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High School Student Perceptions of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports

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HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF POSITIVE BEHAVIOR INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Education
at the University of Kentucky

By

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Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Margaret Mohr-Schroeder, Professor of STEM Education

Lexington, Kentucky

2023

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF POSITIVE BEHAVIOR INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

This case study examines student voice and their interpretations of the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework used in one Kentucky high school. Qualitative interview data from high school student focus groups was analyzed using grounded theory to develop themes related to PBIS implementation.

Using open and axial coding, themes were developed from common student interpretations of PBIS within focus groups. Participants discussed a variety of positive techniques teachers use inside the classroom and responses to student behavior. Reward systems were discussed, but more importantly students offered suggestions of interventions and supports to offer at school. When asked to define PBIS, participants focused on how to prevent and respond to behavioral needs of students.

KEYWORDS: PBIS, High School, Focus Groups, Student Voice, Case Study, Grounded Theory.

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10/09/2023
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DEDICATION

To the first-generation college students, keep going to make it happen.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) offers a flexible multitiered framework that has the potential to influence student experiences. Schools using a PBIS framework first establish school-wide student expectations, creating a baseline for desired behaviors within that school, followed by a proactive approach to discipline. As expectations are initially taught and retaught, both students and teachers are key players in how information will be understood through the school. These expectations are used as a guide to correct student behavior in a restorative reteaching practice by teachers and administration. Tier one consists of the larger portion of students that are meeting the expectations articulated by administration and teachers within the school, tier two students are those that need additional support to meet those expectations who may have received documented discipline infractions, and tier three students are those that move from the previous category who need more intense form of interventions and supports to meet the expectations. This framework divides the population of the school as roughly 80% in tier one, 15% in tier two, and 5% in tier three. PBIS implementation happens both school-wide and in individual classrooms. School staff receive training and support from the local and district levels to help facilitate the teaching and reteaching of expectations and restorative practices to discipline. However, the student's interpretations of expectations may not be sought out by school staff when addressing any changes to discipline practices. Opinions on how and what information is delivered to students is mainly derived from staff experiences. Reviews of procedures and office disciplinary data are frequently used for decision making related to teaching expectations, but student perceptions of PBIS are not reflected in those changes. Administrators, counselors,

teachers, and school staff are all critical stakeholders for using the PBIS framework, as are the students.

Interpretation can vary from person to person in any lesson, and this can be true for expectations as well. Student perspectives should be part of the discussion in the teaching and reteaching process. Some schools include student PBIS teams or individuals to act as advocates for the student population. Still, there is little research available that captures student voices regarding the PBIS framework, interventions, and supports.

Problem Statement

A review of the available studies on implementation practices of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), center around at rates of fidelity, effects of office disciplinary data (ODR) (Bohanon et al., 2006; KB Flannery, Fenning, Kato, & McIntosh, 2014; Malloy, Bohanon, & Francoeur, 2018; Mathews, McIntosh, Frank, & May, 2014; Netzel & Eber, 2003), and academic success rates of students (Freeman et al., 2016; Gage, Sugai, Lewis, & Brzozowy, 2015; Madigan, Cross, Smolkowski, & Strycker, 2016). Although there is research about the implementation and sustainability practices of PBIS, how and what students perceive as PBIS interventions and supports remain mostly unknown. A lack of inquiries into student experiences leaves a gap of understanding about which strategies are viewed as effective for students and how they are understood by them. There may be aspects of the PBIS framework not emphasized by teachers and administration in their school that students consider important indicators of a successful partnership. Students should be given an opportunity to express what is important to them within the context of their school experience to help teachers know what may have a positive impact on student behavior in the classroom. Gaining this information is needed for school stakeholders to explore the direct impact PBIS can have

on schools, particularly to understand the impact on student experiences both school-wide and inside the classroom.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to identify and better understand high school student perceptions about the implementation of PBIS and what they describe as positive behavior interventions and supports used by adults. Student involvement is critical to inform the research about these perceptions and their experiences interacting with adults at school. The proposed study will seek to find information about the following research questions:

1. What are high school students' perceptions about the implementation of the PBIS framework, both school-wide and in individual classrooms?
2. What do students recognize as positive behavior interventions and supports?

Significance

Behaviorism informs this research because the PBIS framework uses behavioral management techniques to control student behavior, but students also construct their own realities based on their lived social experiences in classrooms with PBIS components, or lack thereof. Student behaviors are rooted in previous experiences, both in school and at home. Behaviorism theory says that an observed behavior is not only a behavior, but a response to the environment in which it happens (Moore, 2011). Both the environment surrounding the individual, and how the individual perceives the environment, can impact behavior (Skinner, 1985).

Establishing rules or expectations and following them with positive or negative consequences helps an individual understand their environment. Knowledge of expectations and previous experiences help to control or adapt to future actions. The

PBIS framework is used to establish desired student behavior but may also change social interactions between teachers and students (Bohanon et al., 2006). Providing a positive climate for learning can help those that struggle with behavior issues and those without. Changes in behaviors can be based on the existence or lack of incentives and rewards (Bear, 2013). Studies show a promising relationship between systematic enforcement of good behaviors, through both verbal and physical tokens of acknowledgements from administrators, teachers, and other staff (Lewis, Sugai, & Colvin, 1998; Sugai & Chanter, 1989). A benefit of this behavior training changes mindsets of students from thinking about a list of wrongdoings, to showcasing available ways they can be rewarded or recognized (Horner et al., 1990).

Bandura (1977) states, "Because acquisition of response information is a major aspect of learning, much human behavior is developed through modeling" (p. 192). Bear (2013) remarks that special education teachers are trained with a behaviorism focus whereas other teachers may be trained with a student-centered approach (p.321). Students conceptualize their reality from past interactions with others and within their environments. If there is a lack of consistency between expectations and reality, learned behaviors may adapt to what is modeled by those within the environment. Cobern (1993) summarizes this as, "We learn by making sense of what is experienced" (p.109). Using PBIS as a framework for teaching expectations can produce a consistent environment for addressing student behaviors and for students to receive feedback, but each classroom contains unique experiences depending on interactions between teacher and students.

A positive rapport with students not only builds a teacher's perceived efficacy in the classroom, but it could translate to student success. Interviews from a study by Friend and Caruthers (2012) indicated that when students feel that teachers care and hold them

to a higher standard, they will work harder to meet expectations. Support and encouragement motivate students to be academically successful (Sanders, 1998). In combination with understanding boundaries and expectations through PBIS school-wide practices, perceived teacher support can increase motivation for student growth (Wentzel, Battle, Russell, & Looney, 2010).

In a well-implemented PBIS program, expectations become the universal language spoken through scripts or in the direct interactions of staff and students (Netzel & Eber, 2003). Friend and Caruthers (2012) used the grounded theory approach with observations and interviews to gain an understanding and discover patterns around high school student experiences related to teacher-student interactions. Students expressed wanting higher academic expectations and a reduction in classroom disruptions. Also, students in the study wanted teachers to build personal relationships and show they cared about them beyond the classroom. By gaining student voice in this study, the researchers used their data to show that students used the interviews as opportunities to clear up possible misconceptions about what they need emotionally to feel successful in the school (Friend & Caruthers, 2012). Regular acknowledgement and understanding of expectations can lead to desired behaviors and better teacher-student relationships (Mathews et al., 2014).

Teachers need behavioral expectations to build a learning environment that includes positive interactions with students. A study by Sanders (1998) revealed that students' perceived understanding of expectations from parents, teachers, and the community empowers reflection and the acceptance of help to prevent and correct behavioral issues at school. Reinforcing good behavior is another way to indirectly teach social skills and build positive interactions. In an observational study of high schools in

Maryland, Cash, Debnam, Waasdorp, Wahl, and Bradshaw (2019) found that proactive and positive adult interactions in non-classroom areas reduced negative student behaviors. Rewards alone are not solely responsible for motivation, more importantly, combinations of rewards and interventions have a lasting impact on student behavior (Payne, 2015). Using both verbal and physical tokens of acknowledgements from administrators, teachers, and other staff, studies showed a promising relationship between a systematic enforcement of good behaviors (Lewis et al., 1998; Sugai & Chanter, 1989). Reinforcing good behaviors promotes a less punitive environment in the classroom and helps to build positive rapport between teachers and students.

Not only is PBIS changing the mindset of a student's social behavior, but it is also changing the teacher's social interactions with the students. Providing a positive climate for learning can help those that struggle with behavior issues and those without. A universal plan of prevention and support has no boundaries for who it reaches, therefore the whole school can benefit if all stakeholders are involved. Shared visions among participating members of a school's network can encourage shared accountability (Anderson, 2010). An atmosphere in a school can impact student perceptions about school processes, disciplinary procedures, interactions among students, and interactions among teachers. Students can pick up on adult connections within a school climate and it can change how they behave (Cash et al., 2019). A study by Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, and Johnson (2014) showed that as problem behaviors decrease, school climates improve. Students are not the only group to benefit from these changes. High fidelity in the implementation of PBIS strategies is tied to improvements in school climate (Bohanon et al., 2006; Elrod, Rice, & Meyers, 2022). Raising the quality of a work environment can lower emotional exhaustion and lead to higher job satisfaction

(Anderson, 2010). Creating a positive atmosphere where expectations are clear provides a space for healthy interactions in the school culture, including those between teachers and students.

Studies capturing student perspectives have shown that students are able to contribute constructive feedback, including both good and bad, about school programs (Bosworth, Garcia, Judkins, & Saliba, 2017; Fisher & Frey, 2012; Friend & Caruthers, 2012; Nelson, Ysseldyke, & Christ, 2015; Voight, 2015). Voight (2015) used in-depth interviews with small groups of ten students and three adults to gain perspectives about a schoolwide program, leading to better relationships and improved school climate. Schools with training in PBIS have positive and collaborative climates where teachers work together to focus on good student behaviors (Bradshaw, Koth, Bevans, Ialongo, & Leaf, 2008; Houchens et al., 2014). Sharing responsibility through collaboration gives way to a reduction in fear of failure for individual teachers (Galosy & Gillespie, 2013; Penuel, Riel, Krause, & Frank, 2009). When given the proper tools and training, improving teacher efficacy for behavior concerns can reduce emotional exhaustion and lead to higher job satisfaction (Bullough, 2007; Zee & Koomen, 2016). Cultivating this atmosphere in the classroom is important for both students and teachers.

Study Overview

One way to understand the impact on student experiences is to ask students directly. This case study includes one high school, selected from a large district located in Kentucky. By 2014, the PBIS framework was implemented in this district and the case study school, with continued use through the Spring of 2023. Each school in the district has an appointed PBIS coach, assigned administrator, and staff team to establish expectations for the school, implement incentive programs, support professional

development and complete discipline data reviews during monthly PBIS meetings. The district has a team of support staff designated to help facilitate training for school PBIS teams and offer additional support, as needed.

For this study, students from the case study school were invited to participate in a focus group about their perceptions of PBIS. Interview questions sought out ways students understand or define PBIS procedures that take place within their classrooms and school-wide. Semi-structured interview questions provided the structure necessary to elicit conversations about PBIS, but the process was flexible to uncover directions introduced by the participant. Additional follow-up questions developed during the interviews, considering the previously unknown opinions of students. The interview purpose was to uncover student perspectives during the process, therefore adding, or adapting questions was necessary.

Limitations

Even though the potential for findings would fill in gaps for student voice in the field of PBIS research, limitations should be considered. One limitation is the selection of only one school for this project. The small sample size of participants invited to participate in the focus groups was not representative of the entire school. Purposeful sampling was not used during this study because student perceptions are mostly unknown, but a future study could look at disparities with certain groups and their perceptions of PBIS implementation.

Behavior data of these student participants was not collected, therefore perspectives from students with a variety of behavior levels may not be represented. Students that chose not to participate may not know what PBIS is or may have been resistant to consent if they do not believe in the PBIS framework. Discipline data will not

be cross-referenced in this study but would be beneficial to compare in future studies. Self-reported information from interviews and focus groups can also skew results. Even with these considerations, gaining student perspectives about PBIS procedures is valuable and largely unreported.

Organization of Dissertation

This dissertation contains five chapters. In Chapter 1, the study is presented with reasonable explanation supporting the need for student voices on PBIS implementation and practices. Chapter 2 provides a review of literature on the implementation of PBIS. Chapter 3 presents the detailed methodology for the study, including how student voice was captured using focus groups. Chapter 4 includes a discussion about findings from data collected and themes generated using grounded theory. Chapter 5 presents limitations to the present study and future studies that can add to conclusions found in this research.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational research explores a variety of components in public school systems. Discipline concerns are a priority for schools, and as expectations rise for student achievement, the pressure to implement change weighs heavily on educators and administrators. An obstacle some teachers face is the inability to prevent negative behaviors and to maintain a positive learning environment. Walker et al. (1996) asserts that negative student behaviors can "poison the school environment and lower the quality of life for students and staff alike" (p. 195). Fortunately, researchers linked the use of preventative behavioral management frameworks to promote inclusion for all students and address issues of school environments (R. H. Horner et al., 1990; Horner et al., 2014; Sugai et al., 1999; Sugai & Horner, 2006; Walker et al., 1996). As the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework gained popularity in the early 2000s, many studies investigated connections between implementation and the impact on schools. A review of literature surrounding the use and the theories behind PBIS, and the implementation are discussed in the next sections.

A Brief History of PBIS

Traditional behavior management plans contain strict and punitive punishments, creating a reactive culture within schools where administrators prescribe discipline instead of seeking preventative measures to reduce poor behavior in the future (Walker et al., 1996). The lack of guidance from adults on how students should act perpetuates the problem, leaving them at risk of exhibiting the same or escalating behavior later in life (Lewis et al., 1998). To offer inclusion to all students, researchers examined the influences of using Effective Behavioral Support (EBS) a systematic approach to equip teachers with positive coaching strategies to limit undesired social behaviors (Lewis &

Sugai, 1999). Using both verbal and physical tokens of acknowledgements from administrators, teachers, and other staff, studies showed a promising relationship between a systematic enforcement of good behaviors (Lewis et al., 1998; Sugai & Chanter, 1989). A benefit of this social training is changing the mindsets of students from thinking about a list of wrongdoings, to showcasing available ways they can be rewarded or recognized (R. H. Horner et al., 1990). After the inception of EBS, the emphasis moved from effective management strategies to reducing risk and antisocial behaviors through prevention methods (R. H. Horner et al., 1990; Walker et al., 1996). Also based in behavioral theory, Positive Behavioral Supports (PBS) emerged as a promising framework used by schools to improve school life for both students exhibiting challenging behaviors and the general student population, all while treating both groups of students with the same level of respect (Horner et. al, 1990).

A call to action was made to incorporate practices into a universal model that would meet all students' needs (Walker et al., 1996). With the adoption of the Student with Disabilities Act (1997) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997, a consensus on the comprehensive behavior management system was needed (Dunlap, Kincaid, Horner, Knoster, & Bradshaw, 2014). A grant following the 1997 legislation provided funding for training and implementation of the new Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework, the marriage between EBS and PBS used in an educational context (Dunlap et al., 2014). Instead of only having a specialized approach for a subset of students, PBIS contained a broad preventative framework that could benefit entire schools, with a specialized focus to provide additional supports for students based on a multi-tiered intervention. This positive change in thinking prompts students to have a mindset to achieve behavioral goals, rather than

expecting punishments. The brilliance behind these proactive behavior plans is the adaptability for schools, making it an accessible method for changing individual behaviors (R. H. Horner et al., 1990). Although the PBIS has seemingly gone through a variety of name changes, (e.g., EBS, PBS, PBIS, IPBIS, PWPBIS, and SWPBIS) the main the transition from a management plan to a proactive school-wide framework, gave way to the new title PBIS (Dunlap et al., 2014).

As the adoption of PBIS became widespread in the United States, researchers began studying key aspects of the framework including the rate of implementation, universal team efforts, office disciplinary referral rates, and student achievement to define limitations or sustainability practices (Coffey & Horner, 2012; Mathews et al., 2014; McIntosh et al., 2014). Within much of the literature, these have been interrelated in both short and longitudinal studies. Several different quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches are scattered throughout the literature looking at different angles to gather information. Survey and observational data tools are included to define implementation and sustainability practices with some including qualitative measures to substantiate perspectives from stakeholders.

Implementing with Fidelity

As is true with most new processes, the degree of implementation of the PBIS framework influences the level of success (Bethune, 2017). Using different instruments, School-wide Evaluation Tool (SET) (Horner et al., 2004) and Benchmarks of Quality (BoQ) (Cohen, Kincaid, & Childs, 2007) can determine the levels of implementation for the school-wide PBIS program. SET scores consist of interviews, document reviews and observations from an outside evaluator to determine the level of PBIS implementation from observational data and interviews with staff, students, and administrators at a school

(Horner et. al, 2004). BoQ is a self-assessment used by a school's PBIS team to evaluate areas of focus and level of implementation (Cohen et al., 2007; Kincaid, Childs, Blase, & Wallace, 2007). Questions on both BoQ and the SET instruments are internally statistically reliable. These scores seem to be more prevalent in the literature from the early 2000s and BoQ began appearing both independently and as a complement to SET. Although there are other tools presented in literature (e.g. TELL surveys, TIC, and other self-assessments) the BoQ and SET had the highest frequency for attempting to build connections between organizational health, implementation fidelity, and academic achievement. In several studies, SET scores were not independently predictive of Organizational Health Inventory (OHI) or implementation fidelity (Bradshaw et al., 2008; Bradshaw, Koth, Thornton, & Leaf, 2009). Information gathered from this tool was helpful at the holistic level but without controlling other information, it was difficult to be used as a solid source of information. Self-reporting is a possible limitation of SET, even with outside expert observations (Bradshaw et al., 2009). Houchens et al. (2014), found that "BoQ fidelity scores uniquely predicted academic achievement after controlling for years of PBIS implementation and school demographic variables" (p. 175). Approaching but not achieving a high level of fidelity was also connected to school improvement and student achievement (Bohanon et al., 2006; Gage et al., 2015).

PBIS is considered implemented with high fidelity when the BoQ and SET scores are above 80% and 70%, respectively. Studies have indicated that high levels of fidelity based on SET or BoQ scores have lower rates of office disciplinary referrals (Bohanon et al., 2006; KB Flannery et al., 2014; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Malloy et al., 2018; Netzel & Eber, 2003). Size of schools can make a difference in the length of time and difficulty needed to achieve high fidelity. Smaller schools, like elementary level, can take

a few years to reach fidelity but high schools range from 5-8 years (KB Flannery et al., 2014). High schools have a larger population of staff and students which can consequently accumulate more discipline problems (Bohanon et al., 2006). A larger school size can impede efforts towards school-wide implementation because it takes longer for information to flow between stakeholders within the school. Some studies showed that regardless of fidelity scores, gains for school improvement may be possible (Houchens et al., 2014).

Many variables lead to the inconsistency of fidelity predictions in the research, such as the length and type of study, size of schools, demographic information, school connectedness, existing climate, and the list goes on. Schools are made up of several unique individuals and experiences, so many limitations can hinder the nature of extending these predictions across schools. Trends in studies revealed the potential for a decrease in office disciplinary referrals, gains in student and teacher interactions, connections to student achievement, and among these was a promising result of teachers reporting more satisfaction in their jobs and leadership after implementation of PBIS (Houchens et al., 2014). Even given the vastness of studies, there is still a gap for student voice related to experiences and perceptions around implementation of the PBIS framework.

Defining Practices and Benefits

In a well-implemented PBIS program, expectations become the universal language spoken through scripts or in the direct interactions of staff and students (Netzel & Eber, 2003). Creating a common language of expectations is the outward expression of the framework but other factors contribute to its successful use schoolwide. There are

multiple features that seem to enable the sustained application of PBIS and are discussed in the next section.

Teams

Features of PBIS framework for school systems include team implementation with support from administration and the district, data driven monitoring and decision-making, tertiary supports, establishment and teaching of school-wide expectations, and a focus on prevention through positive interactions (Horner et al., 2004). One major component for proper implementation is the creation of a school team that receives specialized training for PBIS (Walker et al., 1996). This school-wide multi-tiered approach includes individualized preventions and interventions for students identified in tier two and three, requiring specialized teams to help students with more severe behavior concerns.

With this proposed system, 80% of all students would fall at the base tier, 15% would be in the second tier, and the third tier consists of the most severe cases making up 5% of the school's population (Sugai & Horner, 2006). The primary tier includes the larger student body, including those with behavioral challenges. Goals for this tier consist of education on school-wide expectations, consistent disciplinary actions, improving positive interactions with faculty and staff, rewarding good behavior with verbal praise or tangible rewards. At this level, discipline data is analyzed to identify those that require additional support from the faculty, transitioning them to the second tier. Tier 2 provides additional support for students through mentor programs, behavior tracking, and other focused preventative measures that may reduce problem behavior. The most severe cases are in the top tier, wherein a qualified team is established to design an individual behavior plan to help the student be a successful part of the community (Sugai & Horner, 2006).

The degree of implementation of the PBIS framework influences the level of success (Bethune, 2017). Team implementation is an efficient and cost-effective strategy for educational reform (Madigan et al., 2016). In this approach, a team established at each school consisting of school leadership, general education teachers, special education teachers, counseling staff, and potentially other community support members, work with the PBIS framework to create school-wide positive behavior expectations, general interventions, provide resources and training to teachers (Bohanon et al., 2006; McIntosh et al., 2013; Netzel & Eber, 2003). Goals for this first tier level consist of agreeing on school-wide expectations, consistent disciplinary actions, improving positive interactions with faculty and staff, rewarding good behavior with verbal praise or tangible rewards. Universal expectations provide all PBIS team and teachers in the school with a common language to consistently teach students. Teachers are the gatekeepers to implementation and sustainability, as they are meant to be the main regular enforcers of the PBIS framework (Mathews et al., 2014). Still, teachers may resist teaching expectations based on the age of the students and their belief that proper social behaviors should already be understood (State, Harrison, Kern, & Lewis, 2017). Regular acknowledgement and understanding of expectations can lead to desired behaviors and better teacher-student relationships (Mathews et al., 2014). Shuster et al. (2017) found that special education teachers reported barriers to PBIS implementation for special education students. These included modifications to the school wide expectations, students having their own version of reinforcements and data does not necessarily help create an intervention. Using an easy-to-understand acronym detailing expectations can promote expected student behavior from all staff. Having students participate in creating posters, videos, or

announcements about schoolwide expectations can provide student buy-in (K. Flannery, Guest, & Horner, 2010).

Information traveling by way of PBIS teams can reach more faculty members and potentially increase staff buy-in. After a few years of establishing PBIS, some schools showed improvement to the overall school climate and Organization Health Inventory (OHI) (Bradshaw et al., 2008; Bradshaw et al., 2009; Houchens et al., 2014; Netzel & Eber, 2003). The OHI tool measures five different components of a school: institutional integrity, staff affiliations, academic emphasis, collegial leadership, and resource influence (Bradshaw et al., 2008). Yet, overall measures of improvement in school climate and the OHI varied in the literature. A study of Maryland elementary schools indicated that those with initial low OHI scores benefited the most from PBIS implementation, but high scoring OHI schools also showed gains (Bradshaw et al., 2008; Bradshaw et al., 2009). In addition to these promising results, a study by Houchens et al. (2014) showed that "High- and medium-fidelity schools had significantly higher overall achievement scores on statewide achievement tests than low-fidelity schools and non-SWPBIS schools" (p. 175). In the same study, PBIS positively influenced teacher perceptions about leadership and school climate. This idea gives hope to schools that suffer from organizational health problems that PBIS is not only an enabler for relationship with students, but also with staff.

Use of Data

Included in the development of any PBIS plan is the use of data to drive decision making. Not only is data collection essential for implementation, it gives the school an opportunity to empirically track and evaluate existing protocols and make necessary interventions (Scott & Martinek, 2006). Doing so provides the flexibility of discovering

what is best for the students within that specific context and associating it with evidence to support or criticize change (Sugai & Horner, 2006). Analyzing the data to make drastic schoolwide changes can be problematic. Considerations on improving or adding to systems that are shown to be effective are important before making large scale changes after reviewing the data (K. Flannery et al., 2010). One set of data should not be the only factor for a change within the school.

Data driven decisions can improve reform inside a school by tracking their effectiveness in reducing office disciplinary records across years (Bohanon et al., 2006). Alternatively, it can result in unnecessary or drastic changes from reviewing a limited or inaccurate data set, or without further review once change is established. Some studies have shown the use of data as a perceived enabler for PBIS implementation success (Bambara, Goh, Kern, & Caskie, 2012; Bohanon et al., 2006). Another benefit of the data is the identification of students needing additional supports (Coffey & Horner, 2012). Caution should be used when making decisions solely on the data or interpretation of that data. More research is needed to combine teacher and student voices with data driven decision making to include all members of the school community. Since both groups are participants in actions leading up to creation of the office disciplinary data, it is important to understand both perceptions while seeking a resolution to the problem.

Proactive Approach to Discipline

As previously mentioned, teams work together to define clear expectations for faculty and students. The last critical component to true implementation is to have established expectations understood by both students and staff (Horner et al., 2004; Houchens et al., 2014). A study by Sanders (1998) reveals that students' perceived understanding of expectations from parents, teachers, and the community empowers

reflection and the acceptance of help to prevent and correct behavioral issues at school. Reinforcing good behavior is another way to indirectly teach social skills and build positive interactions. Schools give student feedback in the form of tangible or written acknowledgments when they were seen acting with good behavior (Bohanon et al., 2006; Lewis et al., 1998). These acknowledgements have a variety of uses in addition to simple positive recognition, including drawings for prizes, entrance to school events, and currency for school items. These tangible reinforcements should be consistent across all ages, even if some teachers or students feel that it is beneath their maturity level (Bohanon et al., 2006). However, there are some concerns that these rewards could have a negative impact on intrinsic motivation. Rewards alone are not responsible for motivation, more importantly, combinations of rewards and interventions have a lasting impact on student behavior (Payne, 2015). Bear (2013) explains differences in teacher training might also be a reason for a negative teacher response to using the rewards. Special education teachers have training in behaviorism and how students are affected within a specific environment compared to general education teachers with more training in constructivism for students (Bear, 2013). The difference in background and experience can leave the practice of using incentives misunderstood, causing teachers less likely to use them. Incorporating a combination of PBIS practices can lead to positive changes in the overall school climate and a reduction in behavioral issues, but it must be done with an understanding of underlining theories behind the actions.

Changing mindsets from punishments to preventions can be challenging for those that have a deep-rooted belief in the effectiveness of traditional behavior management systems. These methods are outdated and not in the best interest of students because they can potentially cause harm, both physically or emotionally, and leave some students

feeling treated unfairly or embarrassed when behavior issues arise (R. Horner et al., 1990). Using the PBIS framework can develop ways teachers can effectively deal with and prevent behavioral issues. Even so, change is difficult to establish, and barriers exist.

Bambara et al. (2012) revealed that existing staff belief systems are perceived barriers for implementation of PBIS programs. Agreement for handling discipline can be challenging, but providing options and training mitigates the issues and leads to collective perceptions of consistency. Creating a menu of actions regarding problem behaviors can empower teachers and administrators with flexible approaches that fit the scale of the offense (R. H. Horner et al., 1990; Netzel & Eber, 2003). When given the proper tools and training, improving teacher efficacy for behavior concerns can reduce emotional exhaustion and lead to higher job satisfaction (Bullough, 2007; Zee & Koomen, 2016). Administrators, staff, and students have the shared unspoken goal of spending time in positive environments, which can be realized using the PBIS approach.

Decreasing Office Disciplinary Referrals (ODRs)

One goal of PBIS is to have a visible and understood school-wide behavior framework. The most prevalent and immediate consequence of this is the reduction in office discipline referrals. Students and teachers have long complained about fairness and consistency in discipline, so PBIS teams work together to build what Netzel and Eber (2003) refer to as a "continuum of consequences" (p. 74). By having a document of options, administrators can fit appropriate consequences to an incident with regularity. This removes some of the guess work out of assigning actions, and helps students see fairness applied to infractions.

Reductions in problem behaviors can be identified by evaluating office disciplinary data and making relevant changes. During the time when PBIS was

established, most discipline information had not been digitalized. Tracking this information helps school personnel identify places, times, and types of issues and their rate of occurrence. Studies have indicated that high levels of fidelity based on SET or BoQ scores have lower rates of office disciplinary referrals (Bohanon et al., 2006; KB Flannery et al., 2014; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Malloy et al., 2018; Netzel & Eber, 2003). One elementary school saw a 22% reduction in suspension rates after implementing a PBIS framework that included a system for office disciplinary referral (ODR) data that was used regularly and investing in professional development surrounding locations with repeated infractions (Netzel & Eber, 2003). An urban high school in Chicago saw a 20% reduction in ODR data following the implementation of a minor and major infraction guideline in which the authors attributed some of this decrease to changes in handling dress code violations (Bohanon et al., 2006). A study by KB Flannery et al. (2014) linked schools with high fidelity implementation of SWPBIS with lowered ODR rates in general as compared to other schools with low or no implementation. Size of schools can make a difference in the length of time and difficulty needed to achieve high fidelity. Smaller schools like elementary level can take a few years to reach fidelity, but high schools range from 5-8 years (KB Flannery et al., 2014). Even without reaching fidelity in the first few years of PBIS implementation, using the framework can have an impact on lowering ODR rates.

Tracking and putting appropriate actions in place provide guidelines for handling, predicting, and understanding behavior is important. Using this information can be a powerful tool in preventing and teaching correct behaviors for the general population and special needs students. Flexibility in this approach promotes healthy relationships instead of punitive ones, which helps lead to student support and better behavior.

Effect on Student Achievement

One would naturally conclude that reductions in discipline and additional instructional hours would lead to higher student achievement, but empirical evidence is mixed. Instructional time resulting from PBIS framework implementation is not the only attributing factor for higher academic success (Gage et al., 2015). Some studies did connect high fidelity of implementation with increase in student achievement (Bradshaw et al., 2014; Gage, Leite, Childs, & Kincaid, 2017; Gage et al., 2015). However, teachers who showed higher self-efficacy and proactive behavior management skills in keeping students on task were also linked to student success (Zee & Koomen, 2016). In Florida, a longitudinal study showed that over a twelve-year period, there was an increase in overall student achievement for schools that had a high rate of fidelity in PBIS (Gage et al., 2017). In Kentucky, Madigan et al. (2016) compared academic index data for both PBIS and non-PBIS schools over four years before and five years after interventions. In the study, students grew at a faster and higher academic rate than those at non-PBIS schools, but no causation relationship was established. Data driven instruction is one method designed to increase teacher efficacy, which may lead to student growth (ndunda, Van Sickle, Perry, & Capelloni, 2017). Houchens et al. (2014), found that "BoQ fidelity scores uniquely predicted academic achievement after controlling for years of PBIS implementation and school demographic variables" (p. 175). Approaching but not achieving a high level of fidelity was also connected to school improvement and student achievement (Bohanon et al., 2006; Gage et al., 2015). As ODR rates and the number of suspension hours decrease after implementation of PBIS practices, the insinuation is students will receive more instructional hours inside the classroom. Studies have

correlated SET implementation scores with reducing ODR rates, dropout rates, and other risk factors that may influence student achievement (KB Flannery et al., 2014).

How information flows through a school and the school climate are enablers for PBIS implementation. After a few years of establishing PBIS, some schools showed improvement to the overall school climate and Organization Health Inventory (OHI) (Bradshaw et al., 2008; Bradshaw et al., 2009; Houchens et al., 2014; Netzel & Eber, 2003). The OHI tool measures five different components of a school: institutional integrity, staff affiliations, academic emphasis, collegial leadership, and resource influence (Bradshaw et al., 2008). A study of Maryland elementary schools indicated that those with initial low OHI scores benefited the most from PBIS implementation, but high scoring OHI schools also showed gains (Bradshaw et al., 2008; Bradshaw et al., 2009). In addition to these promising results, a comparison study by Houchens et al. (2014) showed that "High- and medium-fidelity schools had significantly higher overall achievement scores on statewide achievement tests than low-fidelity schools and non-SWPBIS schools" (p. 175). In the same study, PBIS also positively influenced teacher perceptions about leadership and school climate. This idea gives hope to schools that suffer from organizational health problems that PBIS is not only an enabler for relationships with students but also with staff and teacher efficacy produced from positive relationships with administration. As teacher efficacy increases, that efficacy can lead to student achievement (ndunda et al., 2017).

Ultimately, many controllable and uncontrollable factors contribute to academic success, but the influence of PBIS practices is promising. Having a longer timeframe of comparable data (Madigan et al., 2016) may lead to the discovery of long-term benefits of the program such as more instructional time due to reduced discipline events but that

data was not available for the study. There are many conflicting results, so no definitive answer can be made. Although the PBIS framework can reduce problem behaviors and improve overall school climate, coupling this with academic initiatives gives the potential to generate gains in achievement (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). The limitations to fully understanding student achievement at the high school level in connection with PBIS implementation is the lack of relevant studies. Recent work shows hopeful results, but more work at this level is needed.

Clear and High Expectations

Perhaps one of the biggest changes suggested by PBIS framework is purposefully and clearly stating expectations. A study by Friend and Caruthers (2012) gained a unique student voice where they shared experiences of frustration when behavioral problems caused a decrease in access to content information. Participants in the study recognized the limiting nature this climate produced and expressed value for teachers who implemented positive behavior strategies. In addition, there was an appreciation for teachers that have high standards and clear expectations (Friend & Caruthers, 2012). Academic encouragement from teachers, parents, and community members helps children believe they can improve academically (Sanders, 1998). Teaching expectations helps build a model that students can easily follow which shapes a healthy and stable learning environment for students. Outside of survey data collected, in-depth student perceptions are rarely considered in research about PBIS. Students are often transformed into data tracking numbers and their experiences are left unheard. Dedication and support are valuable to students and can ignite change for schools, but without accessing how students receive or interpret or define this information remains hidden.

Gaps and Future Studies

Increasing accountability has required data collection at large scales. Enough time has passed since the inception of PBIS for implementation to take root across the county. Programs have been given time to mature, and meaningful evolutions may exist to improve sustainability or effectiveness. Without reaching out to teachers and students that initiate and receive these changes, so much information is lost.

Student voice is the largest component missing. By accessing their perceptions about PBIS, valuable information will travel between students and those that can make noticeable changes to better meet their needs. Giving power directly to the students to discuss necessary changes or experiences could create student buy-in that would prompt higher participation and feelings of support from the staff. Building trust by trying to understand the student's perspective may lead to fewer classroom disruptions and better rapport with teachers.

Teachers are being charged with making these proactive disciplinary changes in the classroom, so seeking information from their experiences can also make changes that benefit the entire school. In combination with student needs, gaining student perceptions and experiences about discipline could eliminate unnecessary and potentially ineffective work that is mandated school-wide. Although generalizations are difficult to make for small scale projects, including these voices could generate a beneficial change in PBIS training. It is important to seek out what is valuable to students regarding the implementation of PBIS strategies to extend beyond the available literature. As challenges of education continue to evolve, solutions may lie in methods that improve classroom environments. According to Horner and Sugai (2015), “School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a framework for delivering both the

whole-school social culture and additional tiers of behavior support intensity needed to improve educational and social outcomes for all students" (p. 80). Investigations of student experiences related to the implementation of the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework at the high school level may provide feedback to help inform school communities about practices or perceived practices.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

One way to understand the impact on student experiences is to ask students directly. Qualitative methods are considered valuable tools of investigation for educational research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Depth and amount of data produced in qualitative methods can be immense (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995), but the knowledge gained about experiences may produce important contributions (Brinkmann, 2013). Interviews can be a gateway to identify opportunities outside the study focus, such as additional information to review or recommendations for more participants (Bornstein, 2015). Through the recalibrating process in grounded theory, researchers can reevaluate data to better represent the experiences of students (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Friend & Caruthers, 2012). This research used qualitative methods, and analysis framed by grounded theory, to identify student perceptions about PBIS at one Kentucky high school by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are high school students' perceptions about the implementation of the PBIS framework, both school-wide and in individual classrooms?
2. What do students recognize as positive behavior interventions and supports?

Case Study

This is a case study of one Kentucky high school that was actively using the schoolwide PBIS framework during the data collection period. By using a case study approach, insight was gained to generalize student perceptions of PBIS at this school. As part of the annual Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI) assessment, the county's district level personnel conducted short surveys with students to measure fidelity of PBIS at each school. In this walkthrough, district personnel randomly selected students to gain an understanding of the knowledge of expectations and climate at each school, but no further

inquiry was pursued about experiences with PBIS. A list of students willing to participate in interviews or other PBIS programs was collected during the TFI walkthroughs and by the school's PBIS team during the school year. Some schools use lists like this one to create a panel of students that work directly with the programs at their school. The goal of this research was to use qualitative focus group interviews to uncover data related to individual experiences and perspectives to inform the research about student understandings of PBIS at one school. The following section highlights some studies and articles that showcase why focus groups have been selected for this research.

Focus groups can be used to encourage a level of comfort among peers creating a safe space to generate ideas (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002). Langford (2003) offers an incentive to focus groups as, "their potential to discover information that might otherwise have remained hidden" (p. 15). However, group bias is a concern due to "the presence of dominant group members who may influence the course of discussion" (Langford, 2003, p. 15). A small group allows ideas to flow between multiple perspectives at once to uncover experiences and connections between participants (Glesne, 2011). In the group setting, participants may focus on their positive experiences (Hosie, 1986) or center opinions around a group consensus, risking the loss of information from some participants (Fossey et al., 2002). Using a moderator helps facilitate effective discussion during focus groups (Creswell, 2013). Considering all of this, focus groups allow the sharing of many experiences at one time (Buchanan, Nese, & Clark, 2016).

A group setting can expose common themes and experiences between multiple perspectives (Langford & McDonagh, 2003). Researchers can identify common opinions or themes in focus groups as a complement to observations and individual interviews.

Pivik, McComas, and Laflamme (2002) discovered that students from three different focus groups made similar comments about barriers to inclusion for special needs students, after a school made efforts for reform. By hearing multiple accounts with similar information, a theme emerged for barriers without doing individual interviews. Similarly, Fisher and Frey (2012) used focus groups as follow up to observations and interviews about teacher practices to gain students perspectives about new school procedures. Purposeful student selection for focus groups can help effectively attain student perspectives that are directly impacted by changes within a school (Buchanan et al., 2016). Rutledge, Cohen-Vogel, Osborne-Lampkin, and Roberts (2015) conducted a study with interviews, observations, data reviews, teacher focus groups, and student focus groups comprised of randomly selected tenth graders, to learn about potential differences in high and low effectiveness between four Florida high schools. Teachers reported similar quality between curriculum and instructional strategies between schools, which was echoed in data collected, noting no discernable differences among instruction (Rutledge et al., 2015). However, two differences reported were perceived high expectations and student connectedness, both academically and socially (Rutledge et al., 2015). These examples showcase the value of incorporating focus groups within a research project to blend different perspectives from multiple stakeholders within a school community.

Context

Uniform High School, a pseudonym, is one of the six high schools within a Kentucky school district that was selected for this project. As part of a districtwide initiative, Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) was implemented in each high school. To assist the implementation of the program, each school had a dedicated

PBIS team comprised of teachers, administrators, counselors and support personnel. A designated staff member served as the coach responsible for disseminating information and providing guidance for the school. All PBIS coaches had opportunities to work with students within their school, as well as other coaches at district level during training sessions.

As a team, the PBIS coach and staff members created a universal set of student expectations for the school that are then shared with the staff. Students were taught the schoolwide expectations at the beginning of the school year and retaught multiple times throughout the year. In addition to these expectations, the team met monthly to discuss discipline data trends within the school, changes to systems to reduce negative data, and incentive programs that were offered to help prevent future infractions and reward students that met the schoolwide expectations.

Uniform High School was selected for two reasons: active implementation of PBIS strategies at the school-wide level and access. Uniform High School has participated in developing PBIS expectations and practices at this school since 2012. As a teacher and a member of the PBIS team at the school, the researcher had access to participants and contextual knowledge about efforts made to incorporate PBIS school-wide. Table 3.1 includes demographics of Uniform High School as it compares to the district overall in February during the 2022-2023 school year. High schools across the district had a total enrollment of 11,484 students, with ages ranging from 13 to 19 years. Uniform High School had a total enrollment of 2015 with ages ranging from 13 to 19.

Table 3.1, *Demographics of enrollment (percentage)*

	White	**Black**	**Hispanic**	**Asian**
District	47	23.3	18.6	4.9
Uniform HS	46	23.3	19.3	11.4

Role of the Researcher

Ideas and theories shape how we interact with participants and the directions research may take. Understanding ethical concerns helps researchers plan for situations that arise during the process. Qualitative researchers should be mindful when setting out in search of knowledge by remaining reflexive and documenting their positionality as the interpretation process has a potential for variance (Barrett, Kajamaa, & Johnston, 2020; Partington, 2001). As a teacher with over sixteen years of experience in the district and at this school, I have established student relationships that show I am trustworthy. At the time of this research, I worked directly with students in both general and advanced classes. Student demographics varied in all classes, but I interacted with students from many racial backgrounds daily. To improve ways to relate to students and their needs, I regularly sought their understanding about schoolwide events and ways that some processes or discipline procedures can be improved while I was a classroom teacher. This practice was informal within my classroom, but it allowed my students to more freely discuss ideas and changes that can be made within the school. This method of rapport building may have helped garner responses during interviews because some students that know me from within their friend groups know I value authentic student feedback. However, my involvement within the school may have led some participants to hesitate when sharing ideas or experiences, if they saw my participation in the PBIS team as someone perpetuating a problem in the schoolwide systems.

A researcher's positionality can limit their awareness of multiple representations in a study and reduce the ability to anticipate all directions interviews could take (Ambert

et al., 1995). Risks of coercion and power within student-teacher relationships are valid concerns in educational research. A teacher researcher positionality may provide background knowledge that can tie ideas together or identify behaviors that may seem unrelated to those not in the field (Ambert et al., 1995). Being in a familiar position, such as a teacher, can help elicit conversation during student interviews (Hosie, 1986) or the teacher's perspective could limit results due to perceived bias (Chenail, 2011). Previous experiences can shape how and what we see in the data, especially when drawing conclusions about the data (Creswell, 2013). Structured interview questions can be a close-ended approach used to verify previously conceived notions rather than searching for answers through a participant's experience (Chenail, 2011). Even our demographic background and social influence may affect attitudes and access to participants (Glesne, 2011). The way we look, act, or dress may intimidate people during data collection. Being a white female teacher may have influenced my interactions with students in the classroom and within the school due to implicit bias within myself and others. My race and gender may have hindered some students from sharing their ideas and thoughts if we had perceived cultural differences.

Researchers must constantly examine their effects on outcomes (Barrett et al., 2020; Hosie, 1986). Some researchers may make connections based on their level of experience or positionality. A goal of qualitative research is to discover new pieces of information rather than trying to necessarily prove an idea (Ambert et al., 1995). Allowing time to process and build connections without manipulating interviews was critical. Stress can interfere when collecting or processing data as it can be difficult to draw conclusions from a wealth of information (Glesne, 2011). It is important to maintain perspective and avoid forcing connections in the data. Triangulation methods were used

to ensure accuracy of reporting and improve the trustworthiness of the researcher (Chenail, 2011; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Outsider evaluators are used for validation and reliability checks by critiquing work for integrity.

Universally, PBIS is a framework that encourages a positive approach when interacting with students, therefore my assumption was that this philosophy has been implemented through the program. Being in a teacher position may have influenced the types of responses that are interpreted (Ambert et al., 1995). Additionally, being a part of the school selected for the research may limit my view of what was being said (Fossey et al., 2002).

As a researcher, I interpreted the student experiences to develop common theories related to their experiences with and perceptions of PBIS. Using a grounded theory approach asserts that my role in education impacted interpretation and construction of meaning about student experiences (Mills, 2006). My role as an educator limits my objectivity when data was collected about student experiences but it also helped connect ideas and concepts together based on my years of experiences in the classroom. My positionality allowed me to situate student experiences into the social context of school life and helped me distinguish between classroom management practices and practices specific to implementation of PBIS. These considerations were important during data collection as well as data analysis so student voice can be properly summarized in this study.

Participants

The purpose of this research was to identify high school student perceptions of positive behavior strategies used by adults at their school. Student participation was necessary to inform the research about student experiences and perceptions relating to

positive behavior interventions, or strategies used in their high school. To gain participant access, Uniform High School's PBIS coach provided a list of thirty-eight students who previously agreed to help that school's PBIS team with initiatives. After the list of students was received, consent forms were sent to their parents and guardians to ask for their student's participation and describe the study. Due to restrictions set by the approved Institutional Review Board (IRB), three students from the original list were not eligible to participate because they were enrolled in a course taught by the researcher during the data collection window. Consent and parental consent forms were provided to the remaining thirty-five students based on their age, below or above 18. Upon collection of consent forms, students were emailed a self-registration google form link that collected demographic information. An overview of participant demographic information is listed below in Table 3.2. Research participants were selected from all grade levels, freshman through senior year. Upon collection of consent forms, students were emailed a self-registration google form link. Thirteen students returned consent forms and all those individuals participated in focus groups. From this group of thirteen, none of the participants were previous students of the research and no discipline data or history of special education services were retrieved from the district. Pseudonyms were used for the study participants. A detailed list of pseudonyms, along with their race and demographics is listed in Table 3.3.

Table 3.2, *Participant Demographic Information*

Grade		Race		Gender	
Freshman	2	Asian	2	Female	9
Sophomore	5	Black	7	Male	2
Junior	2	White	4	Non-Binary	1
Senior	4			Prefer Not to Answer	1

Table 3.3, *Detailed Participant Information*

Pseudonyms	Grade	Race	Gender
Talia	9	Black	Female
Paige	9	White	Female
Mason	10	White	Non-Binary
Naomi	10	Black	Female
Kelly	10	Black	Female
Amaya	10	Black	Female
Baker	10	White	Male
Hessa	11	Asian	Female
Reese	11	White	Prefer not to answer
Norah	12	Asian	Female
Jones	12	Black	Male
Raven	12	Black	Female
Selah	12	Black	Female

Data Gathering Procedures

Focus groups were used in this research to collect student perceived examples of positive behavior interventions or events at one school. Surveys were not used in this research because they may not provide an opportunity for a participant to share important or unknown ways adults communicate positive behavior interventions or supports. A recent study by Jessiman et al. (2022) used student focus groups in combination with adult interviews to highlight changes in school culture based on student perceptions in addition to faculty interviews. Mann et al. (2021) used a two-part study design to separate student focus groups from interviews with school staff discussing barriers to student wellbeing. Separating the two data groups helped showcase student voice, but also generated themes relating to changes in the system. Given the researcher's experience with the historical PBIS implementation at this school, information gained from student perspectives is a valuable tool of comparison against teacher assumptions related to PBIS and prior district level training.

By using focus groups in this study, the researcher examined multiple student examples of events to generalize themes related to positive interactions between students and adults in this school to answer both research topics: how students perceive PBIS and what do they recognize as PBIS events. Without using an in-depth form of data collection, such as focus groups, some student examples of positive interactions are lost.

Interview structures with children should allow participants to share their experiences around a topic in an open approach without fear of negative consequences. Expressing empathy to participants is a useful tool for interviewers to build rapport (Ambert et al., 1995; Chenail, 2011; Partington, 2001). Vincent, McClure, Marquez, and Goodrich (2021) used focus groups with all stakeholders in a high school to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the school's discipline practices. Teachers, administrators, students, and parents all participated in the focus groups and were able to discuss their perceptions about current discipline practices. Providing a space for students to discuss opinions, form understandings about a concept, clear up misconceptions, or provide appropriate feedback can all produce valuable information to researchers (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Friend & Caruthers, 2012). Flexibility in interviewing is important in the data collection process to build connections between the child's experiences and the research topic.

Power levels may play a role during interviews due to the status differential between researcher and respondent (Anyan, 2013). The use of focus groups allowed power to equalize within a group of peers and the researcher. In contrast, some voices may have gone unheard due to fear of being an outsider in opinions or participant shyness (Fossey et al., 2002). Smooth transitions were made between questions, follow-up questions, and closures to questions to show the respondent that they have been heard and

to guide the direction of the interview (Partington, 2001). Language can change interpretations of questions and being acutely aware of responses can help indicate if confusion exists. Follow-up questions were asked to determine understanding and ways to proceed to facilitate clarification on a topics (Hosie, 1986). Students may have a harder time articulating when they felt uncomfortable with a topic, therefore researchers should actively assess the needs of the participant (Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin, & Robinson, 2010; Fernqvist, 2010). It was important to work with children in a way that is both engaging and caring to ensure protection for respondents.

Because it can be difficult to fully understand another person's experience, special care needs to be executed when conducting student interviews (Partington, 2001). Some children may resist sharing negative experiences regarding a research topic (Anyan, 2013). Engaging students in less formal conversations built a level comfort before going directly into the interview. However, trying to rely heavily on rapport can sway participants to produce desired results for the researcher (Brinkmann, 2013). A study by Partington (2001) explored interviewing techniques with students and found a difference in data between interviewers that showed empathy instead of judgement when interviewing the children. Two out of three interviewers in this study were able to speak in tones and manners that showed a refrain in judgement and built a positive rapport with the students, regardless of students being selected based on a negative teacher referral. Active listening techniques, such as restating what we believe a person is saying, along with additional prompting, can encourage students to stay engaged and share their opinions. Empathy helps generate valuable data (Hosie, 1986). A researcher must reflect on how they are presenting information to children to not inadvertently elicit specific responses while taking care to prompt productive conversation.

Data Collection

In this study, focus group interviews were used to collect student perspectives on PBIS within their schools and classrooms. Focus groups accessed multiple perspectives at once and allowed participants to generate ideas or provide more details after interacting with others (Plummer-D'Amato, 2008). Gaining access to the site included active communication and involvement with school staff, or parents of participants, by clearly stating research goals (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010).

Approval was granted by the district and head principal to complete this research. Focus groups were comprised of two to five students in varying grade levels, genders, and races. The maximum number in each group was preselected, to hear from enough students to make generalized statements about student perceptions about PBIS. Focus groups were scheduled based around student availability and when consent forms were returned. Two timeframes were available for participants, during the school day, or after school to allow flexibility for the participants to decide what best meets their scheduling needs and preferences. Ultimately, five focus groups were held during the school day. Students received a letter containing their designated time and place for interviews. Focus groups lasted less than thirty minutes and were recorded and transcribed within one week of the interview. As a form of member checking, students were provided a copy of their focus group transcript to strike through any data they wished to not be included. This allowed students to make sure their voices were captured accurately, and in the ways they intended.

Interviews were designed to investigate how and what students understand as PBIS procedures, within their classrooms and school-wide. A list of interview questions can be found under Appendix A. Semi-structured interviews provided the space

necessary to elicit conversations about PBIS while allowing flexibility to uncover directions introduced by the participant. A triangular method was used to guide students from an opening question, followed by transitional questions, to gain understanding of the specific research goal (Plummer-D'Amato, 2008). Initially, students were asked an ice-breaker question to see what they liked about school. This question helped students settle into the focus group format and learn a little about the other participants. Subsequent interview questions were designed to be broad, allowing students to recall any experiences with Tier 1 procedures at the school-wide level. This allowed students to discuss their perceptions of PBIS within their classrooms and incentive practices currently used. Follow-up questions were used to further probe a topic, allowing new perspectives to be uncovered during the interview process.

Two pilot focus groups were used to fine tune questions. Both pilot groups contained two seniors the researcher worked with over the last two years. Their guidance provided clarification on questions, interview procedures to make students feel more comfortable answering the questions, and the addition of a question related to differences between how behavior interventions should be handled based on age or year levels within the school. One notable moment during each pilot was to emphasize that saying, “There is no wrong answer to these questions,” means that there is in fact, no wrong answer, even though their instinctive thought is the opposite. Without this moment of clarity, it may have been more difficult to establish a rapport with the participants to elicit real responses.

During the five focus groups, a different student was given the opportunity to respond first to the leading question, encouraging engagement of all participants. Each student was prompted to offer their perspectives or add additional comments to the

respondent, if it did not happen naturally. The following cues were taken into consideration to determine a students' willingness to participate: looking away during the interview, not engaging in the conversation, not listening to the other participants, or negative facial expressions. The researcher's 16 years of experience interacting with high school students helped navigate conversations in a way that allowed students to feel comfortable describing their experiences.

Focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed within one week of the by an online transcription company. Transcriptions included the conversation of participants and did not include non-verbal cues. Focus group data was de-identified and pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of students. Once transcribed, open coding was used to review the data by applying common codes to look for trends and themes based on the data. It was unknown what students may describe as a positive interaction from an adult, therefore themes emerged as data was collected and reviewed. Coding took place at three levels: initial coding to gain an understanding for the data, structural coding to describe the "who" "what" "where" "how" and "when", and value coding to explore the student's experiences. Themes were constructed to draw meaning from the data collected. This research was designed to dive deep into the data to provide a better understanding of student perspectives on what students consider positive and meaningful interactions by adults within their schools.

Data Analysis

Grounded Theory

All experiences are different, as are perceptions of those experiences. Brinkmann (2013) suggests that "…phenomena of our lives must be seen as responses to people, situations, and events" (p. 152). Qualitative research aims to find meaning by gaining

access to firsthand experiences, but it does not come without challenges (Fossey et al., 2002; Turner III, 2010). Grounded theory allows researchers to develop theories based on reported experiences (Creswell, 2013; Dey, 2012; Hays & Wood, 2011). Grounded theory is used to form theories that can differ from preconceived assumptions (Charmaz, 2015). Using grounded theory allowed concepts to emerge after transcribing, coding data, and using constant comparison of coded data to reduce preconceived notions about possible connections (Hays & Wood, 2011). Adhering to this notion of data variability helped the researcher analytically process information received by participants.

Analyzing data in a grounded theory approach permited the discovery of new ideas, allowing the experiences of others to develop into informative models and themes during a study (Bornstein, 2015; Friend & Caruthers, 2012; Golding, 2017; McIntosh et al., 2014). Identifying areas of change was not a necessary component for grounded theory in comparison to action research, but instead, the information was reviewed to report reoccurring themes in each situation. Qualitative researchers warn that a less structured interview practice can skew responses based on how the question is posed (Brinkmann, 2013; Turner III, 2010). This can be problematic if data is influenced by the researcher's viewpoint rather than the participants' firsthand experiences, so semi-structured interviews were used to allow adaptations based on student perspectives provided in previous focus groups.

Friend and Caruthers (2012) used the grounded theory approach, with observations and interviews, to gain an understanding of patterns around high school student experiences related to teacher-student interactions. Students expressed wanting higher academic expectations and a reduction in classroom disruptions. Students wanted teachers to build personal relationships and show they cared about them beyond the

classroom. Data showed that students used the interviews as opportunities to clear up possible misconceptions about what they need emotionally to feel successful in the school (Friend & Caruthers, 2012). Classroom management strategies valuable to a teacher or administrator may not be recognized as important from the student perspective (Fisher & Frey, 2012). Although constructive feedback is ideal, child participants may not perceive it as the desired outcome. Providing a way to stay comfortably engaged in the research process is necessary for participants.

Limitations and Weaknesses

Even though the potential for findings of this study could add to PBIS research, limitations should be considered. One limitation is the selection of schools for this project. Only one of the six high schools was selected from this large district, but all have received district and school level training in PBIS procedures. Access to the larger student body was limited in the initial phase of participant recruitment. PBIS coaches did not give every student in the school the opportunity to participate in the research. The researcher's race, gender and teacher status may have limited student voice due to perceived cultural differences between research and students. Rapport was established with students upon meeting, but there could be underlying components that made students not feel comfortable sharing either positive or negative experiences based on these demographic differences or work within the school. The small sample size of participants selected for focus groups and interviews may not be representative of the entire school. Also, data collected is only from participants who consent to participate and may not have all perspectives from students with a variety of behavior levels. Discipline and special education data was not included in this study as it was not part of the information requested in the approved IRB. Given that previous discipline data was

not retrieved, the different behavior tier levels of students could not be determined. Without additional information about if participants received special education services, specific perceptions of PBIS implementation cannot be determined for special education students. Parents of students that did not participate may feel resistance to give consent or volunteer if they do not believe in the PBIS framework. Self-reported information can also skew results, including student accounts of experiences related to this study. Even with all these considerations, gaining student perspectives about PBIS procedures is valuable and largely unreported.

Project Timeline

Qualitative research is a time-consuming event, both the initial data collection and the analysis. It was important to be aware of this time commitment at the onset of the research to meet the goals and deadlines provided. The timeline for this project took place over a four-month period. An IRB submission was completed in July of 2022. Participants were selected in April and May of 2023. Student focus group data was collected in April of 2023. As focus group data was collected, the videos were transcribed within a week of the focus group. Coding and data analysis took place through June and July of 2023, allowing time to process the information received about student voices. This project was completed by August 2023.

Summary

This methodology chapter contains the research design and procedures used for this qualitative research. A case study high school was selected to collect data in five focus groups to gain student perceptions of PBIS. Transcriptions of focus groups were transcribed and coded to organize the information. Grounded theory was used to analyze

the data to uncover themes related to student perceptions about the implementation of PBIS. A discussion about data analysis follows.

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter, data analysis and discussion are based on a grounded theory approach with a focus on continuous revision to capture student voice. Data analysis took place in multiple waves. As more focus group data was collected and coded, previous focus group data was reviewed for further insights. Grounded theory helped define meaningful characteristics in the themes due to continuous efforts for recalibration. As a result, themes and sub-themes were created to represent student perceptions of PBIS, in terms of experiences and suggestions. Pseudonyms are used in the following analysis to protect the anonymity of participants.

Responses to Behaviors and Experiences

Focus group data was collected over a three-week period. After each focus group, students were given the opportunity to review and strike through their data. Once this step was completed, comments were added to the transcripts as a form of open coding to identify initial trends in responses. Data included experiences related to their interpretations of PBIS, as well as suggestions on how adults in the building could respond to, or approach situations proactively. Some of the interview questions responses were negative, but they related to personal experiences, and were shared in a constructive way that was meant to inform, not insult. When asked "Thinking about your school-wide expectations, how do they impact student behavior?", Jones, a member of the fifth focus group, responded with this constructive criticism:

> "Like you may not...know what it means. It's just a saying, but if I feel like they would know, like, the actual meaning if it was like enforced and abided by."

This example shows participants openly discussing their perceptions about the implementation of PBIS and how students can interpret meaning differently than adults intend.

Initial analysis revealed data related to experiences of positive interactions and behavioral responses from teachers, but continuous analysis and subsequent focus group data, it was clear that revision was necessary to best capture the student's perception of PBIS. After the last focus group was transcribed, a delineation was made to separate what participants experienced about PBIS against their perceptions of how it should be implemented. Given this distinction between student reflection on past experiences and suggestions for the future, data was filtered into two main themes: experiences and suggestions. These main themes offered responses to the research questions, respectively. Axial coding was used to finetune ideas further into four minor themes guided by the PBIS framework: positive interactions, behavior responses, academic and behavioral interventions, and ways to support students. As a final step, comments previously made on the document were coded based on the defined PBIS themes. Organization of the analysis including research questions, major themes and minor themes are listed in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1, *Research questions and distinctions between major and minor themes*

Research question	**Main Themes**	**Minor Theme Definitions**
What are high school students' perceptions about the implementation of the PBIS framework, both school-wide and in individual classrooms?	**Experiences**	Positive interactions students experienced or witnessed from teachers or school personnel.
		Behavior responses experienced or witnessed in the classroom or school-wide, including discussions of expectations.
		Interventions that were used to correct or prevent negative behaviors or academic difficulties.
		Supportive ways adults helped students.
What do students recognize as positive behavior interventions and supports?	**Suggestions**	Positive ways teachers can interact with students.
		Behavior responses or expectations adults can use with students.
		Academic and behavioral interventions teachers can use to be proactive and responsive to student needs.
		Supportive ways to respond to mental health, behavior issues, and ways to build relationships with students.

Code definitions and frequencies are listed in tables 4.2 and 4.3, respectively. The transcripts were coded based on the definitions listed in table 4.2. These definitions helped to organize the data between minor themes to better understand student perceptions about experiences and suggestions within the context of the implementation of PBIS. The frequency table values show how often a student mentions an idea or concept that falls under each definition. These definitions were summarized together with the formation of major and minor themes within the data analysis. Overall frequency of the minor themes ranked in the following order: behavior responses, positive interactions, suggestion for student support, and interventions.

Table 4.2, *Code definitions*

Positive		Behavior		Interventions		Supports	
PR	Recognition	BE	Expectations	IA	Academic assistance or guidance	SBR	Building relationship Peer to peer Student to Adult
PRA	Academic Extra credit Homework pass	BEY	Yes, they influence behavior	IES	Safe spaces Verbal check in	SSC	Empathy Common ground No ridicule
PRV	Verbal	BEN	No, Equity Academic Personal beliefs	ISL	Listen to students	SSP	Focus on positives
PRW	Written Awards	BR	Response	ISM	Flexibility of consequences Second chances De-escalation to resolution Verbal conference		
PTC	Tangible Candy Food	BRL	Lack of response to student behavior	ISO	Referrals to school support staff		
PTE	E-bucks	BRN	Negative Verbal Dismissive				
		BRR	Relocation Redirect				
		BRY	Yes- Maturity Grade level				

Table 4.3, *Code Frequency*

Code	Events	Suggestions	Grand Total
BE	9	11	20
BEN	15	8	23
BEY	3	2	5
BR	6	3	9
BRL	4	1	5

BRN	1	3	4
BRR	5	2	7
BRY	3	9	12
IA	7	3	10
IES	2	5	7
ISL	2	3	5
ISM	2	8	10
ISO	1	4	5
PR	1	3	4
PRA	7	0	7
PRV	19	3	22
PRW	14	8	22
PTC	8	1	9
PTE	12	0	12
SBR	6	18	24
SSC	0	7	7
SSP	2	4	6
WLS	14	0	14
Grand Total	143	106	249

Experiences

The following section is an analysis of responses to interview questions that reflected previous events and student perceptions of PBIS implementation. It was important to include a continuous review of focus group data to ground conclusions based on what participants experienced at their school. The first major theme, participant experiences, were categorized and discussed based on four minor themes: Positive Interactions, Behavior Responses and Expectations, Academic and Behavior Interventions, and Student Support.

Positive Interactions

At the beginning of each focus group, participants were asked what they liked about school to warm up the discussion. Responses included enjoying socialization with peers, learning, and relationships with teachers. Following this, students were asked to, “Describe a situation where a teacher positively recognized your behavior”. Positive

interactions with teachers were recalled in different formats: verbal, written, academic incentives, and tangible rewards.

Verbal praise was discussed in the format of encouragement, recognition of improvements, using students as a positive example in class, and noticing when someone is doing their best. Mason offered the following example of verbal recognition they experienced as, "You did really good on this. Good job. I can see you've improved." In another focus group, Baker echoes this idea saying that positive interactions include, "Encouragement, or constructive criticism, to help push the students to do better." High expectations, building relationships, support, and encouragement can motivate students to work harder and correct behaviors (Friend & Caruthers, 2012; Sanders, 1998; Wentzel et al, 2010). Following this statement, Norah describes a situation when a teacher helped a friend apply for a program, "...he helped her and said that you could do it very easily. 'You can get in because it's very easy for you. I know your capabilities.'" This act of verbal reassurance motivated the student to apply, and ultimately, get into a program. Participants recognized adult encouragement as a motivator for continued improvement but also noted that it was appreciated when good student behaviors are acknowledged as well. Jones recalled a moment inside the classroom where a teacher positively recognizing a student's engagement during class:

> "Um, last year, in class, this one boy he was like, he would never, like, raise his hand or answer a question because he was like super shy,...when he finally did raise his hand and answer a question and spoke up, <the teacher> rewarded with, uh, Jolly Ranchers, and said, 'Thank you for speaking up'."

This stood out to Jones because the teacher was able to show appreciation for their classmate who previously struggled to participate. In addition, participants recalled being praised individually for helping others academically, volunteering, trying their best, and being used as a positive example for the class. Participants described multiple moments when teachers expressed being proud of students for their academic accomplishments and how they represented the school in extracurricular activities.

Written recognition came in different forms including words of affirmation and documented incentives. Positive recognition referrals, emails, notes, letters of recommendation, and awards were discussed in all but one focus group. Some of the recognition awards were in the form of "Student of the Month awards", a practice recently adopted by the school. Teachers nominated one student per month that exemplified the school's expectations. A reception was held for the students to attend and have their award read in front of peers, an administrator, and other school staff. Not only was the written recognition important to the students, but this positive recognition may connect other adults to share in the experience. Jones describes their experience going to the principal's office to discuss a positive referral submitted by their teacher in the following segment, "Uh, my teacher recognized that I was a leader whenever I volunteered to like, do, uh, something first or volunteer to just help out or help my classmates." Another member of the group, Selah, offered, "Um, one of my English teachers, she sent an email to my mom. It was basically telling her how I'm good in the class, how engaged I am, I get my work done." The combination of contacting home and positive praise are effective strategies to improve

behavior (Payne, 2015). Moments like these build positive relationships and can also aid in strengthening relationships between students, teachers, administrators, and parents.

Academic incentives included extra credit, bonus points for doing well on countywide assessments, homework passes, or completing additional academic assignments. These were given out randomly, after a top ranking when playing games about content, or as a reward for completing work regularly. Participants were excited about these fun ways to be engaged in the classroom while also earning a reward.

Participants offered constructive criticism when other focus group members mentioned not receiving awards. Specifically, some participants recalled getting attendance awards and honor roll in middle school but were sad to find out they did not get it in high school. Moreover, some participants said that they had not been nominated for any awards in the last few years. After hearing and reviewing the data regarding awards, it became apparent that most awards were teacher nominations, and no reward was automatically generated for all students meeting the expectations on a regular basis. In the following quote, Kelly sheds light on how the lack of generalized awards reduces the opportunity for all students to receive positive recognition:

> "...coming here and not getting any awards the last two school year(s), this year or last year...I should at least got honor roll...I think that some things, like about ho- how awards are given to change, so it's more inclusive...I'm usually one of the kids who gets awards, at the award ceremony, and I didn't get one last year, I'm not getting any this year."

In reflection, it is important to find ways to make all students who are meeting expectations feel recognized in some form. Creating inclusive or automated awards can be meaningful to students, especially when they have a history of receiving them at previous schools.

Tangible rewards were quick ways teachers positively praised students in the classroom. Participants mentioned candy, food, stickers, tickets to specialized events and e-bucks. E-bucks are a form of electronic currency all teachers have access to give. Rewards are given randomly, when students meet expectations, as a whole class reward, upon completion of academic goals, in response to winning classroom games, or given for participation. This year, a store was created where students could purchase items using e-bucks before school, so it gained popularity with students. However, participants mentioned some teachers not using the system to award e-bucks at all or not using the system with regularity. Mason offers, "I feel like it depends, like, it varies with teacher to teacher...Um, 'cause some of them are more laid back and some of them are more formal...The e-bucks, a lot of teachers, like, don't even know how to do that."

Implementation of PBIS with fidelity is a crucial part of the framework and integral in maintaining a reward system. Over the last few years, a variety of methods have been used at this school to acknowledge students meeting expectations. These changes have an impact on the reliability of rewards, as well as continuous use by staff. Even with this is mind, Mason's statement about teacher autonomy in their classroom and training offers an interesting point. There will always be varying levels of implementation for PBIS in individual classrooms. Even though some teachers may not offer tangible rewards with

regularity, they could participate in other written or verbal recognitions used within the school. All participants were able to share ways their teachers positively interacted, even if it was in different ways. Verbal recognition is the quickest and easiest form that can reach individuals or groups of students. This can be used to inclusively acknowledge groups of students and showcase individuals for behavior or academics. Participants articulated the power of privately encouraging students that showed improvement or when receiving a written acknowledgement from a teacher. However, they also discussed negative feelings from not receiving verbal praise or formal recognition for their consistent good behavior. Having a variety of opportunities to respond positively can be helpful to teachers with different personalities, but a broad form of inclusive rewards or school-wide recognition would capture a larger population of students.

Behavior Responses and Expectations

Interview questions regarding teacher responses to behavior were met with some criticism of effectiveness and fairness. Perceived teacher responses to negative behaviors included verbal redirections, seat changes, removal from the classroom, redirection on task, reteaching expectations, and escalated levels of consequences. Some gentle examples of teachers handling behaviors included a teacher waking a student without a negative interaction, being flexible in responses to infractions. Raven brought up a teacher's attempt to recognize behavior improvements, "Um, there was this little boy, he's really bad, and one day he was just being...He wasn't even doing nothing. He was just being regular. They were like, was being extra and stuff." The participant eluded this response was over the top and construed it as inauthentic, given the students regular classroom behavior. Other negative experiences related to witnessing teachers arguing

with students, lack of intervening when teachers witness bullying comments, whole class punishments due to one or few students' bad behavior, treating students differently based on their age, or responding sarcastically to students. However, Naomi recalls ways teachers respond to behavior, based academic performance in the course,

> "...if you do well in their class, oftentimes, like, they'll let you get away with certain things...I do well in all my classes so, like, if I didn't do good on a test, like, I'm often allowed to...retake the test."

Naomi also describes this flexible approach to discipline as a way to build positive relationships between teachers and students.

As a follow up to asking about ways adults positively interact with students, participants were asked "Do you think there are differences in how this is or should be handled based on grade level?" This question was a suggestion from senior students in both pilot focus groups. Raven describes differences in behavior responses based on age, "I feel like, uh, freshman teachers, like just treat them like, they're like annoying just because they're freshman." Opinions were varied in focus groups surrounding how underclassmen were treated differently from upperclassmen. Four students ranging from freshman to juniors said there was a difference in treatment of underclassman emphasizing that maturity and age were factors. The sophomores and junior participants were reflective on personal improvements made since their freshman year due to changes in maturity overall, concluding that freshman sometimes need to be treated differently. Freshman participant, Paige, discussed differences in how she was treated but expressed having a different maturity level than peers, "…their age shouldn't have to, like, describe where they're at with maturity and where they should be placed as a

person." It was noteworthy that in the first focus group, two students described a significant difference in how teachers treated students and the dynamic in the classroom based on the academic level of the course, suggesting there was a difference between advanced or AP and general level classes. "And it's just really interesting the way that teachers treat the students and vice versa," Mason says. Naomi agreed saying, "Some things are not gonna work for AP kids. Some things are gonna work for general ed kids and the reverse." This could be attributed to a teacher's presumed maturity level difference of advanced and general courses, how a specific teacher responds to behavior, the classroom dynamics, the collection of students, and many other potentials. A cause for the difference in treatment was not established, but participants agreed about differences in handling behavior based on age or maturity and between advanced and general classes.

Behavior expectations seemed to have little to no effect on perceived student behavior. In each interview, it took additional prompting when asked, "Thinking about your school-wide expectations, how do they influence student behavior?" Once participants were reminded of their behavior expectations, the majority felt they had no impact on how a student acted. Interestingly, the reasons behind why included personal belief systems, expectations are taught but not enforced, and students simply ignore them. Perry describes variance based on personal belief systems in the following quote,

> "Well, everyone has rules and stuff, but, like it might be different to others, and some might feel...they shouldn't apply to them and have, like, a different view on them. But others may just be like, that's the rules."

Paige follows this and expands the idea that students can be well informed but still make their own behavior choices,

> "Like, they say them in the morning. Whenever we come back from a break, they give us a slideshow presentation almost every single classroom...I feel like everybody knows them. Like, people know how to act, and sometimes they still don't....it helps everyone to know what is expected of them, but it just doesn't enforce it enough."

Specific examples of students not meeting perceived expectations for dress code violations including wearing hoodies, pajama pants, and short clothing. However, dress code is not part of the school-wide expectations, but there are rules and consequences discussed during the same slideshow. Nonetheless, the flexibility or lack of receiving consequences made participants perceive that they were not meeting the expectations because they saw no differences between expectations and rules.

As a follow up to this discussion, participants were asked "Do you feel like these expectations meet the needs of all students?" Many felt that expectations do not meet the needs of all students because of the school's large size and diversity. Interpretations of expectations varied not only from personal beliefs, but also based on race, academic level, maturity and gender. Inclusion is important when developing and teaching school-wide expectations. Not only should they be understood by all students, but they should be representative and meaningful for all students. Without allowing student feedback in the process of constructing and teaching expectations, information can be lost between adults in and interpretations for students.

Academic and Behavior Interventions

Intervention methods were also discussed in regard to behavior, mental health and academic responses. Norah admitted that teenagers can sometimes, "...be a little cranky," but appreciated when teachers can see beyond this to offer help. Participants discussed ways teachers and adults have effectively connected with students to offer interventions.

Behavioral incidents can sometimes be avoided by using de-escalation techniques and talking with students prior to, or at the onset of problems. As teachers build relationships with students, it forms a proactive intervention that offers a safety net when these situations arise. Participants shared examples of this as providing a safe space, having a designated person in the building, adults listening to them in times of stress, and helping them with content when they struggle. Mason describes the importance of these relationships below,

> "Because sometimes teachers will, like, let kids, like, go in their class to eat lunch or, like, go in their class during the free period or something.....Just 'cause they like that teacher and they feel safe with them and they're able to do their work in that class..."

In addition, interventions include simple check ins when kids look down or seem upset to help with behavior. Mason continues, "Not a lot of kids have that opportunity, especially if they act out and stuff...there should be a teacher or an admin, like, someone you feel safe with...at the school. And some kids don't have that."

Participants also shared negative experiences about asking for intervention or help but it was not received. This includes academic support when struggling with a concept, listening to their sides of the stories after an event takes place, or

teachers forgetting to follow up with a plan for a student. Communication breakdowns between students and teachers were frustrating for participants. If they reached out to a teacher for help, and it was not received, they felt teachers were being dismissive of their needs. In addition, an imbalance of flexibility between students with consistent good behavior and bad behavior was noted by Perry, “the people who don't...care or...don't live up to that...they just still get praised. And that person who doesn't live up to the good expectations doesn't, and they get...downed basically.” A focus on improving negative behaviors through positive reinforcement can overshadow small forms of intervention needed to resolve issues before significant behavior changes. Allowing flexibility in responses provides grace to students that present atypical behaviors and those working on improvement. Teacher check-ins and support from adults were offered as positive interventions that resulted in building relationships where students felt supported.

Support from Adults

Holistically, participants defined positive behavior interventions and supports as a combination of relationships and interactions with all members of the school community. Initially, this was reflected in their comments about what made school enjoyable but was echoed in the ways they felt supported at school. Participants mentioned helpful relationships with peers and teachers, both inside the classroom and after school. Extracurricular activities and non-content related discussions helped to build connections between teachers and students. Real world lessons, helping students with goals beyond high school, and moments both groups interacted on a social level were perceived as significant ways participants felt connected to their teachers. Hessa shared that

"...because I came from India, like, teachers (here) are more friendly and caring...," than their previous experience. In essence, moments like these allow the students to see teachers break character from an authoritative classroom role and present themselves on a human level. Not only was this beneficial for students to see, but it mirrored how students wanted to be treated.

Some participants expressed difficulty in relating to peers and how teacher relationships help them feel comfortable. Whether students are shy, feel isolated, have few friends, are going through troubles, they looked to adults for guidance, positive interactions, and support through the high school experience. Mason reminds us of this in the following statement, "Well, obviously they come here because they have to come here...they forget that it can be a good experience sometimes." Changes in PBIS procedures can impact school climate, potentially leading students to feel more positive about school (Elrod, 2022). It is important for teachers to reflect on how practices weave positive experiences into a student's daily life.

Participant Suggestions

Going to school for an education can become a procedure rather than an experience. Adults have the capacity to change the landscape for youth in these experiences. The next section discusses the second major theme: suggestions of how students perceive PBIS could be implemented.

Positive Interactions

Participants had many suggestions on how adults could interact in positive ways with students. Under the first minor theme of experiences, they provided examples of positive praise and recognition. When asked, "How would you define Positive Interventions and Supports?", students articulated ways to make them feel appreciated.

Receiving verbal feedback for continuously doing well was valuable, as was receiving awards through general courses or participation in extracurricular activities. Inclusiveness and nondiscriminatory recognition were emphasized by students. When a small number of focus group members could not recall a moment when a teacher positively recognized them, the other members were visibly disappointed. Discussion included ways to make awards inclusive, continued use of tangible rewards, increase in verbal praise, and proper training on the use of school-wide reward systems to ensure all staff know how to use the tool. Overall, students gave examples of positive recognition experiences but wanted fairness and offered small critiques to improve implementation of existing practices.

Behavior Responses and Expectations

Participants had strong opinions on ways teachers could respond to behaviors. Flexibility of consequences, second chances, mutual respect, maturity and teaching expectations all held importance. Paige suggests that teaching expectations is key, "I think that's a very big one...it helps students know what to do and what not to do." These expectations are later described to set the tone for each school year and how students will act in subsequent years. Norah indicates that actively defining these can make a difference, "...Because we don't understand the reasoning behind it." Intentionally teaching expectations builds common language school-wide and defines specific ways classroom teachers recognize appropriate student behavior (Mathews, 2014). Using this common thread between colleagues creates a shared vision for students, allowing them to recalibrate between teachers and classes. Some participants expected teachers to treat freshman differently from other grades because those students may not understand school procedures. Naomi said, "Because when you're 14 and a freshman, like, you just got out of middle school...totally different than when you're a senior and you've been here for

four years. Like, you know the rules." However, some underclassmen interviewed said that maturity differences should be considered when responding to behavior. Participants provided options of calling home or collaborating with other school personnel to help correct student behavior. In the first focus group, Naomi describes a change in procedures,

> "...I feel like a lot of situations in our school should be handled by admin and not necessarily teachers...admin have been here and have been trained to handle certain situations where teachers haven't...we should definitely use our mental health specialist...because I feel like a lot of people have behavioral issues, um, have, like, underlying mental health issues and I feel like teachers just don't know how to handle that...let someone who actually knows what they're doing solve it."

This brings up an interesting point that some administrators and teachers battle between, who should handle the behavior? In the situation above, Naomi does not distinguish between the level of infraction or how many interventions have been made by a teacher. Instead, the assertion is that support can be offered to resolve the issues when teachers may not seem effective based on underlying issues for which they have not received training.

Equity issues arose because participants felt it would be too difficult to create a set of guidelines that would meet the needs of all students within our academically and racially diverse school. Naomi asserts,

> "I don't want to generalize anyone but I feel like with our African American…there needs to be a different approach than compared to our white population. …I feel like <the school> is too diverse for a school-

> wide thing to work…Some things aren't gonna work for AP kids...Some things are gonna work for general ed kids and the reverse...And some things aren't gonna work for our Black student population and some things aren't gonna work for our Hispanic population and vice versa...<the school> is too diverse and too big."

Naomi's comments display the need for a continuous analysis on how to meet the needs of all students within the school-wide procedures while also being mindful of the differences among the student population. Her suggestions could have stemmed from personal experiences or from observations inside the school. During the first three focus groups, it was apparent that there was a misinterpretation in the question "Are there any differences in how students should be treated based on grade level?" Some of the participants internalized this as academic grades in a course and not the intended discussion around grade level, freshman through seniors. Even though this was a misinterpretation of the question, it is noteworthy that participants were adamant that students be treated fairly and in a non-discriminating way. In their eyes, potential discrimination could be based on academic performance in school, socioeconomic status, gender, and behavior. Participants mentioned that students with lower grades or course levels should not be treated differently from students that were accelerated. However, some respondents said students should be treated differently if they were in advanced or AP level classes versus general level classes. The insinuation between these two things is that higher level courses are expected to have a different type of behavior than general level classes. Participant responses surrounding equity illuminate the need for student input on the implementation of the PBIS framework between including equitable

treatment for all racial backgrounds, course levels, and students with varying grades in coursework.

Not only is student voice important when creating expectations, but also during initial and reteaching moments throughout the school year. By incorporating students in defining and sharing expectations, valuable collaboration is created among students, teachers, and administration. Partnerships like these provide the space for clarifications and changes, especially when school-wide procedures are perceived as unfair or discriminatory.

Proactive Academic and Behavior Interventions

Small interventions are the building block for a positive classroom environment. Participants urged teachers to verbally intervene when they noticed a student was not acting themselves or seemed to struggle with a concept. Academic interventions with struggling students were key components participants used to define PBIS. Perry shared that connecting students with staff members builds a foundation for success because, "a support system really can motivate someone to...be better for themselves and...to reach the expectations." Mason recognizes teachers may not be able to resolve all problems but wanted teachers to offer possible interventions, "...teachers can't solve everyone's problems...But they can be like, 'Hey, not to pry, but what can I do to help?'" Behavior interventions are necessary but members of one focus group expressed caution in how these conversations can go in the following excerpt:

> Raven: Yeah, just like respect others. Don't try coming acting like our parents because y'all ... You know not y'all, but-
>
> Jones: (laughs).

Interviewer: I am an adult here. So, it's fine. Okay.

Jones: I'll have to agree. Because like when you come in, teachers sometimes, they, they just like try to put, throw their authority around.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Jones: And just, and it's like, you're just, you just have to stay there and listen to whatever they say, even if you disagree. So I would just say be willing to communicate with them and try to see their point of view as well.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you guys want to talk about what he said or echo that?

Selah: Yeah, like Jones said, just cause like you're an authority figure doesn't mean like you have to abuse that power.

Naomi also echoes that communication and de-escalation practices and can be used, “I feel like things need to be...de-escalated and broken down...then you can go in and...solve what the actual, like, problem is...” These moments show that students understand the need for intervention, but they want it to be handled in restorative and communicative ways. Empathy and providing space for making changes is also suggested. Baker adds, “Be patient with us and try to see what we’re going through at the time...Because sometimes we might have a bad day or something is going on...”

Supporting and Building Relationships

One of the biggest ways participants defined PBIS was specifically in terms of support. From a teacher's perspective, training has focused on teaching expectations and different ways to intervene, reward, or proactively respond to behavior. When students were asked to define PBIS, they offered ways to support students academically,

emotionally, and relating to student mental health. Participants offered suggestions on supportive ways to interact with students, including what to do and not to do.

Participants gave different scenarios where they thought PBIS involved cultivating relationships between peers, as well as school staff. These points are also referenced while discussing the things that they liked about school and how social interactions get them through the day. Participants expressed the need to be supported and helped by peers, but they also wanted flexible, non-academic times where they could get to know their teachers. Different forms of quality time were important to the participants because they wanted to engage with adults in meaningful and fun ways. Students suggested going outside to enjoy each other's company in a different environment, learning about real life topics that were either adjacent to content or not, and having teachers get involved with their extracurricular activities. Reward activities were important to participants, but they wanted teachers to share in the experience. Participants valued having teachers be a part of their daily lives, and they wanted to include them in engaging activities. Teachers may have reservations about participating in these events, for a variety of reasons, but the kids want them to be part of their high school experience. This need for relationship building shows a level of respect and comradery that can be built between both groups.

At the end of each focus group, participants were asked if they had any questions or comments. This gave them the opportunity to share thoughts previously anticipated that we did not cover. The following exchange took place at the end of the last interview, leaving me with a reminder of the importance behind this research is in conjunction with speaking to colleagues about PBIS. Jones posed a question about effectiveness of incentive practices,

Jones: Do you all think students benefit more when they get a reward, or do you think they work harder when they know-

Interviewer: Well, that's a question for you guys. That would be-

Jones: I would say yeah.

Selah: I think-

Talia: Yeah. Yeah. I would say yeah.

Selah: If you get rewarded, you're definitely going to-

Jones: So, if you don't get a reward, you won't work as hard?

Selah: Me, I would work, I would work as hard regardless. Award or not.

There are a few meaningful takeaways from this exchange including the fact that some students would work harder for an incentive while it may not impact behaviors in others, but ultimately it is important to ask them. Although it is only one component of the PBIS framework, rewards systems are scrutinized. Teachers might resist the use in general because of personal beliefs or training (Bambara, 2012; Bear 2013). It would be beneficial to ask this specific question to students to see how it impacts student behavior. If given the opportunity, this question posed by the participant would be an important one to ask teachers. Moreover, this segment poses a consideration that it is important to ask teachers and administrators how they would define PBIS.

Chapter Summary

High school student focus group interviews were used to uncover student voice related to implementation of the PBIS framework at one high school. A grounded theory approach provided continuous recalibration during thematic coding procedures to best represent participant voices. Open coding was used at the onset of data analysis in the form of comments, followed by axial coding to define details in the data. Two main

themes were found to answer the following research questions: What are high school students' perceptions about the implementation of PBIS framework, both school-wide and in individual classrooms? What do students recognize and positive behavior interventions and supports? Each main theme, student experiences and student suggestions, addressed the research questions respectively. Participant data was later categorized into four minor themes interpreted as past or future events that included positive interactions, responses to behaviors, academic and behavior interventions, and student supports.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Discussion and Conclusions

Enough time has passed for the PBIS framework to take root, be examined, and updated within our education system. Schools that began the implementation process over ten years ago may see cracks in systems, allowing criticism to flatten the potential effectiveness in schools. Incorporating student perspectives provides a new lens to view the PBIS framework.

Participants from this study provided many examples of experiences related to the implementation of PBIS. Students were able to give examples of experiences that exhibited the positive reinforcement of component of PBIS including recognition in the form of verbal, tangible or written rewards. Positive interactions with teachers were described in a vast number of ways, especially given the small number of participants. This suggests that students understand how teachers intend to interact positively with students, but they criticized the frequency and individualization of these attempts. Perceptions captured from students can accompany previous studies about the benefits of individual positive interventions over whole class interventions and regularly recognizing students for regular good behavior (Mathew, 2014; State, 2017).

Above all, participants seemed to have many experiences with both the positive and behavior components of PBIS. Within the study, one of the substantial finding revolved around to suggestions including how teachers could incorporate more forms of interventions and supports for students. Helpfulness and empathy are both behavior and academic interventions participants recognized as PBIS practices. Although some behavior responses described were negative, focus groups attributed this to lack of training, teacher personality, student age, or other circumstances. No malicious intent was

cited as a cause for negative responses to behaviors. Most perceptions of behavior responses included addressing behavior proactively, responding to classroom disruptions, continued efforts to solve the root issues, relying on resources, practicing empathy, and allowing flexibility for consequences. It was not expected that behaviors would be unnoticed or not addressed. Participants also expressed familiarity with teachers attempting to respond to behavior in a variety of ways. Discussions included examples of how to redirect misbehavior or ways teachers reacted to disruptions inside the classroom. There was a variation in whether participants viewed responses to behavior as appropriate based on classroom composition of students, including differences in racial demographics, academic levels, and maturity. Overall classroom management practices of teachers varied when experiences were recalled. Some students expressed frustration with how some behaviors were handled in their experiences and offered solutions they viewed as fair based on a more individualized approach to discipline. However, teaching expected behaviors was not emphasized as an implemented PBIS strategy at the time research was completed. This foundational component of teaching expectations redirects punitive interactions into reaching expectations, creating a positive feedback cycle to help students. Without implementing foundational structures like these, students may not know what teachers expect or how to achieve behavior standards within their school. Furthermore, almost all of the participants concluded that the school-wide expectations had no impact on behavior due to personal beliefs, school size, or diversity. Participants viewed individual teacher behavior responses and classroom expectations as something that does impact student behavior or feelings. Participants felt that behavioral responses should be equitable to all students, expectations should be taught with regularity if they are used to hold students accountable and discipline should be flexible to meet the

individual needs of the student. It should be noted that many behavioral practices and expectations were adjusted due to the historic pandemic events in 2020. Regressions in student behavior, increased teacher flexibility to accommodate student mental health needs, adjustments to high expectations, lack of support during shutdown periods, and reduction in teacher PBIS trainings are components that may be reflected in this data. Further research is needed to revisit implementation practices of PBIS after the pandemic shutdown and subsequent years.

Interventions described in this research include moments between teacher and students that supported both mental health and academic improvement. Responding to students asking for help, recognizing atypical behaviors, and offering supportive assistance to achieve goals are all examples of expected things teachers would do to help students. Being receptive to this immediate need can take many forms but ignoring the opportunity for response can create a lasting negative impression. Responses to behavior and academic needs were both considered forms of interventions for participants. When something was noticeably wrong or different, participants urged teachers to respond or intervene, either to offer academic or emotional support. They also urged teachers to be respectful when communicating and collaborative with students, even if they were addressing misbehavior.

One of the largest pieces to come from participants was the defining characteristics of PBIS surrounding support. Improved communication and building relationships were key to student support. Participants requested spending time with their teachers to learn content related academics as well as real life skills. Teachers were recognized as valued, positive role models that students wished to connect with on a personal level, in addition to academic involvement. Teachers are key to the

implementation of PBIS interventions and practices (Mathews, 2014; State, 2017). For teachers, finding a balance between work life balance is important but it can also prevent building relationships within students outside the school day. However, participants indicated that spending time within the school day would promote feelings of support from their teachers. Overall, support from adults in the building and finding ways to have the two group engage together in meaningful experiences was important form of intervention for participants.

Two additional takeaways include awards from all and equitable responses for behavior. In the PBIS framework, most of a school's population should be meeting the school-wide expectations. In this light, a majority of students should receive positive recognition and encouragement for good behavior. Nonetheless, participants in this group described formal recognitions that were typically teacher generated. If a student does not have a positive relationship, or even a close enough relationship with a teacher to recognize their behavior, it might eliminate methods used to reward students. Automation of awards may seem redundant or less personal to adults, but it provides inclusion and meaning to students that can be overlooked. Participants described the importance of fairness and equity when interacting with and rewarding students. They sought to be understood and acknowledged for consistent behavior but also allowed grace to learn from mistakes without future repercussions. Finding implementation practices and recognitions that can support students at all behavior levels is beneficial.

Implications

The research attempts to further the research on positive behavior interventions and supports by understanding student perceptions to implementation. There are additional aspects of that should be examined related to this topic.

Discipline data is a tool regularly used in PBIS meetings. In future research, participants could be selected based on their office disciplinary occurrences and behavior history. Understanding the student perceptions of PBIS can range greatly, especially in how it is viewed by students with documented behavior issues. Focus groups that specifically included Tier 2 or Tier 3 students could shed light on how implementation of PBIS is interpreted to those students, thus a discussion could be built around student perceived effectiveness and strategies used within classrooms and school-wide.

In addition to studies around behavior differences, future research related to student perceptions based on different ethnic, racial, socioeconomic status, academic standing, and course levels is valuable. As noted in data analysis, participants verbalized that experiences between diverse students can be different. Finding and understanding similarities and differences in perceptions of PBIS is a necessary path for future research.

Chapter Summary

Data from this study shows a unique student perspective for implementation practices of PBIS. They offered examples of positive behavior strategies understood by teachers but also suggested other experiences and additional definitions of support. Still, students struggled to recall the school's defined expectations. Instead, they were able to recall rules that are discussed or infractions they have witnessed or received alongside examples of positive interactions. Clearly communicated expectations are key to implementing the PBIS framework but students may interpret meaning from other interactions as more valuable forms of positive recognition. Interventions and supports were two important suggestions students provided when defining PBIS. Students recognized teacher try to find ways to positively reward students and to address behavior, but what they encouraged was ways teachers could step in to make changes through

intervening when a student began to struggle or finding ways to offer supports and build relationships with their students.

Instead of starting from scratch with a new discipline structure, continued use and reframing school-wide procedures can encourage schools to define PBIS relevance within their own school culture. In other words, by incorporating insights from student voice teams, PBIS could be further adapted to meet the needs of students at a particular school. This process would need a high level of reflectiveness and the right individuals to seek and listen to student voices. This untapped resource is not only valuable but will continuously adapt and evolve as students pass through schools. Not all students are the same and neither are their teachers. Professional development can be cultivated to match current needs to improve implementation and fidelity based on discoveries in student voice inquiries. The inclusion of all stakeholder voices can offer a new meaning to positive interventions and supports.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

All focus group interviews were semi-structured with follow up questions based on the responses to questions included here.

1) What do you like about school?

Prompt: Positive interactions can be made directly to you or about a student with others around.

2) Describe the situation when a teacher positively recognized you for your behavior. Why does it stand out?
    a) Do you recall a moment when a teacher recognized another student for positive behavior, and you were there to witness the situation?
    b) This can include, but is not limited to, a positive comment, note, email, phone call home, a Recognition Referral or Student of the Month referral, e-bucks, etc.
3) What positive behavior strategies do any teachers use with you and/or other students?
4) From your perspective, what stands out as an important way to positively interact with high school students?
    a) How can adults interact positively with high school students?
5) Are there any differences in how teachers should treat students based on grade level?
6) Thinking about your schoolwide expectations, how do they influence student behavior?
    a) Schoolwide expectations are usually a short list of desired student behaviors that your school has taught/advertised regularly.
    b) Do you think these expectations support all students at your school?
7) What advice would you give adults in your school?
8) How would you define PBIS?
9) Do you have any other comments or thoughts you'd like to share with me?
    a) Questions you anticipated me asking that we may not have covered so far?

APPENDIX B. FOCUS GROUP REGISTRATION FORM

PBIS Focus Group Volunteer Form

This form is used to registration participants for a focus group interview about Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

* Required

1. Your school *

   Mark only one oval.

   - ◯ Bryan Station
   - ◯ Dunbar
   - ◯ Fredrick Douglass
   - ◯ Henry Clay
   - ◯ Lafayette
   - ◯ Tates Creek

2. Your Last Name *

   _____

3. Your First Name *

   _____

4. Would you be willing to participate in a focus group discussion about Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) at your school? *

   Mark only one oval.

   - ◯ Yes
   - ◯ No

5. Preferred email *

6. Secondary Email *

7. Grade Level *

Mark only one oval.

- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12

8. Race *

Mark only one oval.

- African American
- Asian
- Hispanic
- White
- 2 or More Races
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

9. Gender *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Female
- ◯ Male
- ◯ Non-binary
- ◯ Prefer not to answer
- ◯ Other: _____

10. Can you access Zoom? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Maybe
- ◯ Other: _____

11. Are you available to meet over Zoom after school? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Maybe
- ◯ Other: _____

Thank you for your response! You will be contacted via email to set up a time for the focus group.

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2013-2016 **University of Kentucky**
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2006-2007 **University of Kentucky**
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