

Schoolwide Positive Behaviour Support: The Positive Effects and Barriers to Sustainability

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Abstract

Schoolwide positive behaviour support (SWPBS) programs have proven to be largely effective at reducing problem behaviour in schools. Full implementation of SWPBS has been associated with positive behavioural and academic outcomes. However, despite their effectiveness, implementation rates of SWPBS remain low. For SWPBS to be sustained, a number of barriers need to be addressed. Insufficient investment from school administrators, staff buy-in, and school culture are the main barriers to successful implementation. By attending to these barriers, the chances of successful implementation of SWPBS are enhanced.

Schoolwide positive behaviour support (SWPBS) programs are among the most promising approaches currently used to address challenging behaviour in school, though they are not without their challenges. SWPBS is a proactive, positive approach to managing behaviour that focuses on managing the learning environment, controlling consequences, and teaching replacement behaviours that reduce problems and promote learning (Chitiyo & Wheeler, 2009). SWPBS programs manage student behaviour by creating schoolwide positive behavioural expectations, and providing reinforcement for students who meet those expectations (Bradshaw et al., 2010). When implemented with fidelity, SWPBS leads to positive student and schoolwide behavioural outcomes (Gage et al., 2017). SWPBS holds an advantage over traditional, punitive behaviour management programs, which can lead to worse behavioural outcomes in the long run (Amemiya et al., 2020). Additionally, one of the side effects of SWPBS appears to be improved academic outcomes (Bradshaw et al., 2010). However, despite their success, SWPBS programs are typically not sustained beyond a few years. Multiple barriers impact the successful implementation and sustainability of SWPBS. As with many new school initiatives, lack of administrator involvement and leadership, negative staff attitudes, and pre-existing school culture and structure represent some of the main barriers to implementation (Chitiyo et al., 2019). While SWPBS holds great potential for curbing problem behaviour at school, the barriers to implementation make it difficult to sustain over time.

The Positive Effect of SWPBS

Implementation of SWPBS in schools has proven to be beneficial at multiple levels of analysis. SWPBS interventions are schoolwide, and include classroom interventions, non-classroom supports, family and community connections, and individualized interventions for specific students (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Through creating schoolwide plans that describe positive behavioural expectations, and providing incentives to students who meet those expectations, SWPBS is a consistent, effective strategy for managing student behaviour (Bradshaw et al., 2010). When compared to other, more punitive behaviour modification programs, SWPBS advances beyond reactive responses, and is more effective in managing problem behaviour at school (Caldarella et al., 2011). Beyond its immediate focus, SWPBS is effective in improving academic outcomes for students, by removing behavioural barriers to education (Gage et al., 2017). By shifting focus away from punishment, and toward universal positive expectations, SWPBS is an effective approach to improving behavioural and academic outcomes.

Any programmatic effort to manage disruptive behaviour at school needs to demonstrate its effectiveness. Though still relatively new in many regions, SWPBS holds a robust and growing evidence base to support its implementation (Gage et al., 2017). Recent findings indicate that implementation SWPBS is associated with a decrease in office disciplinary referrals, a decrease in suspensions, and an increase in students' sense of safety at school (Bradshaw et al., 2010). SWPBS approaches to managing student opposition have been successful in curbing defiance, and promoting positive replacement behaviours for some of the toughest students (Hall & Hall, 2003). In addition to decreased problem behaviour, SWPBS has a positive impact on the school climate and it promotes pro-social student behaviour. Schools where SWPBS is implemented demonstrate better problem-solving skills by their students, and are more efficient in their ability to deescalate and support students who engage in negative behaviour (Caldarella et al., 2011). Many schools struggle to put together a coordinated response to challenging behaviour. SWPBS organizes the smallest amount of evidence-based interventions necessary, and implements them with high fidelity (Sugai & Horner, 2009). When focusing on a limited number of universal interventions, schools using high fidelity SWPBS can clearly articulate to students what behaviours are expected throughout the school, and can start to establish community norms. High fidelity SWPBS has the greatest potential for positive behaviour modification and long-term sustainability (Kim et al., 2018). SWPBS has shown to be effective in reducing problem behaviour and promoting a positive climate at schools.

SWPBS offers a positive, effective alternative to punitive behaviour management systems. While SWPBS and traditional, punitive behaviour management programs are both effective in reducing problem behaviour, SWPBS programs are significantly more effective in their pursuit (DeJager et al., 2020). For many traditional school professionals, punitive behaviour management systems are the norm in their buildings. Despite their popularity, these systems tend to lead to increased defiant behaviour in the classroom, especially for students who previously had positive attachment to school (Amemiya et al., 2020). SWPBS programs, when implemented with fidelity, have been effective in reducing office disciplinary referrals, and increasing feelings of safety at school (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Even small-scale examples of positive behaviour support programs, such as token economies (using small rewards to motivate students to engage in positive behaviours and eliminate negative behaviours), are more effective than the punitive approach of negative reinforcement for unwanted behaviour (DeJager, et al., 2020). While punitive behaviour management systems may be more familiar, SWPBS is more effective in reducing problem behaviour.

While SWPBS is fundamentally concerned with reducing problem behaviour at schools, there are academic advantages that accompany implementation of the program. Many school staff are inclined to believe that there is a tradeoff between academic success and positive behaviour support (Lohrmann et al., 2008). However, most children need to feel safe and supported at school before they are ready to learn (Hall & Hall, 2003). While any positive changes in academics are distal, sustained SWPBS programming seems to be associated with improved academic performance (Bradshaw et al., 2010). By reducing behaviour exclusion, students are exposed to more classroom instruction, which leads to higher academic achievement in schools where SWPBS is implemented (Gage et al., 2017). In fact, schools that implement high fidelity SWPBS can predict significant academic growth the longer they sustain the program (Kim et al., 2018). In Gage's (2017) study of approximately 2,033 schools and 10 years of data, sustained implementation of SWPBS led to significant improvement in both reading and mathematics. There are both academic and behavioural benefits of implementing SWPBS in schools.

SWPBS holds a great deal of potential to decrease negative school behaviour and promote positive alternatives. It is built on the principles of prevention, continuous behavioural support for all students, and commitment to environmental and systemic change (Caldarella et al., 2011). These principles are implemented through interventions that outline universal school expectations, provide incentives to meet those expectations, and modify environmental factors

to promote student success (Bradshaw et al., 2010). These interventions are extremely effective in reducing problem behaviours, improving overall quality of school life, and promoting appropriate social behaviour (Caldarella et al., 2011). When compared to other behaviour modification programs, specifically more punitive programs, the benefits of SWPBS are clear. An added bonus to the behavioural outcomes of SWPBS is the academic benefits that accrue because students are better able to access learning activities without the distraction of problem behaviour (Gage et al., 2017). The benefits of SWPBS are clearly documented, and many school districts are in favour of implementation. However, the implementation of the practices and principles of SWPBS remains low (Chitiyo et al., 2019). For SWPBS to be successful, a better understanding of the barriers to implementation and sustainability is necessary.

The Barriers to SWPBS Implementation and Sustainability

While the benefits of SWPBS are evident, significant barriers to implementation exist. Many school personnel agree with the principles of SWPBS, but see the path toward implementation as daunting. Among the many barriers to implementation, three of the major hurdles reflect the core values of SWPBS (Kincaid et al., 2007). Sustained investment from the school administrator is crucial in adopting new practices, including SWPBS (Lohrmann et al., 2008). Staff confidence, ability, and attitude toward implementing SWPBS can often present a barrier to successful implementation (Lohrmann et al., 2008). Since SWPBS involves evaluating and readjusting environmental factors in the school, structural and environmental barriers can interfere with implementation (Chitiyo & Wheeler, 2009). These barriers need to be understood and mitigated in order for SWPBS to be implemented and sustained.

School administrators, by way of their position, can serve as key facilitators or barriers to implementing SWPBS. For school personnel, administrative commitment to SWPBS is pivotal to its success (Bambara et al., 2009). Administrators are often the catalyst for school change. However, it is not uncommon for administrators to resist change passively by delegating the implementation of SWPBS to others, and separating their role from the project (Forman et al., 2009). For SWPBS to succeed, it is important for administrators to have the knowledge of SWPBS, and the ability to implement schoolwide changes. Beyond their managerial skills, administrators need to be the instructional leaders of their schools, and to have a positive attitude about the interventions (Forman et al., 2009). Perhaps most importantly, administrators play the biggest role in supporting school staff in implementing SWPBS at the classroom level. Administrators play a crucial role in providing the necessary resources, training, and release time for staff to implement SWPBS. Beyond the tangible support, moral support and active participation in team decision making makes successful implementation possible (Bambara et al., 2009). For these reasons, the role of the school administrator in the success of SWPBS programs cannot be understated.

Unsurprisingly, implementing SWPBS without adequate staff buy-in severely hinders any chance of its success. Staff confidence in their abilities, and their attitudes toward the effectiveness of SWPBS, are essential factors to consider for SWPBS to be sustainable long term (Chitiyo et al., 2019). For many professionals, implementing SWPBS may require changing their practice, which can be uncomfortable for them. If teachers are not confident, they may abandon the practices of SWPBS and resort to traditional, punitive behaviour management practices (Chitiyo et al., 2019). Another barrier to staff buy-in is lack of training in SWPBS. Inadequate staff training in SWPBS methods and interventions can decrease staff confidence, and make them reluctant to implement new strategies (Bambara et al., 2009). Most teachers are not taught the principles of SWPBS during their university training, and unless they have regular professional development on the topic they will not be prepared to sustain SWPBS practices over time (Chitiyo et al., 2019). Lastly, many staff fail to see the relative advantage of SWPBS practices. For staff to buy into SWPBS practices, they need to see the positive impact of the interventions (Forman et al., 2009). Implementors also need to control for the idea that there is a

tradeoff between SWPBS practices and academic priorities (Lohrmann et al., 2008). In order to track the positive gains in both the academic and behavioural domains, SWPBS implementation needs to include extensive data collection and representation. Cultivating staff buy-in is crucial for the implementation and sustainability of SWPBS.

School culture and structure can hold major barriers for the implementation and sustainability of SWPBS. Schools, and school staff by association, are locked into a rigid yearly and daily schedule. Because school staff need to be confident in using the SWPBS mode, they require additional training, collaboration, and follow-up to ensure its success (Chitiyo et al., 2019). School personnel often experience SWPBS activities as labor intensive and time consuming, and thus indicate that they do not have adequate time to sustain the practice (Bambara et al., 2009). Philosophical misunderstanding of SWPBS is another common challenge found in the culture of schools. When the philosophical beliefs of a school are in line with the principles of SWPBS, successful implementation is more likely (Forman et al., 2009). A common example of philosophical misunderstanding is misperception of what constitutes effective behaviour management at the schoolwide level (Bambara et al., 2009). Many school staff experience frustration and hopelessness when interventions fail, and fall back on punitive consequences for behaviour (Lohrmann et al., 2008). For others, the principles of SWPBS are viewed as unfair: they see the interventions as giving special treatment to students who behave badly (Bambara et al.). These philosophical difference and misunderstandings need to be addressed with data supporting the effectiveness of SWPBS interventions in order for barriers in the culture and structure of schools to be mitigated.

Conclusion

High fidelity SWPBS holds the capacity to transform behavioural and academic outcomes for all students. As a universal system, SWPBS defines and promotes expected behaviours, and emphasizes adjustment of the learning environment and reinforcing positive behaviour change (Chitiyo & Wheeler, 2009). SWPBS is associated with large, sustainable changes in multiple positive behaviour outcomes, including decreased office discipline referrals, decreased suspensions, and increased pro-social attitudes (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Even small examples of SWPBS, such as token economies to reinforce expected behaviour, are quite effective in curbing problem behaviour in the classroom (DeJager et al., 2020). In opposition to punitive behaviour management systems, the principles of SWPBS consider the systemic conditions and multiple variables that impact student behaviour, rather than simply focusing on the individual child (Chitiyo & Wheeler, 2009). In doing so, SWPBS is far more effective in managing problem behaviour across the school system, and creating an enhanced learning environment for students. Schools that implement and sustain SWPBS have demonstrated higher academic achievement by reducing problem behaviour and thus exposing students to more instruction (Gage et al., 2017). The positive effects of SWPBS student behaviour and academics are well documented, but full implementation and sustainability remain a challenge.

Despite widespread support, SWPBS implementation and sustainability faces many barriers. SWPBS focuses on delivering universal supports that require system-wide coordination and high fidelity to ensure quality implementation (Kim et al., 2018). School administrators can become passive barrier against successful implementation (Forman et al., 2003). As the main school leaders, administrators are the drivers of change, and administrative support for SWPBS is seen as crucial for its sustainability (Bambara et al., 2009). School staff are not usually trained in implementing SWPBS, and their attitudes and beliefs can act as a major barrier implementation. For SWPBS to be successfully implemented and sustained, school staff need to be confident in their abilities, and believe that their efforts to implement SWPBS will be successful (Lohrmann et al., 2008). Collaboration and universal consistent reinforcement of positive behaviours is necessary for high fidelity SWPBS success (Parrish, 2018). Pre-existing school structures and culture can make this difficult, and present another barrier to

implementation. Beyond the fact that there is limited time in the school year for additional training, personal and community beliefs regarding proper discipline can make it difficult to sustain SWPBS (Bambara et al., 2009). It will be up to school and system leaders to prioritize the implementation and sustainability of SWPBS, and ensure that adequate training and resources are made available for its success. Even though the success of SWPBS is evident, careful consideration of the barriers is essential for long-term sustainability.

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