neutralize implicit bias