

**Behavioral Interventions to Support Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders:**

**A Research Report**

Camryn Ridpath

Longwood University

SOWK 490

Professor Daniels

March 30th, 2022

### **Abstract**

Children living with emotional and behavioral disorders experience many academic, mental health, and social challenges which impact their ability to succeed and often result in adverse, long-term negative life outcomes for this population. One area in which potential effective interventions and services can be targeted is within their K-12 education. The following research report aims to review the effectiveness of various techniques to be utilized when working with children with emotional and behavioral disorders in an academic setting and discuss ways in which these strategies and interventions are being implemented within an alternative school setting in Cumberland, Virginia.

*Keywords:* Emotional and behavioral disorders, emotional disturbance, student success, special education, mental health, inclusion, alternative education settings

Children living with or at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) experience a number of difficulties and adverse life experiences which contribute to overwhelming instances of poor long-term life outcomes which highlights this population as vulnerable and in need of additional services and supports. More specifically, school-aged children with EBD experience many academic and behavioral challenges which impact their ability to achieve educational success. When compared to students within other disability categories, students with EBD, who make up roughly 6% of the school-aged population, are at the greatest risk for overall academic failure and experience high instances of negative post-school outcomes such as the largest school dropout rates, long-term unemployment, lower earned wages, and increased instances of criminal justice system involvement (Zolkoski, 2019). With such high numbers of the United States population facing the daily consequences of inaction, the proper treatment and support of children and youth living with EBD should be a concern of all people. Children living with these disorders often engage in high levels of internalizing (e.g., avoiding social settings and interactions) and externalizing (e.g., aggression to self and others, using inappropriate language, property destruction) behaviors, which result in students with EBD having fewer opportunities to form meaningful relationships with teachers and peers, observe appropriate classroom behavior, and participate in traditional classroom activities (Weeden et al., 2016). While some children living with EBD can be successful within a typical school setting, many of these youth require levels of additional academic, social, and emotional support that can be achieved in an alternative school setting.

The issue of the lack of effective support and services for children with EBD which results in long-term adverse life outcomes impacts many stakeholders including teachers and

typical students who study alongside students with EBD, parents of children with EBD, law enforcement/the criminal justice system, mental health professionals, and community members. Social workers, specifically those who work in the fields of mental health, criminal justice, community outreach, and education, are significantly impacted by the adverse experiences and outcomes that occur as a result of the lack of funding, services, and support that exist for this population. Moreover, the improper care of children and youth with EBD directly goes against many of the National Association of Social Workers' values including social justice (social workers challenge social injustice), service (social worker's primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems), dignity and worth of a person (social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person), and the importance of human relationships (social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships) (NASW, 2021). It is important for social workers to have, at minimum, a basic understanding of the qualities and characteristics of emotional and behavioral disorders and a desire to help this population in accordance with the NASW Code of Ethics.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher, a senior-level social work student at Longwood University, worked alongside ten students and seven staff members within a private therapeutic day school for students ages eleven to eighteen with emotional and learning disabilities daily for four months. The researcher sought to answer the following two research questions: What interventions are most effective when working with children with or at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders in an academic setting? Secondly, the researcher asks how these strategies can be effectively implemented for students of this population within various alternative school settings?

A fair amount of research has been conducted into a variety of promising techniques and strategies to be utilized when working with children with EBD within the school setting in an effort to improve both educational and overall life outcomes for this population. Upon observing the techniques and strategies of the staff at the therapeutic day school, the researcher found that many of the interventions utilized within this alternative school setting are based on theory and existing literature that has been conducted on this topic. The following is a review of the literature on academic interventions for students with EBD as well as explanations of how each strategy is being implemented by the staff at the therapeutic day school.

### **Positive Teacher-Student Relationships**

The development of positive relationships with trusted adults is commonly understood to be incredibly beneficial in the lives of all children, and especially those who are at risk for adverse life outcomes for a variety of reasons. Children living with EBD are statistically less likely to experience consistent relationships with caring adults throughout their childhoods (Zolkoski, 2019). The following study, conducted by Staci Zolkoski, compared student experiences at alternative and traditional schools and overall reviews the importance of teacher-student relationships for students with emotional and behavioral disorders, more specifically how teachers can promote resilience in students with EBD (Zolkoski, 2019). Resilience is defined in this study as “achieving positive outcomes despite challenges or threatening situations (Zolkoski, 2019).” Zolkoski utilizes the ecological approach which views both risk and resilience factors through the lens of the interactions that individuals have with their community, families, and other social environments (Zolkoski, 2019). The results of the study found that while most students had both positive and negative experiences with their teachers, the majority of

participants expressed having more negative experiences at traditional schools when compared to alternative schools (Zolkoski, 2019). Participants frequently reported that in their traditional school settings, they felt as if their teachers did not care about their success in school or their overall wellbeing (Zolkoski, 2019). Alternatively, participants expressed feeling cared for and valued by their teachers at alternative schools and many noted that this relationship had a significant impact on their education and inspired them to try to work harder and do better for their teachers (Zolkoski, 2019).

Two important themes were uncovered by this study as ways in which teachers can promote resilience in their students with EBD: teachers should actively engage students in the learning process and teachers should show students that they care about them and their success (Zolkoski, 2019). The promotion of resilience among students with EBD improves long-term life outcomes for this population and can be greatly enhanced by the development of positive relationships between students and their teachers (Zolkoski, 2019). A core aspect of the mission of Bear Creek Academy is the development of healthy relationships between students and staff with the goal of promoting the values of respect for self, respect for others, and respect for the community. The author of the article served in a professional capacity as a senior-level social work intern at Bear Creek Academy from the time of January 2022 to April 2022. During this time the researcher observed teachers and counselors consistently striving to promote resilience among the students through engaging students in the learning process and showing them that they genuinely care about each student's ability to work through academic, social, emotional, and behavioral challenges with the support of the staff and their peers.

### **Examination of the Check-In/Check-Out Intervention with Students with EBD**

Check-In/Check-Out (CICO) is a positive support intervention in which an individual student is paired with an adult mentor with the intention of supporting appropriate behavior and addressing and decreasing inappropriate behavior (Swoszowski et al., 2013). The following study analyzed the relationship between this intervention and a single participant's academic performance, office discipline referrals (ODRs), and the percentage of school-wide positive behavior support points earned (SW-PBIS points) over a six-week period (Swoszowski et al., 2013). The sole participant was Laura (pseudonym), a ten-year-old female in the third grade with a diagnosis of EBD living in a residential facility at the time of the study (Swoszowski et al., 2013). Prior to the implementation of this intervention, Laura displayed consistent problem behaviors such as verbal outbursts and physical aggression towards her teachers and peers in both her foster care placement and in school settings (Swoszowski et al., 2013). The CICO support intervention was conducted daily and included Laura meeting with her mentor at the beginning of each day to establish behavioral goals during which she would be given her daily CICO chart that provided her with a visual representation of her class schedule and included a space for her teachers to rate her behavior throughout the day (Swoszowski et al., 2013). At the end of each school day, and after receiving feedback from all of her teachers, Laura met with her mentor to discuss the points she received and review her overall behavior from the day.

Three dependent variables were analyzed for the purpose of this study: SW-PBIS points, student grades, and ODRs (Swoszowski et al., 2013). Significant improvements in all three of these areas occurred over the course of the six-week intervention period including a 56% decrease in ODRs, an 11.19% increase in SW-PBIS points, and an overall GPA increase of .315 (Swoszowski et al., 2013). While generalizability of these results is limited due to the small

sample size of one student, these results indicate that the Check-In/Check-Out positive support intervention was effective in improving academic performance and decreasing instances of problem behavior throughout the school day for the sole participant of the study (Swoszowski et al., 2013).

The Check-In/Check-Out intervention is one that has been implemented at Bear Creek Academy in a few different ways with students who have significant and consistent behavioral challenges. With one of the students, the Check-In/Check-Out intervention is conducted each morning. When the student arrives at school, he goes straight to the school's all-purpose room and is able to relax and get oriented for the day. The student then checks in with one of the counselors and together they discuss whether or not he is ready and able to attend his first block class. If he is, the student and counselor walk together to his classroom and they meet with his teacher to discuss the plan for the day and any needs the student has for his teacher. This intervention has been very effective with this student and has minimized situations where the student has outbursts or causes problems in his first block class. If the student is having an especially difficult day, the counselor will conduct the check-in intervention with him throughout the day as needed.

### **The Implementation of Academic Choice for Students with EBD**

Baseline studies show that when utilized as an educational intervention, the implementation of choice, which provides the ability for individuals to select a specific condition among two or more options, has resulted in increased task and content engagement and an overall reduction in inappropriate classroom behaviors when tested with for students with varying levels of special needs (Skerbetz & Kostewicz, 2013). The following study conducted by



Skerbetz and Kostewicz served to expand the current literature base to specifically analyze how the implementation of choice impacts students with EBD and strived to address the research question: “What effect will providing a choice of assignments during independent activities have on the task engagement and academic performance of students with or at risk for EBD served in an inclusive setting? (Skerbetz & Kostewicz, 2013).”

This study utilized a single-subject reversal experimental design, took place in a public school in a large, urban city, and involved five eighth-grade students - three girls and two boys with an identification of EBD or a status of at-risk for EBD (Skerbetz & Kostewicz, 2013). In order to measure the impact of the four dependent variables which were task engagement, non-task engagement, task accuracy, and task completion time, teachers implemented either no-choice procedures (in which a pre-made series of assignments were given to students for completion) or choice procedures (in which students were allowed ten seconds to choose from one of four assignment types to complete - all covering the same material) (Skerbetz & Kostewicz, 2013). The results of the study showed overall improvement in each of the areas outlined by the dependent variables for all participants except one, who appeared to be unaffected by the condition change (Skerbetz & Kostewicz, 2013). In regards to academic engagement and non-engagement, four of the five participants demonstrated either clear or moderate increases in engagement levels when provided with academic choice (Skerbetz & Kostewicz, 2013). Task accuracy and task completion time were also improved in four of the five participants when choice procedures were implemented (Skerbetz & Kostewicz, 2013). Data collected from four of the five student participants indicated a functional relationship between all three dependent variables and the implementation of assignment choice, suggesting that this

intervention may produce positive academic and behavioral gains for students with EBD (Skerbetz & Kostewicz, 2013).

Academic choice is consistently implemented as an intervention at Bear Creek Academy. Rather than granting the students the opportunity to fully choose what they want to do on any given day, the teachers often give students the option between two or more assignments that will need to be completed. Ultimately, all of the assignments will be completed, but through the intervention of choice, the teacher empowers the student to decide which assignment they would like to focus on first. Additionally, students are given ten to fifteen-minute breaks during almost every class period and they often have the ability to decide what they want to do for break such as go outside, draw, play a card game, or go on the computer. This has been a highly effective intervention when working with this population.

### **Methodological Plan**

The methodology utilized for the present research study is a type of qualitative inquiry known as ethnography, in which data is collected through the collection of real-life interviews, observations, and documentary data to investigate different social phenomena (Reeves et al., 2013). For this research study, the phenomena being studied are in regards to the educational success of children with or at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders within an alternative school setting, specifically Bear Creek Academy in Cumberland, Virginia. Over the course of a four-month internship, the researcher located a key stakeholder within the alternative school (the social worker's supervisor), and together they reviewed the research process and discussed the data that has been reviewed in this proposal. Upon presentation of the data, the researcher conducted a needs assessment with the help of stakeholders to build on the foundational research

that has been conducted into effective interventions for students with or at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders and allow for a starting point regarding how the stakeholders would like to proceed. Qualitative data in the primary form of interviews and observations were conducted by the researcher over the approximate span of a four-month period from January 2022 to April 2022 with staff at Bear Creek Academy, an alternative educational setting for students aged eleven to eighteen who have not thrived in traditional school settings due to various mental, behavioral, and emotional adversities.

### **Ethics Statement**

The complete protection of the privacy and rights of all research participants were ensured throughout the duration of the research study. To achieve this, full consent was obtained from all participants in advance of any data collection. A high level of confidentiality of the data was ensured through the use of anonymity of all research participants and involved organizations. This qualitative study is unlikely to create any risk of harm because it only seeks to derive input rather than test the effect of any intervention on a subject, nevertheless, Longwood University's IRB (Institutional Review Board) chair was consulted with assistance from the researcher's supervisor and it was determined that the IRB did not need to be involved due to the present project not qualifying as human sciences research.

### **Statement of Limitations**

As with any research study, there are some limitations to the present research being conducted including the small sample size, the self-reported nature of the data, and the inability to determine longitudinal effects due to the short-term nature of the study. In regards to the small sample size, the total number of students and staff at the alternative school utilized for this study

is less than twenty-five, resulting in a relatively small potential sample size for this study. This limitation results in the sample being not being the most culturally and ethnically diverse and may not represent the demographics of the community or agency. This limitation was unavoidable and should be considered when analyzing the data collected. The next limitation of this study involves the self-reported nature of the data which allows for an increased amount of personal bias and impacts the ability of the data to be independently verified. The last major limitation of this study is the short period of time in which the study will be taking place (less than five months) which limits the researcher's ability to determine any longitudinal effects of the data. The short study time is unavoidable in this case and is due to the researcher collecting data throughout the duration of their five-month-long internship at Bear Creek Academy. It is suggested that further research should be conducted on multiple alternative schools (rather than just one) and that more long-term data should be collected to allow for the generalizability of the study and determination of longitudinal effects.

### **Policy Implications and Conclusion**

Existing data has produced many valuable trends in research that supports the implementation of various teacher-led interventions such as CICO programs, academic choice, and group contingency procedures. Across all foundational studies, the data show that when teachers and support staff show students that they truly care for them and want them to succeed, through the development of positive relationships and an overall willingness to implement new interventions to inspire success, greater behavioral, mental health, and educational outcomes result for students with EBD. Over the course of the researcher's internship at Bear Creek Academy, data collected in the form of observations and interviews with staff provide real-life

examples of these valuable interventions being utilized in an alternative classroom setting. Additionally, the staff at Bear Creek Academy consistently displayed care and concern for their student's success and well-being as well as constantly worked to develop healthy and genuine relationships with students built on the values of empathy, trust, and a desire to help them grow into physically and emotionally healthy adults. This study utilized a type of qualitative inquiry known as ethnography to collect data on the educational success of children with or at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders. The present study builds on current literature and further highlights the need for more research to be conducted into effective interventions for this population. Additional studies should evaluate the presence and effectiveness of interventions that are being facilitated within other alternative school settings across the United States and beyond. Due to the current high rates of long-term adverse life experiences and outcomes facing individuals with EBD, the need for a significant increase in the overall awareness and levels of educational support for this population is clear.

## References

- National Association of Social Workers. (2017). NASW code of ethics. <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>
- Reeves, S., Peller, J., Goldman, J., & Kitto, S. (2013). Ethnography in qualitative educational research: AMEE guide no. 80. *Medical Teacher*, 35(8). <https://doi.org/10.3109/0142159x.2013.804977>
- Skerbetz, M. D., & Kostewicz, D. E. (2013). Academic choice for included students with emotional and behavioral disorders. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 57(4), 212-222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988x.2012.701252>
- Swoszowski, N. C., Jolivette, K., & Fredrick, L. D. (2013). Addressing the Social and Academic Behavior of a Student with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders in an Alternative Setting. *Journal of Classroom Interaction*, 48(1), 28–36.
- Weeden, M., Wills, H. P., Kottwitz, E., & Kamps, D. (2016). The effects of a class-wide behavior intervention for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. *Behavioral Disorders*, 42(1), 285-293. <https://doi.org/10.17988/bd-14-12.1>
- Zolkoski, S. M. (2019). The importance of teacher-student relationships for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 63(3), 236-241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988x.2019.1579165>