

Widely Used Disciplinary Options for Aggressive Kids

Are the Current Approaches Effective?

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Abstract

The question of what to do with aggressive students has plagued schools since mandatory attendance laws were passed. At the present time, many practitioners are using tactics for aggressive students that may not effectively remediate the problem, and research and practice do not seem to be in harmony regarding disciplinary options for aggressive students. While the most widely used options continue to be in-school suspension and out-of-school suspension, the research does not seem to support the efficacy of such measures. However, there are many promising practices within the research that deserve more consideration, and some of these have a stronger research support than suspension.

Widely Used Disciplinary Options for Aggressive Kids: Are the Current Approaches Effective?

Throughout history, schools have struggled with what to do with students who exhibit chronic discipline problems. In fact, school discipline issues stand at the forefront of the national agenda as bullying, violence, and aggressive acts proliferate at many high schools, including many affluent suburban schools that were not historically plagued by these concerns. Historically students who exhibited such behaviors were routinely expelled, but today schools must offer free appropriate education to all students including those with frequent and chronic behavior problems.

The search for disciplinary options other than expulsion becomes even more acute when dealing with students served in special education for behavioral disorders due to the legal cautions associated with disciplinary policy for students with special needs (O'Neil, 2003, Zirkel, 2003, Yell, 2001). Although these students need to be able to experience consequences for their actions, determining appropriate consequences may not be as simple as determining what is or is not legal (Etscheidt, 2002). Clearly, all students have a right to be educated in an environment free from disruption and aggression. Administrators must consider overall school safety issues and the effects students who have chronic discipline problems have on students who do not misbehave, yet, may have their education interrupted by an unruly or violent classmate.

To compound the problem, simple removal of belligerent or hostile students does not

accommodate the student's educational needs nor does it remediate the student's behavioral problems (Troyan, 2003). Further, educators, administrators, parents, advocates, and attorneys are often at odds as the views regarding overall school safety and the individual rights of aggressive students seem to conflict.

In evaluating these issues, it is important to look at what non-expulsion discipline options are currently in place for students who demonstrate aggressive behavior or other behavior problems (Telzrow, 2001). A variety of disciplinary options needs to be scrutinized to determine the relative efficacy of these approaches as well as the factors that facilitate success. The following review will address these questions in relation to the discipline options that are most commonly used in the public education system; out of school suspension, in school suspension, and several more recently developed disciplinary options.

In this review, the various disciplinary options are considered in the order in which they were developed historically. We chose specifically to exclude expulsion, and the "boot camp" disciplinary options (i.e. residential placements in a boot camp setting for several weeks or more) from this review, as these options often result from legally binding policies of "zero tolerance" in which the school administrators have little control. In fact, "boot camp" options may result from court orders rather than decisions based with school administrators. Here we decided to emphasize disciplinary options that are frequently used, and over which administrators may exercise some selective judgment.

In the sections below, a number of indices of "success" are considered including, frequency of behavioral infractions after a particular disciplinary option had been used, recidivism in use of the disciplinary option, students' attitude change after receiving a disciplinary penalty, etc. Overall, the extant research is not particularly positive for the common disciplinary options involving suspension, although the research on several more recently developed alternatives seems more promising (Morgan-D'Atrio, Northup, Lafleur & Spera, 1996; Tobin & Sugai, 1996; Imich, 1994, Atkins, McKay, Frazier & Jakobsons, 2002; Rodney, Crafter, Rodney & Mupier, 1999, Costenbader & Markson, 1994; Stage, 1997; Morrison, Gale, Anthony, Suzanne, Stori, Meri, Dillon, Cynthia, 2001, Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Brand, 1993; Saunders & Saunders, 2002, Castleberry & Enger, 1998, King, 1998).

To determine the efficacy of various disciplinary options, a computer review of the literature in the ERIC and psycARTICLES databases using indicators such as out of school suspension, in school suspension, and alternative schools, within the dates 1995 to 2003, was used as the primary method of search. Limiters such as "study" and "journal articles" were also used in order to further refine results. These various computer based inquiries generated some XXX studies which were reviewed. Among the articles found, it soon became apparent that empirical studies that document actual efficacy results of suspensions or alternative school programs are sparse. Many of the results were not empirical studies relevant to the purpose of this review.

In order to supplement this computer search, an additional hand search of the following journals was conducted in order to locate any articles that may have been missed by the computer search: Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, Behavioral Disorders, and Exceptional Children. In summary, XX articles addressed efficacy of one of the major disciplinary options under discussion, and thus were determined to be appropriate for review here.

Out of School Suspension

Out of school suspension (OSS) is one of the most frequently used consequences for rule violations in schools today (Dupper 1994; Skiba, 2002; Sautner, 2001). The beginnings of OSS seem to be clouded in mystery, as there is not a definitive establishment of this consequence cited in the literature. OSS is defined in the literature as a consequence for misbehaving in which the student is excluded from school for a period of time. Of course, OSS does not necessarily mean that the student is excluded from education, as many school districts now provide homebound instruction for some suspended students. However, the student is denied access to their typical educational environment for a set period of time ranging from as little as a day to as long as a permanent expulsion. This consequence is viewed as a form of punishment, since a student is removed from a reinforcing environment in order to decrease maladaptive behavior.

Little research has been done regarding the actual effectiveness of OSS (Skiba, 2002). In fact, while OSS is used quite frequently, not a great deal is known about its effects on student behavior, attitude, and eventual outcome. The research that has been done seems to point to less than desirable outcomes such as further suspension and an increased dropout rate (Skiba, 2002; Bounds 2000). Furthermore, some research suggests that suspension may be assigned arbitrarily and at a disproportionate rate for many African American students (Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Imich, 1994, Townsend, 2000). Finally, the research on efficacy of OSS suggests that it may not be effective (Morgan-D'Atrio, Northup, Lafleur & Spera, 1996; Tobin & Sugai, 1996; Imich, 1994, Atkins, McKay, Frazier & Jakobsons, 2002; Rodney, Crafter, Rodney & Mupier, 1999; Bounds, 2000; Ruck & Wortley, 2002). Clearly, serious questions need to be addressed regarding this frequently used intervention.

Does OSS Improve Student Behavior?

Presumably, interventions for inappropriate behavior should lead to a reduction in the behaviors that lead to the intervention and various researchers have investigated the effects of OSS in this regard (Morgan-D'Atrio, Northup, Lafleur & Spera, 1996; Tobin & Sugai, 1996; Imich 1994, Atkins, McKay, Frazier & Jakobsons, 2002). For example, Morgan-D'Atrio and colleagues (1996) studied suspension at a large urban high school. They analyzed data from a random sample of 94 students who had been suspended. The researchers looked at the discipline records of these students by utilizing the school wide data recording program. The researchers found that the most common behaviors resulting in school suspension were cutting class and tardiness. Of course, these particular behaviors are typically considered school avoidance behaviors and this raises certain questions about the applicability of OSS. Specifically, it would seem that OSS, which results in avoidance of school, would be the wrong type of consequence for school avoidance behaviors. Further, the researchers found that suspensions were inconsistently implemented in this school, suggesting that the procedural integrity of school discipline was minimal. According to these data, 58% of the students who were suspended once were subsequently suspended again. Some students were suspended as many five subsequent times. These data suggest that OSS itself did not seem to be successful in improving behavior for over half of the subjects. Thus, these data suggest that OSS may not be effective as a discipline procedure (Morgan-D'Atrio, Northup, Lafleur & Spera, 1996).

Tobin and Sugai (1996) evaluated patterns of behavior in middle school students by analyzing discipline records. In the first phase of this study discipline records over five years from one middle school were reviewed in order to determine patterns that would identify students who would be most in need of behavioral remediation after the first term of 6th grade. Using behavioral records the researchers formed two groups of subjects. Group A included 18 students whose discipline records could be analyzed over the course of their entire middle school career, and who had been suspended during almost every term during middle school. Group B consisted of 17 students who had begun middle school, but had not yet completed it, and who were referred during the first term of 6th grade as well as in at least in two subsequent terms. When a student in the school was referred to an administrator for a rule violation that administrator had the latitude to make a judgment, within some established guidelines, regarding what consequences would be appropriate for the infraction. Thus in this study, the researchers were able to tally how many students received suspension as a consequence of inappropriate behavior, and compare that data to data concerning how many students did not receive a suspension. Of specific interest here, the researchers then evaluated the remaining discipline records of these students to determine if the suspension had the desired effect, ultimately the reduction of rule violating behavior.

Of the students 17 who were referred to the office for discipline problems within the first term of 6th grade, 10 received some type of a suspension for their infraction. The students who received the suspension demonstrated an elevated number of discipline referrals in the future when compared to students who had not received suspension as a consequence for their rule infraction during their first term. Specifically, of the 17 students in Group B who were referred for discipline in the first term of 6th grade, 7 received no type of suspension: the average number of referrals over the next four terms, which encompassed the remainder of 6th grade and the majority of 7th grade, was 3.85 referrals for that group. However, for the 10 students who received some type of suspension, an average of 14 subsequent referrals was noted during this same time period. In short, the students who were suspended for a behavioral offense in the fall tended to be suspended more times after the initial infraction than the students who had not received a suspension for their initial infraction in the fall. These researchers argue that if suspension was an effective disciplinary tool, these data would be expected to demonstrate just the opposite.

The second phase of this study analyzed data from 36 students who attended one of three middle schools, including the middle school evaluated in the first phase (Tobin & Sugai, 1996). These students were considered chronic discipline problems having experienced office referrals in both spring of 6th grade and spring of 8th grade. Data was taken from databases regarding the date, grade level, reason for referral, and administrative action taken for each offense. The data revealed an increase in the total number of referrals from grades 6 to 8 among these students. These data document that OSS functioned as a reinforcer, on a variable interval schedule, for this group of students (Tobin & Sugai, 1996).

Imich (1994) researched trends regarding OSS and other exclusions from school. By analyzing discipline data over the course of three years in a large school district of some 225,000 students, this study unlike those previously reviewed, allowed for comparison between different schools on application and frequency of OSS. Specifically data on the frequency of three different types of exclusions were examined over the course of the three years, including data on OSS (suspension for a specified period of time), indefinite exclusions (e.g. suspensions from school for a non-specified length), and expulsions.

The data demonstrated an increase in the frequency of OSS. Specifically, use of OSS nearly doubled within the three-year period rising from just over 900 to nearly 1,700 per year. Furthermore, the number of indefinite exclusions rose from 70 to 210 over the course of three years. Finally, the number of expulsions rose by 50%. This increase in the number of suspensions over the three year period suggests that the OSS consequence was not effective in reducing rule-violations in these schools. Next, the district was broken down into six administrative areas and the suspensions and exclusions from school assigned by administrators in each area were compared. The results demonstrated that there was significant variation from area to area in the number of exclusions from school, suggesting that students may have a higher chance of being suspended or expelled from school simply based on the area of the county in which they lived.

To continue this effort, Imich (1994) next evaluated one large area of the district more closely; this area included 23 secondary schools. The data revealed that a very small number of schools—only five of the 23 secondary schools--accounted for over two-thirds of the suspensions. This finding further suggests that the consequence of suspension is arbitrarily assigned and may be greatly influenced by the administrative personnel in the school. (Imich, 1994).

Atkins, McKay, Frazier, and Jakobsons (2002) analyzed the disciplinary records of students in grades 3-8 who attended an inner-city public school in order to determine effectiveness of the disciplinary options used. The students who had been referred for disciplinary action were divided into three groups: the “never group” of 117 students had never received a suspension or detention, the “fall group” of 62 students received this consequence in only the fall and not the spring, and the “fall/spring group” of 75 students received such a consequence in both the fall and spring terms. The students were broken into these groups in order for comparisons between the students who were never suspended (the never group), students who seemed to respond to an early suspension (the fall group), and for students who continued to exhibit problematic behavior despite an early suspension (the fall/spring group).

The researchers indicated that for the fall/spring group the consequence was not effective based on the fact that the students were subsequently suspended. However, the “fall group” (i.e. the 62 students who were not referred again in the spring), seemed to suggest that student behavior did improve as a result of OSS. This suggests that there may be certain factors associated with OSS which make it effective for some students and not for others—an idea explored in the next section. Nevertheless, when these results for the two groups are taken together, the data demonstrate that OSS was not an effective deterrent for over half of the students (55%). The researchers, like those reported previously, indicated that for the fall/spring students, the OSS consequence itself may have served as a reinforcer.

In order to explore other differences between the fall only group and the fall/spring group, data on student behavior was analyzed, using teacher and peer ratings of behavior; in this school such behavior rating scales are administered each year, during the middle of the year. The behavior ratings were used to determine if the students who would respond to the initial suspension could be identified at this point in the year. The researchers found that the fall /spring group demonstrated more behavior problems than the students in the fall and never groups, indicating that it may be possible for teachers and peers to predict which students will be responsive to the consequence of OSS and which students will not. Clearly, detentions and suspensions should not be relied upon as

an effective way to decrease rates of rule-violations for all students (Atkins, McKay, Frazier & Jakobsons, 2002).

In spite of these negative results regarding the efficacy of OSS, administrators seem to feel that OSS is a viable disciplinary option. Killion (1998) conducted a study in which seventy-four randomly selected secondary principals answered questions regarding the discipline procedures used in their school. Specifically, the principals were asked which of the disciplinary measures that they currently employed were effective. The data showed that OSS was among the most frequently employed methods of discipline in public school systems and that few other options were more frequently utilized. Moreover, the principals ranked OSS as one of the most effective disciplinary options available. However, in considering the overall design of the questionnaire, one must note that it would have been difficult for principals to rate one of their own frequently used disciplinary measures as ineffective (Killion, 1998).

A number of methodological issues can be identified in these studies. First, these studies suggest a unit of analysis issue, in that many of the studies analyzed data on OSS from a number of student's in only one school, and this presupposes that individual students' disciplinary records are the appropriate unit of analysis. However, with administrators having considerable latitude in the disciplinary options used in the schools, perhaps the unit of analysis needs to be school disciplinary records, and studies should be conducted which compare multiple schools--and thus multiple administrators—as done by Imich (1994) and Killion (1998).

Next, many studies on the efficacy of disciplinary procedures utilize only one outcome measure – the reuse of the same disciplinary intervention. In future research other outcomes should be investigated, such as students' attitudes towards school, and the effects of these interventions on others within the school. For example, principals may select OSS not because it works as a deterrent to future behavior problems by the student who is suspended, but because it makes other students safer or results in less class disruption. Alternatively, the Atkins et al. (2002) study suggested that the behaviors demonstrated by students--behaviors which are evident to teachers and peers--result in differential efficacy of OSS for different students. Researchers should explore both of these possibilities and attempt to tease out the factors that make OSS an effective disciplinary option.

With those concerns noted, the extant data do suggest several things. First, in each study, the majority of the students who were suspended once, continue to be suspended. Clearly, the consequence of OSS was ineffective in changing student behavior overall for this majority of children (Morgan-D'Atrio, Northup, Lafleur & Spera 1996; Tobin & Sugai, 1996; Imich 1994, Atkins, McKay, Frazier & Jakobsons, 2002). In spite of this, administrators continue to believe OSS to be an effective option (Killion, 1998). Next, these data suggest that the assignment of suspension is arbitrary in nature (Imich, 1994). Further, the data show that many students are assigned OSS for school avoidance behavior (Morgan-D'Atrio, 1996), and this may be questionable since, OSS would not seem to be appropriate for school avoidance offences.

What Factors May Be Associated with Suspension?

Much research has focused on what factors may be associated with OSS, and the correlational studies have investigated both academic difficulties and grade retention (Morgan-D'Atrio, 1996; Atkins, Mckay, Frazier & Jakobsons, 2002; Rodney, Crafter, Rodney & Mupier, 1999). Although correlational designs do not demonstrate a causal relationship between the variables, the factors that seem to typically be associated with students who are assigned OSS are noteworthy.

Some research has investigated aspects that seem to be related to the assignment of OSS. For example, Morgan-D'Atrio (1996), in the study reviewed previously, also evaluated the extent of academic, social skill, and adjustment deficits among students who had recurrent suspensions. Twenty-four middle and high school students who had been in OSS were assessed to determine their academic achievement and discipline profiles. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews and reviewed the academic and discipline records of the students. Results indicated that the incidence of academic deficits were high among students assigned OSS, for both middle and high school groups; no significant differences were found in conjunction with grade level. The data showed that only 13% of high school students with recurrent suspensions were found to be at or above grade level in word recognition with 26% of these students performing below 3rd grade level in word recognition. Further, 26% of these same students were below 3rd grade level in reading comprehension. The reading achievement results for the middle school group were similar; only 21% of the middle school students who received OSS were reading at or above grade level. Clearly, many of the students who are in OSS on a recurrent basis are the students most in need of academic remediation (Morgan-D'Atrio, Northup, Lafleur & Spera, 1996), and the removal of these students from the academic demands of the class may not be in their best interests.

The middle and high school groups of students in the Morgan-D'Atrio et al. study were also evaluated in other domains. The researchers gathered data on the students' social skills, behavioral problems, social competencies, and self-esteem using a variety of normed teacher and student rating scales and checklists. The data revealed that 52% of high school students and 67% of middle school students in OSS had social skill deficits based on either self or teacher reports. Scores demonstrated that 43% of high school and 38% of middle school students scored within the significant problem behavior range on one or more subscales, indicating that they had problems such as attentional deficits, aggression, or social self-concept deficits. Interestingly, in spite of these self-esteem deficits as perceived by teachers, the students' scores did not demonstrate any significant self-esteem deficits.

This difference between self-perception of and teacher perception of self-esteem raises the question, are the students who receive OSS completely cognizant of their behavioral abnormalities in other areas? Perhaps these students do not have a specific sense that their behaviors are abnormal. Alternatively, these students may recognize that their behavior is considered extreme, but may merely be unconcerned by these behavioral problems. At a minimum these data indicate that the students in OSS often have social skills and/or other behavioral deficits. Clearly, these students are in need of remediation for all of the previously mentioned social problems, and this would suggest that most OSS programs, which typically do not include these remediation options,

may be ineffective as a treatment option (Morgan-D'Atiro, Northup, Lafleur & Spera 1996).

Atkins and colleagues (2002) also investigated the academic and behavioral skills of the three groups of students in the study described previously. One group had never been suspended, one group had been suspended in the fall only, and another group had recurring suspensions. The groups were analyzed based on their scores on a normative teacher rating scale to assess academic competence and problems behaviors. The results indicated a significant decline on all measures, including both behavior and academic competence, in each group. In other words, the more frequently students were given OSS, the less competent they were academically and behaviorally than a norm sample (Atkins, Mckay, Frazier & Jakobsons, 2002).

Rodney and colleagues (1999) looked at a group of African American males to discern what factors contributed to grade retention. Unlike many of the studies reported previously, the primary variable of interest was not OSS. The study included a group of 243 African American boys who were between 13-17 years old. The participants were recruited for interviews through fliers and community service organizations. The interviews lasted about one hour each and involved questions on alcohol use, discipline in the home, and conduct disorders. The data was analyzed to determine what variables impacted grade retention, and the results indicated that the factor most strongly associated with grade retention was OSS, followed by conduct disorders, and a lack of discipline in the home. Of the African-American adolescents who had been retained, 90% had been in OSS at least once. Although the study does not point to a causal relationship, it demonstrates that many of the students who are suspended, may be among students who are most in need of remediation to prevent retention. Further, the researchers assert that suspensions may create academic problems by further putting the student behind in their curriculum (Rodney, Crafter, Rodney & Mupier, 1999).

Similarly, Bounds (2000) studied the relationship between OSS and the high school drop out rate among students with disabilities. The study participants consisted of 60 students with disabilities in grades 9-12 who had dropped out of school. Participants were recruited through a federally funded project focused on facilitating re-entry into the school system for these students. The participants responded to four separate questions regarding why they dropped out of school, why they have returned, what their school could have done differently to encourage them to stay in school, and what skills they needed to be successful. The second highest reason for drop out, cited by 17.2% of students and second only to academic difficulties, was that the student got into trouble, and particularly, that they were in OSS (Bounds, 2000).

Ruck and Wortley (2002) evaluated student perceptions of school discipline and compared these perceptions across students by race. The sample of students included 1870 students in grades 10-12 from 11 different high schools in Canada. The high schools were ethnically and racially diverse. Students were surveyed and responded anonymously to questions regarding their perception of differential treatment and the school environment. The questions employed both Lickert-type responses as well as open-ended questions. As related to OSS, the results indicated that over half of the African American students felt as if they were more likely to be suspended from school than were their classmates from other ethnic groups (Ruck & Wortley, 2002).

Taken in total, this research demonstrates that the students who are suspended are often the students who are most in need of assistance, both behaviorally and academically, within schools (Morgan-D'Atiro, 1996, Atkins, Mckay, Frazier & Jakobsons, 2002). Further, such use of OSS is

likely to put them further behind their peers. OSS seems to be associated with increased retention or drop out rate (Rodney, Crafter, Rodney & Mupier, 1999; Bounds, 2000). Moreover, students often feel as though suspension is unfairly assigned, and this belief would seem to hinder the effectiveness of this practice (Ruck & Wortley, 2002). Clearly, students who are behind their peers in many areas necessary to be successful at school, students who feel like they are more likely to be suspended than their peers, and students who are in need of remediation to prevent retention and drop out, will most likely not benefit from a consequence such as OSS.

Summary

While OSS is one of the most widely used consequences in the public schools, many studies evaluating various results of OSS demonstrate negative effects of this type of suspension (Morgan-D'Atrio, 1996; Atkins, McKay, Frazier & Jakobsons, 2002; Rodney, Crafter, Rodney & Mupier, 1999). Further, these studies demonstrate that students, who already experience numerous difficulties, academically and behaviorally, are suspended recurrently. OSS does not seem to be effective in reducing rule-violating behavior for a majority of students (Tobin & Sugai, 1996; Imich, 1994; Atkins, McKay, Frazier & Jakobsons, 2002; Breunlin, Cimmarusti, Bryant-Edwards & Hetherington, 2002). Moreover, OSS seems to exacerbate the problems of students who are already behind both academically and socially, often resulting in grade retention or dropping out of school (Morgan-D'Atrio, 1996, Rodney, Crafter, Rodney & Mupier, 1999; Bounds, 2000). Similarly, students perceive OSS as unfair and arbitrary and the data seem to support that perception. Data has demonstrated that OSS is assigned arbitrarily (Ruck & Wortley, 2002; Morgan-D'Atrio, 1996; Mendez & Knoff, 2003). In considering this research base, it would be difficult to label OSS as an effective, fair consequence for aggressive or other problem behaviors.

In-School Suspension

The first in school suspension (ISS) models were developed in the 1970's either as a compliment or an alternative to OSS (Morris, 2003). In comparison to OSS programs, ISS programs allow for highly aggressive students to remain in school, thus offering the option of continued remediation while also protecting the students in other classes, as well as the overall community (since ISS programs do involve keeping students off of the streets) (Sheets, 1996). Generally, ISS is a consequence which requires students to attend school, but yet be removed from school related events such as attending classes, eating lunch in the cafeteria, or even participating in extra curricular activities for a specified length of time. There are many varieties of ISS programs involving the length of stay, supervision, academic or behavioral components, etc. Most ISS programs allow students to continue in their academic curriculum, but there is considerable debate on whether or not this actually occurs (Trojan, 2003). Furthermore, unlike most OSS programs, ISS programs sometimes have a behavioral intervention component that serves to combat the reason behind the student's rule violation.

Most ISS programs are designed to serve two main functions: students are to be separated from the general population as a deterrent for further rule breaking behavior, and students are separated from the general population so other students may be afforded the opportunity to learn without significant disruption. The later of these two functions is not widely debated; when disruptive students are removed it can improve the learning environment for others in the classroom (Trojan, 2003). However, whether or not ISS serves the former function of acting as a deterrent is a matter that should be demonstrated through research.

When ISS options were created, this intervention was deemed a positive alternative to OSS, and consequently ISS soon became widely used. However, in spite of the popularity of this option, the effectiveness of ISS in reduction of subsequent student rule violations is not documented in the literature (Skiba & Peterson, 1997; Morrison, Gale, Anthony, Suzanne, Stori, Meri, Dillon, Cynthia, 2001). Furthermore, studies that do investigate repercussions associated with the use of ISS do not demonstrate positive benefits (Costenbader & Markson, 1994; Stage, 1997; Morrison, Gale, Anthony, Suzanne, Stori, Meri, Dillon, Cynthia, 2001).

For example, Costenbader and Markson (1994) compared the responses of students who had experienced OSS and/or ISS to the responses of students who had never been suspended. These groups were compared on measures regarding school attitude, behavior, and attitude toward the application of the ISS option. Researchers surveyed 620 middle and high school students across two school districts. The students first completed a self-rating of behavior problems which provided information on four factors including rule compliance/acting out, anxiety, peer skills, and school interest. Students were also asked to respond to several demographic questions including whether or not they had ever been to ISS. If the students indicated they had previously been suspended, they were then asked to answer questions regarding their perceptions of various factors relating to the suspension. The findings generated interesting responses that question the efficacy of suspension overall, including ISS. Results from the rating scale indicated a trend where students who had never been suspended demonstrated more positive and healthier scores than students who had been assigned ISS. Further, students who had been assigned ISS fared better than those who had been assigned OSS. These results suggest a continuum of effects associated with the degree of removal from school, with less positive outcomes being associated with increased removal. Also, the students who had been assigned either ISS or OSS self reported that they were less interested in their school achievement. When responding to questions regarding their feelings about the suspension, no differences were noted between the students who received ISS versus students who received OSS, both were generally not positive. Moreover, when asked the extent to which the suspension helped them to solve problems and to avoid being suspended again, the majority of students indicated that the suspension did not help or helped only a little. Again no real differences were noted between students receiving ISS versus OSS (Costenbader & Markson, 1994).

Stage (1997) used an observational research design to study the effects of three different types of ISS over four phases on the disruptive classroom behavior of students. The participants were 36 students, 25 males and 11 females, ranging in age of 12 to 17 years, who were being served in special education under emotional or behavioral disorders. The study was conducted at one residential facility. Throughout one full school year researchers implemented three different types of in-school suspension across four phases with varying components such as a 15 minutes timeout, a 15-minute timeout plus an academic component, and a 15-minute timeout plus a problem-solving intervention. The ISS model used across all phases was consistent in that teachers could remove disruptive students immediately from their classroom and assign them to ISS. After the student had successfully complied with the necessary components of the ISS program, they were allowed to return to class. Disruptive classroom behavior data was gathered by a trained observer. Results indicated that assignment to ISS had no effect on the disruptive classroom behavior of students across all phases of implementation. Thus the ISS, regardless of the additional components present, did little to reduce disruptive classroom behavior. Also note-worthy, the researchers found that teachers primarily relied upon disapproval of inappropriate behavior to regulate student behavior in class. Researchers theorized that in order for ISS to have the desired effect on students, they must experience removal from a positive classroom environment, and in this study the students did not experience the classroom as a positive environment. In other words, this

study suggests that ISS may only work if the student would rather be in his or her usual class than in ISS (Stage, 1997).

Morrison and colleagues (2001) approached the efficacy question by looking at the type of student who would benefit from an innovative ISS program. The authors analyzed data regarding students who had been suspended including discipline histories, grades, principals' assessment of behavior changes, and student self-report surveys. These data were used to generate conclusions regarding what type of student may experience the most benefit from a day long "in-school suspension" where students participated in a teaching/counseling curriculum at a local community college. The participants were 128 middle school students who were specifically chosen by their principals as possible candidates who would benefit from this program. These participants included 50% of the total number of students who were suspended during that year. Data was gathered from the assistant principal's ratings of student improvement, and student self-report surveys. Some students were perceived to have benefited from the program, although empirical analysis of this benefit was not demonstrated statistically nor was the type of benefit analyzed. The students who were rated by their assistant principals as having benefited were students who were also "less susceptible to peer pressure, more optimistic, and more socially responsible." Furthermore, 27.4% of the students referred to this program had been previously suspended, which does suggest that the previous suspension(s) were not successful in curbing their rule violating behavior. In considering the results of this study, we must note that the ISS program here differs greatly from what traditional in-school suspension looks like in most schools. It should be viewed not as an in-school suspension program as defined in this review, but as a specifically designed program to remediate behavior. Lastly, the results of this study seems to suggest that students who already demonstrate optimism and social responsibility will benefit from such an elaborate program, furthering the concept that the disillusioned students who are often referred to more commonplace ISS programs may not experience any real benefit from the consequence in relation to their future behavior (.Morrison, Gale, Anthony, Suzanne, Stori, Meri, Dillon & Cynthia, 2001)

Clearly, the extant research does not seem to demonstrate efficacy of ISS programs (Costenbader & Markson, 1994; Stage, 1997; Morrison, Gale, Anthony, Suzanne, Stori, Meri, Dillon & Cynthia, 2001). However, the fact that so few studies exist that evaluate whether or not a traditional ISS program actually improves the behavior of students, thereby reducing their rule violating behavior, makes efficacy questions difficult to address. Still, a variety of study designs, including both observations and student perceptions, have failed to provide hard data demonstrating the efficacy of ISS.

Recently Developed Promising Practices

Although the research does not document the efficacy of OSS and ISS in decreasing in rule-violating or aggressive behavior, there do seem to be a variety of promising practices presented in the research. First, alternative schools seem to demonstrate a measure of success, especially when the students feel as though they are part of a caring environment (Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Brand, 1993; Saunders & Saunders, 2002, Castleberry & Enger, 1998, King, 1998, Epstein, 1992, Bauman, 1998, Sekayi, 2001). Next, there also seems to be some promise in conflict resolution programs used in conjunction with more traditional discipline approaches (Woody, 2001; Breunlin, Cimmarusti, Bryant-Edwards & Hetherington, 2002). Further, functional behavioral assessment has demonstrated effectiveness in the reduction of certain specific problem behaviors, including

aggressive behaviors (March & Horner, 2002; Doggett, Edwards, Tingstrom & Wilczynski, 2002; Moore, Doggett, Edwards & Olmi, 1999). Also, strength based assessment of students with behavioral difficulties promises to yield intervention results that are more positive than several interventions currently used. By focusing on the strengths of the student within his or her environment, this recently developed procedure may prove to be effective with aggressive students (Epstein, 1998; Epstein, 1999; Rudolf, S.M., Epstein, M.H., 2000). Finally, Bender's model (1998) of effective discipline as founded in positive relationships may serve as a conceptual vehicle for discussion of the relative strengths of many of these alternative programs, and that model is described below.

Relational Discipline: An Emerging Perspective

In 2003, Bender suggested that effective discipline must be understood as founded in relationships. Pointedly, he redefined discipline as follows: Discipline is a positive relationship with a significant authority figure that results in a student wishing to change his or her behavior to a set of more socially appropriate behaviors. Bender utilized the growing literature on risk and resilience as his basis to suggest that students who formulated strong positive bonds with “significant adults” could and often did, seemingly overcome many risk factors in their environment. Bender further suggested that this disciplinary model represents a “higher aim” for effective discipline than merely overt behavioral compliance. Indeed he discussed this disciplinary approach as an approach which could incorporate behavioral tactics, but would also allow the field to move beyond behavioral approaches that have dominated the disciplinary literature for the last 20 years.

This relation discipline model suggests that when a student feels that the disciplinary authority—typically the teacher—had his or her best interest at heart, and truly cared about he or she as a person, that many disciplinary efforts would be effective. Conversely, if the student senses a lack of personal involvement, or indeed a personal disdain on the part of the teacher or administrator, few positive disciplinary options are likely to result. It becomes apparent, why this perspective was referred to as “relational “discipline;” indeed according to this perspective, all effective disciplinary options will be founded on positive relationships.

With this emerging model of discipline in mind, one may readily understand the critical nature of the factors which students seem to value within the programs below, and this “relational discipline” perspective may shed light on what types of disciplinary options should be further explored. Thus, the impact of the efficacy research on the following alternative approaches will be discussed from this perspective.

The Alternative School Option

Alternatives to traditional education in the form of alternative schools are often used as a disciplinary consequence of rule violating behavior within the public school system. However, the concept of an alternative educational environment is not limited to only to aggressive students or to students who have been removed from their traditional school. Alternative schools (AS) were designed as an option for a broader group of students than merely students with behavioral problems; AS interventions were developed to serve many types of students who were not optimally served by the regular school program (Raywid, 1994). Raywid cites three categorical types of AS including (1) schools that focus on popular innovations within the curriculum, (2) “last chance” schools that can be used as a consequence for inappropriate behavior, and (3) remedial

schools in which specific skill remediation is offered. To further complicate matters, any specific AS can fit into more than one category (Raywid, 1994).

As communities continue to have difficulty providing an alternative placement such as ISS within the school, and as student bullying, violence, and aggression prevail as one of the top issues facing public education, the development and implementation of alternative schools for students with behavioral problems has increased (Harrington-Lueker, 1994). Students who are chronically disruptive or who have committed a major aggressive or legal offense (i.e. drug violations or weapons possession/transmission) may not be allowed to attend their general high school any longer. At some point, either by assignment via the school system or by their own choice, many aggressive students attend some type of alternative program.

Much of the literature available on AS are reviews of particular programs (King, 1998, Brand, 1993), and due to a notable lack of empirical evidence on overall efficacy, it is important to evaluate such school specific literature here. The following discussion attempts to synthesize information regarding both the effectiveness of these schools and how such effectiveness may be measured.

With that caution stated, the extant research does support the overall efficacy of AS (Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Brand, 1993; Saunders & Saunders, 2002, Castleberry & Enger, 1998, King, 1998, Epstein, 1992, Bauman, 1998, Sekayi, 2001). Positive outcomes such as increased self-esteem, school attendance, and a more positive student perception of school have been documented for students attending AS. These positive outcomes seem to be more apt to occur within an alternative environment that has certain components such as a caring staff, challenging curriculum, one-on-one instruction, communication, and small class size (Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Brand, 1993; Saunders & Saunders, 2002, Castleberry & Enger, 1998, King, 1998, Epstein, 1992, Bauman, 1998, Sekayi, 2001).

In one of the few studies that compared overall efficacy of AS and traditional programs for more than one AS, Castleberry and Enger (1998) evaluated student responses to AS. The authors interviewed 173 students who attended 21 different AS programs. The participants had been assigned to the various schools for a host of differing reasons including disruptive behavior, academic problems manifested through low achievement scores, retention, or family problems. Interviews consisted mainly of questions designed to elicit responses in reference to whether or not the students preferred the alternative school to the traditional school they came from. The students who preferred the AS program were asked questions regarding what they liked about the alternative program as opposed to their previous experiences. Results of the interviews demonstrated that the students felt that their AS helped them achieve at high levels for the following reasons: teachers, size, student-teacher relationships, expectations, atmosphere, courses, building, schedule, and student-student relationships. The students indicated that they felt that the teachers were more caring and willing to help, an outcome that would certainly be suggested by the relational discipline perspective described above. Students found greater flexibility among the faculty in AS, than in their traditional schools. The students also felt that the faculty in the AS programs believed in them, listened to them, and treated them like family, much more so than in the traditional programs. Students particularly liked the benefits of more one-on-one instruction.

When asked whether or not the AS program has had a positive effect on their lives, 83% of students said yes. These students indicated that their attitudes had improved overall, that they intended to stay in school and graduate, and that their grades and behavior had also improved. Clearly, these findings overwhelmingly document the positive changes associated

with AS for these students (Castleberry & Enger, 1998). Further, these interview results would seem to support the suggestion that effective disciplinary programming for students with overt behavioral problems is heavily dependent upon the quality of the relationships between those students and their teachers.

Various other studies have documented these types of positive outcomes for specific AS programs (Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Sanders & Saunders, 2002). For example, Dugger and Dugger (1998) researched the effectiveness of an AS program in relation to student achievement and self-esteem. They used achievement scores and a norm referenced self-esteem index to gather data regarding the effect attendance at an AS had on 71 students who elected such an environment. The control group consisted of 44 students who were on the waiting list to attend the AS but were not accepted during a particular semester. The achievement scores were inconsistent, not demonstrating any significant difference in the achievement between the two groups of students. However, the results of the self-esteem comparison were significant. These data showed that students who attended the AS increased their level of self-esteem particularly in relation to their perception of their own academic competence and their perception of their peer popularity (Dugger & Dugger, 1998). These authors stated that this AS had several characteristics that were believed to be important for success of the program including: high expectations of the students, a location away from other schools, individualized curriculum and hands-on learning, small class size, goal setting as part of the curriculum, working with community agencies to overcome barriers to school attendance, daily contact if a student was absent or tardy, and flexibility in school structure (i.e. the school was both highly-structured and extremely flexible). Thus this study supports many of the factors mentioned by Castleberry and Enger (1998) as important components of effective AS programs.

Sanders and Saunders (2002) evaluated student perceptions of their previous traditional schools and compared these perceptions to perceptions of the AS in which they subsequently enrolled. This particular AS sought to create a supportive and “pastoral” atmosphere of academic and social support for their students. For example, each student was assigned a caseworker that was a Master’s level social worker. These caseworkers individually helped the students beyond the classroom and these caseworkers were not only responsible for academic learning, but anything that may affect school performance. This is the type of intervention suggested by the relational disciplinary model as described above. Each of the participating students completed two surveys, one in the fall regarding their previous school and another in the spring regarding their AS experience. Comparative results indicated more positive interactions with school personnel such as administrators, teachers, and caseworkers, at the AS. Furthermore, the students rated the overall environment at the AS higher than they did their previous traditional school. Results illustrate that an alternative school focused on creating a caring environment can have a positive effect on the way students view school personnel and the school itself (Saunders & Saunders, 2002). This level of personal, individual, support translated into a more caring, accommodating, and personal environment for students, as suggested by the relational discipline model (Bender 2003).

A 1998 study by King and colleagues evaluated the effectiveness of one AS on several elements including student achievement, attendance, and student perception of school. The study describes Lakeside High School, and the implementation of policies that created positive changes within their students as assessed by their authentic school records such as grades, attendance, and student reports. The high school began by instituting a four-day instructional week. Students can take three classes per semester, and still meet all of their requirements. Fridays were spent with

faculty meeting in order to plan for individual students so that the staff could effectively provide assistance and design strategies directed toward eliciting positive changes in the students. The school enforced a strict discipline contract that was used in conjunction with a prevailing theme that Lakeside was now a school of choice. The previous assignment of students to Lakeside was changed within the district to an arrangement where students experiencing problems could choose to attend Lakeside. Higher achievement after these changes was documented by several factors. During the succeeding year, one third of the students at Lakeside made the district wide honor roll which represented a dramatic improvement over previous years. The state wide examinations also showed impressive increases. Next, the number of non-promotions declined from 70% to 31%. Also, students improved attendance from an average of 62%-65% in previous years to 82%.

In addition to these data, student perceptions of the new program innovations at Lakeside Alternative School were gathered via interviews, observations, and surveys. The students reported that they felt the majority of changes at lakeside were positive. The researcher even observed the students with T-shirts touting the slogan, “Lakeside, A School of Choice, Our Choice.” Finally, both teachers and students reported that the theme of respect, both from students and teachers, was a major factor in the school improvement (King, 1998). Again, this relational element would seem to support Bender’s (2003) suggestion that effective disciplinary policies need to be based in relationships.

Clearly, AS can lead to many positive outcomes for students. AS programs tend to be more able than traditional schools, to set the curriculum, specific behavioral guidelines, and goals for their students. While experiencing this autonomy each AS must define for itself what is considered effective for their students and justify this effectiveness to stakeholders (Katsiyannis, 1998; Lange, 1998; Lehr, 2003). A review of the literature illustrates that these schools can increase achievement, as well as raise self-esteem and school attendance (Brand, 1993; Dugger & Dugger, 1998; King, 1998; Lange, 1998; Saunders & Saunders, 2002). Furthermore, AS can create a positive outlook toward school and learning (Dugger, 1998; Brand, 1993; Saunders, 2002). Schools that are responsible for demonstrating such positive changes tend to be schools where the students perceive their teachers care about them, and schools that offer a structured program with some flexibility within the program (Epstein, 1992; Castleberry, 1998). Further, research does seem to show that in order for students to embrace their curriculum without resistance, a strong focus in the basic academics is needed (Sekayi, 2001). The aspects of communication, one-on-one instruction, smaller class size, strict discipline, and a student’s choice to attend the school are all characterized as important to the success of an alternative school (Epstein, 1992; King, 1998; Bauman, 1998; Castleberry, 1998). This theme of “student choice” is also said to have an impact of the goals and approaches of all alternative schools (Lehr, 2003).

These programs all seemed to demonstrate the importance of caring teachers in the disciplinary program. Further, AS placements can provide a curriculum rich in basic academics as well as a curricular component designed to combat social skill deficits. Finally, flexibility of programming, smaller class size, one-on-one attention, strong parent communication, seem to be critical components of AS placements, and would apparently result in the demonstrated efficacy of AS placements as one disciplinary option. All of these factors come together to seemingly make an alternative placement a successful and viable option for students experiencing difficulty at their traditional school. Of course, with only one study documenting this efficacy across AS placements, much more research should be undertaken.

Conflict Resolution Programs

Whether a disciplinary option involves the use of punitive consequences or not, the institution of conflict resolution programs in schools has been shown to have a positive effect in reducing aggressive student behavior (Woody, 2001; Breunlin, Cimmarusti, Bryant-Edwards & Hetherington, 2002). Conflict resolution programs offer some hope for school administrators who may feel as though there is no systematic preemptive strike which will reduce aggression or that there is little alternative to ISS or OSS as a disciplinary response to aggression in their schools.

For example, Woody (2001) detailed the implementation of a school wide conflict-resolution program within one AS High School. The high school was small, with an average enrollment of 350 students, and attendance at this particular high school resulted from some behavioral difficulty in a more traditional school program. Two social workers instituted a conflict resolution program that involved all students and school personnel. All students participated in a four hour training session and all school personal participated in a two hour training session. The program focused on communication, role-plays, and self-exploration. Further, to reinforce the training the students also participated in conflict resolution training in their homeroom classes. The effectiveness of the program was measured by anecdotal reports, a non-standardized test based on knowledge of conflict resolution principles, and a standardized measure encompassing how students would deal with specific conflict situations. When comparing pre- and post-test data, statistically significant results indicated that students had not only gained the knowledge inherent in the conflict resolution program, but also that when faced with situations involving conflict more students chose to respond assertively or submissively as opposed to aggressively. Further, anecdotal reports indicated the efficacy of the program in reducing conflict, no fights occurred at the school after the conflict resolution program was instituted (Woody, 2001). Of course, this emphasis on relationships is, again, the type of emphasis suggested by relational discipline (Bender, 2003). Specifically, when students discover that they have—and may exercise—social power via effective relationships, there is less need for student to impact their social environment through aggressiveness.

Breunlin and colleagues (2002) studied high school students who participated in a conflict resolution program as an alternative to suspension. The students attended a large public high school with a population of over 3,000. The goal of the program was to reduce the amount of re-suspensions for students who participated in the conflict resolution program. The researchers used a repeated measures design with non-equivalent comparison group. Six groups of students were formed, based on the offense for which the student was referred, and based on whether or not the student participated in the conflict resolution program. Students were given a choice between OSS only or the reduction of the time of OSS, contingent upon on their participation in a conflict resolution program. Thus the students who participated in the program did so by choice, and as an incentive for them attending the program those students had their suspension reduced; such reductions were either from 10 days to 5 days, from 5 days to 2 days, or from 3 days to 1 day. The results indicated that the students who participated in the conflict resolution program were less likely to be re-suspended for both physical and non-physical rule violations. Among students who were referred for physical acts of aggression, those who participated in the program were two times less likely to be re-suspended. These students were also five times less likely to be re-suspended than those who were suspended for other acts of violence (i.e. verbal aggression, etc.). Further, none of the students who participated in the program were subsequently expelled,

whereas seven of the students who were suspended without participating in conflict resolution were expelled subsequent to the initial suspension. The results clearly demonstrated that a voluntary program of conflict resolution linked to OSS is more likely to have a positive effect on behavior than OSS alone. Also, while these data—like those reported previously—demonstrated OSS alone was not effective overall in the reduction of rule-violating behaviors, these results did suggest that OSS may have a place within a school's disciplinary options if coupled with a conflict resolution program (Breunlin, Cimmarusti, Bryant-Edwards & Hetherington, 2002).

Clearly, the use of programs such as conflict resolution can have a positive effect on student behavior. Whether these programs are used as an alternative to punitive consequences or as a proactive measure to prevent problem behavior there seems to be a marked measure of efficacy for such programs (Woody, 2001; Breunlin, Cimmarusti, Bryant-Edwards & Hetherington, 2002).

Functional Behavioral Assessment

What Is Functional Behavioral Assessment? Functional behavioral assessment is generally defined as an approach toward student behavior that involves gathering information about the behavior itself in relation to the environmental events that sound it, as well as the development and testing of hypotheses that explain the consequences that maintain the behavior (Ryan, Halsey & Mathews, 2003; Sugai, Lewis-Palmer, Hagan-Burke, 2000). A large number of research studies on this disciplinary approach have demonstrated positive results such as decreases in problematic behavior as well as the increases of positive behavior (March & Horner, 2002; Doggett, Edwards, Tingstrom & Wilczynski, 2002; Moore, Doggett, Edwards & Olmi, 1999), though, in the interest of time, only several of the recent studies are reviewed below.

For example, a 2002 study by March and Horner evaluated whether or not interventions that addressed the function of the behavior would be more likely to improve student behavior than a school wide intervention that did not address the function of the problem behavior. In the first phase of the study, 24 middle school students were evaluated on the frequency of discipline contacts per week as they participated in a school wide behavior intervention program. Each of the 24 participating students had been assigned to participate in the behavior education plan. These plans necessitated that each participating student check-in at the office each morning where they received a form designed to track behavior and provide an opportunity for behavioral feedback. The student was to take the form to their teachers throughout the day and subsequently returned it to the office each afternoon. This plan did not have any functional analysis component to determine the functionality of the student's misbehavior, and all students received this same intervention regardless of the function of their behavior. The results regarding effectiveness were determined by comparing the number of lunch detentions or office referrals for each student both before and after involvement in the plan. Further, the results regarding effectiveness were analyzed based on teacher responses to a checklist administered to the school personal who knew each student best after the implementation of the behavior education plan (March et al., 2000). This checklist generated a hypothesis regarding why the problem behavior was maintained (i.e. peer or adult attention, escape, etc.). Results indicated that the plan was successful mainly for students who were perceived to engage in problematic behavior in order to gain adult or peer attention. Among those students, many improved their behavior; 80% and 62.5% improved respectively. The results illustrated that the plan was less effective for students who engaged in problematic behavior in order to escape or avoid work; only 27% of those students improved. Further, 40% of the students who participated in the plan demonstrated a 50% or greater increase of problematic behavior suggesting that these students needed a more involved

intervention than this plan which did not address the function of their behavior. These students became the participants in the next phases of the study which sought to define and tailor an intervention that addressed the function of the problem behaviors.

During the second phase of the study, three students who had not demonstrated behavioral improvements with the previous plan alone were assessed and individualized interventions were implemented. A multiple baseline across students was used. The functions of the students' behavior were determined using teacher and student interviews and direct observations. Interventions were implemented tailored to each student based on the hypotheses generated. For example, if the analysis suggested that a student's problem behavior was maintained by attention from the teacher or peers, the interventions offered increased attention, contingent upon appropriate behavior. It should be noted here that these students were not demonstrating overtly aggressive or violent behaviors; rather they were typically demonstrating rather mild behaviors such as attention seeking behaviors. Other interventions included manipulation of setting events, and rewards withheld contingent on problematic behavior. Each of these students demonstrated a decrease of problematic. Across all three students the problematic behavior decreased and the academic engagement increased to levels comparable to that of other members within the class. Clearly, when taken together, the results of both phases indicate that although a school wide behavioral support system may be effective for decreasing certain problem behaviors, analysis of the functions of a student's behavior may be more likely to result in improvements in behavior for certain students (March & Horner, 2002).

Doggett, Edwards, Moore, Tingstrom, and Wilczynski (2001) also looked at the effectiveness of functional analysis of behavior for reducing problem behaviors. Again, the problem behaviors under study here were rather mild problem behaviors rather than overt hostility or aggression. Participants were two boys in two general education elementary classrooms whose problem behaviors included out of seat and inappropriate teacher and peer engagement. The researchers used both interviews with the teachers and direct observation to assess behaviors. Once hypotheses were generated, they were verified by teacher implemented manipulation of peer and teacher attention. A single subject, ABAB design was implemented for each student. Both students demonstrated a reduction in problematic behavior contingent upon the manipulation of teacher and peer attention (Doggett, Edwards, Tingstrom & Wilczynski, 2002).

These studies, and many others, demonstrate convincingly that functional analysis of behavior can be an effective classroom intervention to reduce certain types of problematic behavior. Further, March and Horner (2002) demonstrated that a functional analysis of behavior was more likely to result in positive behavioral change than other interventions. However, the research has not yet addressed many questions on the use of functional analysis as a disciplinary approach.

Second Generation Questions

Although there is a plethora research on the effectiveness of functional analysis of behavior for students who have mild or severe behavior disorders, there is less data on use of this intervention for highly aggressive students. Further, there is generally a lack of such a wealth of research on students without disabilities or even students with high incidence disabilities (Reid & Nelson, 2002). Consequently, there are a few questions that remain unanswered regarding FBA implementation in such populations that center on the core premise behind FBA, usability of FBA in a large classroom, and teacher use.

First, it is important to address the use of functional analysis of behavior for students who exhibit aggression or other serious behavioral offences. The use of this approach generally requires that the target behavior be observed on a recurrent basis in order to establish meaningful hypotheses before introduction of an intervention. This becomes difficult when the behavior itself may result in removal from school, or at the very least placement in an OSS program.

Also, there is an issue of time and resources regarding the use of functional analysis of behavior in general education classrooms. In most studies where efficacy of this approach is demonstrated in general education classes, there was a highly trained researcher/observer in the classroom. Would application of functional behavior assessment be feasible with only one teacher in a general education classroom? Although teacher feedback in these studies has been positive, it is noteworthy that this feedback did not center on a question of whether or not the practices could be implemented without the assistance of a highly trained observer/researcher.

With these second generation questions in mind, certainly more research on applications of functional behavioral analysis will be needed. While this disciplinary approach is very useful for many types of behavior problems, more research is needed with the use of this procedure with the more highly aggressive students in the schools.

Strength Based Assessment

Another recently developed alternative is strength based assessment (Epstein, 1998; 1999). Traditionally, students with the most severe behavioral difficulties may have been referred for some type of assessment to pin-point these areas of weakness. These assessments often yield a litany of academic and behavioral weaknesses that can be very exact regarding what is, in essence, wrong with the student. However, professionals are often unsure what to do with such data, and this list of problems does not seem to lend itself to development of effective behavioral interventions. Moreover, because the problems demonstrated by many highly aggressive students are often very similar, it seems to some practitioners that these descriptions of behavior problems are almost interchangeable from one student to another.

Strength based assessment offers a different approach to assessment of students who demonstrate aggressive and other problem behaviors (Epstein, 1998; 1999). This innovation approach involves analysis of areas of strength that the student demonstrates. These strengths center on their accomplishments, relationships with others, and varying abilities. In strength based assessment, these results can then be used to develop interventions for the students that truly build upon these areas.

This type of assessment also invites participation from family members and others close to the student as there seem to be positive ways in which all can help the student build upon strengths while conversely increasing areas that may not be as strong. Epstein and Sharma (1998) have developed the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale a standardized norm referenced measure for use in strength based assessment. It is intended for use with students who have either emotional or behavioral disorders (Epstein & Sharma, 1998). This assessment allows for professionals to have strength based assessment that is easy to use while being both valid and reliable.

Rudolph and Epstein (2000) describe such an approach and intervention with a 9th grade student— Jake-- who has a history of highly aggressive behavior and who had been referred for treatment at a local mental health facility. By using strength based assessment an analysis of Jake’s strengths and areas of interest were developed, as well as areas where he needed more support. From this list of his strengths a team was able to improve upon and maintain his areas of strength by planning for him to become a math tutor, to join the school basketball team, to volunteer within his community, and to spend more quality time with his grandparents. Further Jake would participate in anger management, meet with a school counselor, and eat dinner with his family at least three times per week. This type of assessment allowed for a plan to be developed for Jake where many different parties were involved and where his strengths were built upon in order to foster improvement in the subsequent areas of weakness (Rudolf & Epstein, 2000).

This approach to assessing the strengths of students who exhibit problematic behavior seems to demonstrate results that would be viable for use in real behavioral change among aggressive students (Epstein, 1998; 1999; Rudolf & Epstein, 2000). Clearly more research is needed prior to suggesting this approach as a practical alternative to either OSS or ISS within the field. However, innovative approaches such as this may hold to key to development of effective alternatives for discipline of highly aggressive students.

Summary

Educators have historically utilized an array of disciplinary options for highly aggressive students that have been developed over the entire history of public schools. However, today educators must base decisions regarding discipline on the effectiveness of the practices used, and at this time the research reviewed here does not support the continued use of traditional approaches such as OSS and ISS. Given the legal attention which has always followed disciplinary policy (Telzrow, 2001; Troyan, 2003; Ziekkel, 2003), administrators who continue to use unsupported interventions such as these may find themselves subject to legal action.

In contrast, the research on a variety of promising practices seems to suggest that there are appropriate alternatives to OSS and ISS. These may include strength based assessment and/or functional behavioral analysis and interventions, or alternative programs focused on development of positive relationships between teachers and students. Further, the most troubled students seem to do better in alternative schools where there is a caring staff, offering a highly flexible program. There needs to be further research on all of these promising practices, in order for system administrators to have solid research on which to base their disciplinary decisions.

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[Return to the Table of Contents](#)