



Implementing Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) With Fidelity: Secondary School Staff Members' Descriptions of School Climate

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Abstract

Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) is a schoolwide initiative implemented in many schools to address discipline concerns and promote a positive school climate. This phenomenological study examined the school climate perceptions of 12 staff members from three secondary schools in two North Carolina school districts that implemented PBIS with fidelity. All 12 participants favorably described their school climate after PBIS had been implemented with fidelity. Additionally, study participants reported improved discipline practices, as well as improved practices for acknowledging positive student behavior. This study's findings fill a gap in the existing body of literature, regarding the implementation of PBIS in secondary schools, and provide additional support for the use of PBIS to improve school climate in secondary schools.

Keywords: *discipline, Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS), school climate, phenomenology*

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Introduction

There is a need to examine alternatives to traditional discipline practices in secondary schools. Traditional discipline practices rely on punitive and exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension and expulsion from school, to address student discipline issues (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2019; Weaver & Swank, 2020). Many middle and high schools across the United States continue to implement traditional discipline practices that researchers have identified as ineffective at producing positive student outcomes (Curran, 2016; Moreno, 2021). Although researchers have associated traditional discipline practices with adverse school climates, poor academic outcomes, increased student dropout rates, and disproportionate discipline practices (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2019; Weaver & Swank, 2020), secondary school leaders have continued to utilize traditional discipline practices (Curran, 2016). Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) is a framework for addressing student behavior and improving school climate that many school leaders have turned to as an alternative method for ineffective traditional discipline practices (Gagnon et al., 2020).

According to the pioneering research of Sugai and Horner (2002), PBIS is an evidence-based schoolwide approach for managing problem student behavior while also fostering a positive school climate through the reinforcement of prosocial student behavior. More recently, PBIS has been defined as a systems approach to establishing the social culture and behavioral supports needed for all students in a school to achieve both social and academic success (Pas et al., 2019). The key features of the PBIS framework include teaching a well-defined small number of positively stated schoolwide expectations, an acknowledgment system for prosocial student behavior, and the establishment of a continuum of consequences so that discipline is consistent and replacement behaviors are taught (Pas et al., 2019). School teams are trained first in the PBIS framework, and then develop a plan for the schoolwide implementation that is specific to the data-based needs of the school (Bradshaw et al., 2021; Horner & Sugai, 2015).

Although researchers have examined the relationship between the implementation of PBIS and establishing and maintaining a positive school climate, more information is needed. The implementation of schoolwide PBIS is intended to improve school climate and address student behavior throughout the school environment (Bradshaw et al., 2021; Smolkowski et al., 2016). One longitudinal study of secondary schools revealed a relationship exists between the implementation of PBIS and improved school climate in secondary schools (Elrod et al., 2021). However, most of the current PBIS-related research had a primary focus on the impact of PBIS in elementary schools (Gagnon et al., 2020; Pas et al., 2019). Limited research has been conducted related to PBIS implementation, specifically in secondary schools (Elrod et al., 2021; Gagnon et al., 2020). Furthermore, many PBIS-related research studies are quantitative in nature and do not examine the school climate perceptions of the study participants (Freeman et al., 2016).

Purpose of the Study

This phenomenological study aimed to examine how secondary school staff members in the Southeastern region of North Carolina perceived school climate after PBIS had been implemented with fidelity. PBIS was defined based on the early work of Sugai and Horner (2002) and the current work of Pas et al. (2019), as a data-driven systematic framework that incorporates multiple tiers of evidence-based practices to promote positive behavioral change in students and to meet the academic, social, and behavioral needs of all students by fostering a positive school climate. There is a limited amount of research examining the benefits of implementing PBIS in secondary schools (Elrod et al., 2021) and the experiences of school staff members through the use of qualitative research methods (Freeman et al., 2016). To address the need for further qualitative research and to determine what impact, if any, the implementation of PBIS may have on the experiences of staff members in secondary schools, this phenomenological study posed two questions: “How do various secondary school staff members describe school climate when a school has implemented PBIS with fidelity?” and “What benefits, if any, do secondary school staff members experience from implementing PBIS?”

Method

A qualitative phenomenological research design was appropriate for this study to obtain the essence of the experiences of secondary school staff members after PBIS was implemented with fidelity. This research design was selected because many other researchers of PBIS have chosen to utilize a quantitative research design that does not examine the perceptions of study participants (Freeman et al., 2016). Since the purpose of the study was to understand the phenomenon of implementing PBIS in secondary schools through an examination of participant perspectives of school climate after PBIS had been implemented with fidelity at their schools, a phenomenological research design was best for achieving that purpose. Data for the study were analyzed by describing participants' personal experiences with the phenomenon, such as developing a list of specific statements from the participant, organizing the statements into themes, and describing what the participants experienced, how the experience happened, and the essence of the experience incorporating textual and structural descriptions.

Setting and Participants

The Southeastern region of North Carolina served as the setting for this study. This region of North Carolina was selected for the study because each district within the region had more than one school currently implementing PBIS, which were conveniently located near the primary researcher. To ensure participants were selected from schools implementing PBIS with fidelity, a list of current School Evaluation Tool (SET) scores of schools in the region was obtained from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. A school is considered to be implementing PBIS with fidelity with a SET score of 80% or above on the overall implementation scale (Ryoo et al., 2018).

Six districts in the region had secondary schools with a SET score above 80, so each district was sent an email inviting them to participate in the study. The two school districts that returned an email answering the request to participate in the study were in rural and urban geographic locations, respectively. In the larger of the two districts, the average daily enrollment of students was 50,485 with 45% of students identifying as Black, 31% White, 12% Hispanic, and 12% other races, while 64.3% of the students received free or reduced lunch (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2016). The smaller school district had an average daily enrollment of 4,571 students with 38% of students identifying as Black, 39% White, 15% Hispanic, and 8% other races, with 59.5% of the students receiving free or reduced lunch (NCDPI, 2016).

This phenomenological study included a small sample of secondary school staff members from three different school locations within the two school districts. A phenomenological approach to qualitative research involves collecting data from a small number of participants who have experienced the same phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Initially, all administrators, teachers, assistant teachers, and counselors of the three schools identified as implementing PBIS with fidelity using the schools' most recent SET score were sent an email inviting them to participate in the study.

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants based on their relevance to the research question (Schwandt, 2015). Potential participants, who replied to the email, were asked if they were employed at the school before the school began implementing PBIS. Only 12 participants responded that they were employed before the school implemented PBIS. All 12 agreed to participate in the study. The participants included two principals, one assistant principal, two teacher assistants, and seven teachers from two middle schools and one high school. Table 1 provides additional information about the participants of the study by school site using pseudonyms.

Table 1. *Participant Description by School Site*

Participant pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Staff position	Years in the field	District pseudonym	School pseudonym
Allen	Male	Black	Assistant Principal	13	Coastal	Holly Middle
Kim	Female	White	Teacher	10	Coastal	Holly Middle
Myra	Female	Black	Teacher	28	Coastal	Holly Middle
Rose	Female	Black	Teacher Assistant	7	Coastal	Holly Middle
Brent	Male	White	Principal	19	Riverside	Westgate High
Linda	Female	Black	Teacher	4	Riverside	Westgate High
Todd	Male	White	Teacher	7	Riverside	Clover Middle
Tammy	Female	White	Teacher	10	Riverside	Clover Middle
Christy	Female	White	Principal	19	Riverside	Clover Middle
Jan	Female	White	Teacher	12	Riverside	Clover Middle
Ben	Male	Black	Teacher	3	Riverside	Clover Middle
Kay	Female	Black	Teacher Assistant	22	Riverside	Clover Middle

Data Collection and Analysis

For this research study, semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and writing prompt responses were used to collect data from the research participants. The voice of the study participants was enhanced by following a sequence of data collection so that each component of data built upon the other.

The first source of data collection was semi-structured interviews, which allowed the participants an opportunity to become comfortable talking about their experiences individually before sharing their experiences with other participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

After interviews were conducted and transcribed, the interview participants took part in an online focus group. Focus groups are ideal for exploring the experiences, opinions, wishes, and concerns of study participants. To reflect a traditional face-to-face focus group and to provide a convenient meeting format for the study participants, a synchronous online format was used to conduct the focus group (Gaiser & Schreiner, 2009).

The final method of data collection included gathering responses to a writing prompt, since open-ended writing prompts can produce a rich source of qualitative data (Patton, 2015). Following the ideas of Moustakas (1994) and Creswell and Poth (2018), the data gathered from the interviews, focus group, and written responses were analyzed by first using statements to describe the participants' personal experiences with the phenomenon, then sorting those statements into open codes, followed by organizing the open codes into themes, and finally developing a central theme that described what the participants experienced.

Results

The participants of this phenomenological study shared a great deal of information about their experiences with school climate and the implementation of PBIS in middle and high schools. Interestingly, all participants shared similar perceptions of school climate after the implementation of PBIS and credited some aspect of the PBIS framework for enhancing their school's climate despite their varying positions, different school locations, and different district locations. Additionally, each study participant shared how implementing PBIS enhanced specific school practices at their school. Analysis of the data gathered from the study participants revealed two central themes that formed the answers to the two research questions.

Research Question One

The theme, "Experienced a positive school climate," emerged from the data and formed the answer to the first research question: How do various secondary school staff members describe school climate when a school is implementing PBIS with fidelity? This theme represents how participants experienced a positive school climate after the implementation of PBIS at their schools. The three open codes that were used to formulate this theme described the climate of the schools at the time of the study as positive, friendly and welcoming, and motivating. When analyzed, these three open codes with high reoccurring frequencies depicted a common experience related to a positive school climate after the implementation of PBIS. These three frequently reoccurring codes were (a) described the current school climate as positive; (b) described the current school climate as friendly or welcoming; and (c) described the current climate as motivating. Table 2 illustrates how the three open codes were developed through the identified participant statements and their relative frequencies across data sets.

Described current school climate as positive. This open code emerged during the analysis of the individual interview transcriptions and appeared again during the coding of the writing prompt responses. Participant perceptions of a positive school climate first emerged when participants responded to interview Question 4: Describe the current climate of your school. In their responses, seven out of 12 participants explicitly described their current school climate as positive. While five out of the 12 participants did not explicitly use the term *positive* to describe their school climate, their responses were determined to be reflective of a positive school climate. Analysis of the written responses to the writing prompt revealed that all 12 participants replied to the prompt by portraying their school's current climate using terms that were reflective of a positive school climate. However, only two out of the 12 participants explicitly used the term *positive* to describe their school's current school climate.

Described current school climate as friendly/welcoming. The participants' perception of a current school climate that was either friendly or welcoming first surfaced during the focus group session. Three out of 12 participants identified the terms "friendly" or "welcoming" in their initial post when posting a response to the focus group discussion question: describe your school in three words. In their follow-up discussion, these participants posted a response that affirmed how their school's climate was either friendly or welcoming. These reoccurring statements emerging from the focus group transcriptions were used to form the code. The code resurfaced when the writing prompt responses were analyzed. In their writing prompt response, two of the 12 participants described their school as more welcoming since the implementation of PBIS in their school. These five reoccurring statements formed an open code that was categorized as "reflective of a positive school climate."

Described current climate as motivating. This code emerged during the analysis of the individual interview transcriptions and reappeared during the analysis of the focus group transcriptions. During their interview, when asked to describe their school's current climate, two of the 12 participants described their current school climate as motivating to students. At the conclusion of the focus group session, when asked if

there were anything else they would like to share, three of the 12 participants commented about their school climate being more motivating since the implementation of PBIS. These five reoccurring statements formed the second open code that was categorized as “Reflective of a positive school climate.”

The theme, “experienced improved school practices after implementing PBIS with fidelity,” surfaced from the data to form the answer to the second research question: What benefits, if any, do secondary school staff members experience from implementing PBIS with fidelity? This theme developed from two open codes with high reoccurring frequencies that, when analyzed, revealed that study participants shared a common experience of improved school practices as a result of implementing PBIS. The two frequently reoccurring codes that formed the theme were (a) improvement in ineffective and inconsistent discipline practices; and (b) improved practices for acknowledging positive student behavior. Table 3 illustrates how the two open codes were established through the identified participant statements and their relative frequencies across data sets.

Improved discipline practices. The code, “improved discipline practices,” first surfaced during the transcription of the individual interviews, reappeared during the transcription of the focus group discussion, and occurred again in the participant responses to the writing prompt. During the individual interviews, six of the 12 participants shared that their school’s discipline practices were inconsistent before the implementation of PBIS and credited PBIS for improving their school’s discipline practices. During the focus group discussion, four of the 12 participants agreed that the PBIS practice of establishing a schoolwide discipline flowchart was an important factor in improving their school’s discipline practices. Two of the 12 participants’ responses to the writing prompt reinforced that PBIS improved the consistency of discipline practices at their school.

Improved practices for acknowledging positive student behavior. The code, “improved practices for acknowledging positive student behavior,” emerged from reoccurring statements found during the analysis of the individual interviews and focus group transcriptions. The code first appeared in the participants’ responses to being asked how the implementation of PBIS has influenced the school climate in their school during the individual interviews. Two of the 12 participants responded by describing how school staff were more accountable and more consistent in acknowledging positive student behavior since the implementation of PBIS. The code reappeared during the analysis of the focus group transcriptions when six of the 12 participants engaged in a discussion about how implementing PBIS in their schools improved the way that staff responded to positive student behavior.

Table 3. *Open-Code Frequency*

Open Code	Frequency across data sets	Statements
Improvement in ineffective and inconsistent discipline practices	12	<p>“Our school had a reputation for discipline issues.”</p> <p>“The approach we take toward discipline is more effective than years past.”</p> <p>“We had a lot of write-ups. A lot of suspensions.”</p> <p>“PBIS has made our school more consistent in the way we approach discipline.”</p> <p>“Our discipline practices have also become more consistent.”</p> <p>“I’ve seen the change. When I arrived the discipline climate was bad.”</p> <p>“I was here when we were not very consistent with what was going on. Each teacher had their own management plan. With PBIS that changed.”</p> <p>“All staff now use a discipline flow chart, so we have a consistent approach to discipline.”</p> <p>“Since expectations are taught, and consequences are doled out evenly/fairly, ambiguity has been eliminated, and teachers (as well as students) have a clear understanding of how things are run.”</p> <p>“Since the implementation of a school-wide PBIS, discipline is down, and expectations for a safe and orderly environment has increased.”</p>
Improved practices for acknowledging positive student behavior	8	<p>“I think that PBIS provides a framework that kids learn what the expectations are and that we deliver the goods [rewards] when we say we are.”</p> <p>“Staff members are more consistent with how students are rewarded, and in turn, the students are more consistent with their behavior.”</p> <p>“Establishing, teaching and the reinforcement of school-wide expectations, this has been the key for us.”</p> <p>“I see the kids trying harder to earn praise and rewards.”</p> <p>“Kids do better when the adults look for the good in kids. Looking for the good changed the climate at my school.”</p>

Summary of Findings

The participants in this phenomenological study worked at three different secondary schools located in two different school districts in the Southeastern region of North Carolina. The study participants disclosed information about their school’s climate both before and after the implementation of PBIS. They shared a great deal of information about their experiences with implementing PBIS in secondary schools and their similar perceptions of school climate after the implementation of PBIS in their schools.

Analysis of the data revealed two central themes, “experienced a positive school climate” and “experienced improved school practices after implementing PBIS with fidelity,” that answered the two research questions posed. The results of this study show that all participants perceived a positive school climate at their school as related to the implementation of PBIS. The results of the study also showed that each of the participants experienced improved school practices after the implementation of PBIS.

The results of this study suggested that secondary school staff members described their school climate in positive terms after their school reached fidelity in the implementation of PBIS. During the interviews, each of the participants described their school's climate after the implementation of PBIS in positive terms. Each participant also used positive terms when asked to describe their school climate after the implementation of PBIS in one sentence in the final stage of data collection. Not one participant associated the implementation of PBIS with a negative school climate.

Additionally, the results of the study revealed an improvement in specific school practices after the implementation of PBIS. The consistency in which participants experienced a positive school climate after the implementation of PBIS and shared benefits of implementation, despite their different school and district settings, provided firm support for the implementation of PBIS in secondary schools.

Discussion

This phenomenological research study brought to light empirical and practical implications that may be beneficial to district leaders and school administrators who are leading the implementation of PBIS in secondary schools. The implication value of this study assists in determining the strengths and weaknesses in studying what influence the implementation of PBIS with fidelity may have on the school climate perceptions of secondary school staff members. The implications resulting from this study could guide the decision-making process of implementing PBIS at the local school district level, as well as at the individual school level.

Empirical Literature Discussion

The results of this phenomenological study contributed to the existing body of literature that supports the implementation of PBIS to bring about school climate change. Many teachers, schools, and school districts, across the nation, struggle to address the problem behavior of students and maintain a positive school climate (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2019). The PBIS framework is intended to improve school climate and intended to address student behavior throughout the school environment (Bradshaw et al., 2021; Smolkowski et al., 2016). The results of this research study uncovered that all 12 participants described their school climate favorably after the implementation of PBIS with fidelity. During their interview, seven of the participants explicitly used the term *positive* to describe their current school climate. The other five participants used terms such as *welcoming*, *friendly*, and *motivating* that were determined to be reflective of a positive school climate. Due to the consistency in which the study participants experienced an improved school climate, the results of this study provided significant additional support for the use of the PBIS framework as a method for improving school climate.

This research study specifically contributed to the existing body of literature, regarding the implementation of PBIS in secondary schools, as a method for improving school climate. Much of the existing PBIS research had a primary focus on its implementation in elementary schools (Pas et al., 2019), and a limited amount of research was available regarding to the implementation of PBIS in secondary schools (Elrod et al., 2021; Gagnon et al., 2020). This study adds to the body of literature supporting a relationship between PBIS and a positive school climate in secondary schools.

Implications for District Leaders

School district leaders who are considering the implementation of PBIS in secondary schools could use this study to help guide their decision-making process. It is essential that district leaders maintain positive school climates and safe school environments (Elrod et al., 2021). The results of this study support the implementation of PBIS in secondary schools as a practice to promote a positive school climate.

Each of the 12 participants described their school's climate in positive terms after the implementation of PBIS with fidelity at their school. Just as the results of this study could be used to establish district support for the implementation of PBIS, the positive school climate perceptions shared by the study participants could be used by district leaders to encourage middle and high schools in their district to implement PBIS.

District support has also been identified as an important aspect of sustaining PBIS implementation (McIntosh et al., 2018). Additionally, the results of the study may contribute to the decision making of district leaders with regard to how they will demonstrate their support of PBIS in secondary schools. Those decisions could then potentially improve the sustainability of PBIS in the district's secondary schools.

Implications for School Administrators

Through the knowledge gained from examining the perceptions of secondary school staff members who participated in this phenomenological study, school administrators may be more prepared to support the implementation of PBIS in their school. Classroom teachers have conveyed that PBIS becomes a priority within a school when the school administrators are actively involved in implementation (McIntosh et al., 2018). The results of this study provide secondary school administrators with insightful information on how secondary staff members perceived school climate after PBIS had been implemented with fidelity and the perceived benefits of implementation at their schools. This information can be used by school administrators to gain an understanding of how implementing PBIS may influence their school climate and thus elicit the support of staff in the implementation of schoolwide PBIS.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations of this phenomenological study occurred as a result of the choices made related to the setting of the study and the selection of the study participants. The schools selected as sites for gathering study participants were purposely limited to secondary schools scoring at or above 80 on the SET, which indicated the school was implementing PBIS with fidelity. Study participants were also purposely limited to only secondary school staff members who were employed both before and after the school implemented PBIS. These delimitations provided an intended boundary to the reach of the study results.

Along with the presented delimitations, this study was also not without limitations. The results of the study are limited by the study's ability to be generalized to other geographical locations. Although the participants were staff members from three different secondary schools located in two different school districts, the study was still limited to a regional portion of the state of North Carolina. An additional limitation of the study may be the voluntary nature of the study. The desire to participate in the study may have limited the data collected from the study participants. A preconceived positive perception of PBIS by the participants may have impacted their willingness to participate in the study and thus limited the data collected. These factors limit the generalizability of the conclusions that may be drawn from the results of this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Given the findings of this phenomenological research study, along with its delimitations and limitations, further research is recommended. Specifically, further research is recommended that replicates the methods of this study in other geographic locations and research that further investigates the relationship between the implementation of PBIS and school climate in secondary schools. Because this study was limited to the Southeastern region of North Carolina, additional studies replicating the methods of this study should be conducted in other schools across the nation. Since only two of the study participants were from a high school setting, additional research using high school settings should be conducted. Although this study addressed the

need for research investigating the relationship between the implementation of PBIS and school climate in secondary schools, further research is needed to confirm if other secondary schools experience a positive relationship between implementing PBIS and school climate outcomes. These recommendations for further research are based on the findings of this study, which revealed that the implementation of PBIS with fidelity resulted in participants indicating that they perceived a positive influence on school climate.

Conclusion

This phenomenological research study was developed to explore how secondary school staff members perceived school climate after the implementation of PBIS. The lived experiences of the study participants provided insight on the implementation of PBIS in secondary schools, and the staff's perception of the influence of PBIS implementation on school climate. Expanding on current literature, this research study examined the school climate perceptions of different secondary school staff members after their school had implemented PBIS with fidelity to identify any potential consistencies in the perceptions of those staff members.

With the consistency in which the study participants experienced an improved school climate, the results of this study provided significant support for the implementation of PBIS in secondary schools and contributed to the existing body of literature regarding its implementation, specifically in secondary schools. The results of this study indicated that the implementation of PBIS with fidelity had a notably positive influence on participant perceptions of their schools' climate.

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