

USE OF BEHAVIOR-SPECIFIC PRAISE TO IMPROVE LEARNING OUTCOMES IN  
INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

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## DEDICATION

For my mom and dad, Eileen and Clifford Weinstein, who instilled the value of education in me and helped me to believe I could do anything I set my mind on. Thank you, mom, especially, for your never-ending patience, support, and love.

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## ABSTRACT

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### USE OF BEHAVIOR-SPECIFIC PRAISE TO IMPROVE LEARNING OUTCOMES IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

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General education teachers need to be equipped with effective evidence-based practices to meet the needs of the growing population of students with an emotional and behavioral disorder (EBD), at risk for EBD, or who engage in challenging behavior in the classroom. General education teachers often lack training on working with these students and may be overwhelmed by the challenges these students may present (Allday et al., 2012). While research targeting improved academic outcomes for students with EBD is limited, there is enough to provide some foundational strategies for teachers (Lane, Barton-Arwood, Nelson, & Wehby, 2008; Sutherland & Wehby, 2001). However, the gap between research on practices that effectively improve academic outcomes for this population and those practices being implemented continues to exist. One example of this disconnect is teachers' inconsistent use of praise for students with EBD; praise is not used consistently in classrooms with students with EBD (Briere, Simonsen, Sugai & Myers, 2015; Gable, Tonelson, Sheth, Wilson & Park, 2012). The current study examined

if teachers' knowledge of and practices in providing behavior-specific praise (BSP) to students with EBD, at risk of EBD, or who otherwise engage in challenging behaviors align with the indications from current research; that is, do teachers have the background knowledge and skills to improve the learning-task engagement and academic performance of elementary students with EBD, at risk of EBD, or who engage in challenging behaviors in the classroom? Descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency distributions, mean) were calculated to gain an understanding of the teachers' current knowledge and practices delineated in the survey. Qualitative data from open-ended questions were analyzed to identify themes and patterns; six themes emerged. Findings from this study revealed that most teachers know and understand the difference between general praise (GP) and BSP and they are using BSP with students with emotional/behavioral difficulties in inclusive classrooms. Teachers in this study indicated that they felt emotional/behavioral difficulties interfere with overall student learning and engagement during academic instruction and academic tasks, but less than half indicated that they felt confident supporting the academic needs of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties; participants also indicated a need for additional strategies to manage the behavior of these students.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: PROSPECTUS

The various dynamics of a classroom can be challenging for any teacher, regardless of years of experience or quality and quantity of training. Student behavior that does not meet classroom expectations can cause numerous challenges and contribute to poor academic achievement, poor social and emotional skills, and poor teacher retention (Conroy, Sutherland, Snyder, Al-Hendawi, & Vo, 2009; Kennedy & Jolivette, 2008; Wehby, Lane, & Falk, 2003; Allday et al., 2012; Evans, Weiss, & Cullinan, 2012; Lane et al., 2008). As a result of the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004 and the No Child Left Behind Act (now the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA), there is an increased focus on meaningful outcomes for students with disabilities. Because education reformers are looking to give students with disabilities greater access to the general education curriculum, students with disabilities are being educated alongside their non-disabled peers more often, and the push for more inclusive practices has continued to intensify (Bradley, Doolittle, & Bartolotta, 2008; Ross-Hill, 2009).

Today, more students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) are being educated in regular public schools; many of these students spend at least a portion of their school day included in general education classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), where general education teachers may lack training in supporting students with EBD. In fact, an estimated 80% of students with

EBD receive some or all of their schooling in general education settings (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Inclusion can be challenging for general education teachers, who may be unprepared or under-prepared to educate and accommodate students with disabilities in their classrooms (Allday et al., 2012; Fullerton, Conroy, & Correa, 2009; Nagle, Yunker, & Malmgren, 2006; Ross-Hill, 2009). These challenges include teachers' fear of inadequacy at meeting students' needs, time constraints and allocation, need for additional resources, staff support and strong leadership, teacher efficacy, knowledge of effective strategies, and disruptive behavior in the classroom (Evans et al., 2012; Fuchs, 2010; Ross-Hill, 2009; Shady, Luther & Richman, 2013).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Teachers often describe challenging student behavior and related issues as the most stressful part of their teaching career and frequently request assistance with classroom and behavior management (Evans et al., 2012; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Lambert, McCarthy, O'Donnell, & Wang, 2009). Furthermore, students who frequently engage in challenging behavior may disrupt teacher instruction, impede others' learning, and limit their own opportunities for academic and social success (Allday et al., 2012; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). In addition, research has regularly found that students with EBD face poor academic outcomes (Bradley et al., 2008; Wagner, 1995; Wagner & Davis, 2006). For example, students with EBD often receive lower grades, are less likely to pass classes, and experience higher rates of school dropout than students without disabilities and those with other high-incidence disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities; Wagner, Cameto, & National Center on Secondary Education and Transition [NCSET], 2004).



Elementary students with EBD often score below the 25th percentile on reading, math, and written expression measures (Lane et al., 2008; Reid, Gonzalez, Nordness, Trout, & Epstein, 2004). Given these academic concerns, interventions for students with EBD may be more effective if they have both academic and behavioral components.

Education law (e.g., IDEA, ESSA) indicates that schools should be implementing evidence-based practices that positively impact both student and teacher behavior.

Research has identified multiple evidence-based classroom management strategies that are associated with preventing problem behavior, increasing appropriate social behavior, and increasing students' engagement with learning tasks to improve social and academic outcomes for a diverse group of students (Cavanaugh, 2013; Sutherland, Wehby, & Copeland, 2000). Since poor behaviors have negative effects on student learning, teacher instruction, and classroom environment, it is essential that teachers are equipped with strategies to effectively manage behavior in the classroom. Teachers who are effective classroom managers have a higher likelihood of academic and social success for their students (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jenkins, Floress, & Reinke, 2015; Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, & Sugai, 2008).

### **Rationale for the Study**

One evidence-based practice associated with improved student behavior is specific praise. Teacher-provided behavior specific praise (BSP) has been associated with a reduction in students' off-task behavior (e.g., Allday et al., 2012; Fullerton et al., 2009; Myers, Simonsen, & Sugai, 2011; Sutherland et al., 2000) and a decrease in students' disruptive behavior (e.g., Dufrene, Lestremau & Zoder-Martell, 2014; Myers et al., 2011;

Pisacreta, Tincani, Connell, & Axelrod, 2011). BSP consists of a verbal statement that communicates positive feedback to a student; this statement is delivered contingent on an appropriate or desired specific academic or social behavior. BSP is most effective when delivered immediately following the desired behavior (Jenkins et al., 2015; Simonsen et al., 2008; Sutherland et al., 2000).

Research has demonstrated a functional relationship between increased rates of BSP, reductions in student disruptive behavior, and increases in on-task behavior, including a positive relationship between students' academic engagement time and academic achievement (Brophy, 2006; Hattie, 2009). Teacher behaviors that increase academic engagement are likely to increase overall academic achievement (Scott, Alter, & Hirn, 2011). Empirical evidence supports a functional relationship between teachers' increased use of BSP and improved classroom behavior for students with or at risk for EBD (e.g., Allday et al., 2012; Dufrene et al., 2012; Sutherland et al., 2000). However, there is limited research on teachers' use of BSP to increase academic achievement of students with EBD; existing research centers mostly on increasing opportunities to respond (OTR) rather than specific academic behaviors such as accurate academic responses, academic engagement time, and academic performance (Sutherland & Wehby, 2001).

### **Research Study Questions**

Given that both appropriate social and academic behavior are essential for student success and that teachers' use of BSP affects student behavior, the current study examined if teachers' knowledge of and practices in providing BSP to students with

EBD, who are at risk of EBD, or who engaged in challenging behavior in the classroom aligns with indications from current research. The literature indicates that providing BSP should improve the learning-task engagement and academic performance of elementary students with EBD, at risk of EBD, or who engage in challenging behaviors in the classroom. This study investigated the following research questions:

1. Do general education teachers indicate that they know the difference between general praise (GP) and behavior-specific praise (BSP)?
2. Which types of praise do general education teachers indicate they provide most often to students with EBD?
3. Do general education teachers report need and desire for interventions/strategies for working with students with EBD?
4. Do general education teachers report that students with EBD interfere with overall student learning?
5. Do general education teachers indicate that they provide BSP to students with EBD in the classroom?
6. Do general education teachers indicate that they are equipped to meet the academic needs of students with EBD?

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **Legislation and Policy Changes**

In 1975, the United States Congress passed the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, which was reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. IDEA mandated that all states institute special education programs for children with disabilities ages 3 to 21. In the 1980s, parents and advocates for students with disabilities petitioned Congress for a mandate that would provide these students with a less segregated and isolated education, which led to an increase in inclusive educational practices and inclusive classrooms (O'Dell & Schaefer, 2005). Revisions to this sweeping federal law in 1976, 1986, and 1990 included (a) expanded education services to children ages birth to age 3 through early intervention programs, (b) educational preparation for adult living after high school via transition planning and services, and (c) making parents more active participants in the development of their child's Individual Education Plan (IEP). Other key changes included (a) the addition of Traumatic Brain Injury and Autism as disability categories (1990); (b) mandates that transition planning must begin by age 14 and teams must identify goals for postschool outcomes, document those goals in a student's IEP, and specify who is responsible for the transition activities (1997); and (c) increasing the focus on improving outcomes for students with disabilities as well as their families (1997) by adding a mandate requiring schools to report the progress of students

with disabilities to their parents/families as frequently as they report progress to parents/families of students without disabilities.

The most recent reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 added the word “Improvement” to the law’s name (i.e., Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, or IDEIA) and included revisions focused on improving access to general education curriculum and programs for all students with disabilities through the implementation of research-based practices, higher expectations and greater accountability, and a requirement that special education teachers be “highly qualified” like general education teachers. O’Dell and Schaefer (2005) define inclusion as the concept that students with disabilities can and should be educated with their peers without disabilities in their neighborhood schools and in general education classrooms. As a result of the reauthorization of IDEIA in 2004 and NCLB (now the ESSA) and increased accountability for outcomes and curricular access for students with disabilities, there has been increased interest in educating students with disabilities with peers without disabilities, and the push for inclusion has intensified over the past decade (Bradley et al., 2008; Ross-Hill, 2009). Out of 600,401 students with disabilities served during the 2011-2012 school year, 373,000 of those students (about 6%) were identified with Emotional Disturbance (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). The primary goal of IDEIA is to ensure that every student with a disability receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) designed to meet his or her individual needs (Ross-Hill, 2009). The ESSA, enacted in 2015 (as a reauthorization of NCLB), was designed to ensure equal opportunity for all students and to reduce the achievement

gap between students of color and students from low socioeconomic status and their majority-group peers (Nagle et al., 2006; O'Dell & Schaefer, 2005; Ross-Hill, 2009). ESSA requires schools to show adequate yearly progress and holds schools accountable for all students' progress as evidenced by state exams. Furthermore, NCLB increased the awareness of general education and special education administrators regarding the potential of inclusion for improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities (Nagle et al., 2006; O'Dell & Schaefer, 2005; Ross-Hill, 2009). The ESSA gave more decision-making power back to the states and local education agencies, defined criteria for more rigorous accountability systems, and allowed for flexibility of resources to support struggling students (ESSA, 2015). Furthermore, the ESSA (2015) charged states and local education agencies with using appropriate, evidence-based interventions to improve school outcomes. Implementing and encouraging inclusive education practices does not guarantee improved outcomes or achievement for students with disabilities. To increase the likelihood of improved outcomes for all students, teachers must have (a) the necessary skills and knowledge to use effective practices, and (b) positive attitudes toward inclusion of students with disabilities.

### **Inclusion**

A shift toward inclusive classrooms created new challenges and responsibilities for general education teachers as more students with special needs were educated in their general education classrooms (Nagle et al., 2006; Ross-Hill, 2009; O'Dell & Schaefer, 2005). These challenges include teachers' fear of inadequacy to meet students' needs, time constraints and allocation, need for additional resources, staff support and strong

leadership, teacher efficacy, knowledge of effective strategies, and disruptive behavior in the classroom (Berry, 2011; Fuchs, 2010; Nagle et al., 2006; Shady et al., 2013). General educators often have significant uncertainties about the likelihood of success for included students with disabilities (Berry, 2011; Fuchs, 2010; Nagle et al., 2006). Factors contributing to teachers' negative attitudes toward inclusion likely include limited resources and training, such as training in behavioral issues that can disrupt teaching (Berry, 2011; Drysdale, Williams, & Meaney, 2007; Fuchs, 2010; Shady et al., 2013).

Inclusion, like any other educational initiative, is more likely to be successful if teachers approach inclusion with a positive attitude. A teacher's positive attitude can provide the motivation for pursuing successful strategies (Fuchs, 2010; Drysdale et al., 2007; Johnson & Fullwood, 2006; Ross-Hill, 2009). General education teachers may be apprehensive about inclusive practices because of feelings of inadequacy about meeting students' educational needs (Fuchs, 2010; Johnson & Fullwood, 2006). For example, results from one study indicated that educators in an inclusive classroom were aggravated about the amount of time needed to complete paperwork, which took away from attending to students and fulfilling other duties (O'Dell & Schaefer, 2005). Teachers are likely to favor inclusive practices, particularly when few instructional adaptations are required and when students with mild disabilities, rather than students with significant disabilities or students who require teachers' significant involvement, are included (e.g. those with autism, emotional or behavioral difficulties; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are related to teachers' motivation for implementing certain strategies, and their attitudes have the potential to affect students' attitudes (Berry,

2011; Drysdale, et al., 2007; Fuchs, 2010; Fowler, Banks, Anhalt, Der, & Kalis, 2008).

One factor that may impact teachers' attitudes toward inclusion is students' behavior in the classroom.

### **Classroom Behavior and Classroom Management**

When students with challenging behavior are included in general education classrooms, teachers may experience initial opposition toward inclusion because they perceive the problems as severe, demanding, and possibly the result of the school system's failure to provide teachers with adequate strategies for dealing with behavioral problems (Drysdale et al., 2007). General education teachers typically receive less training than special education teachers on managing behavioral problems that interfere with the teaching process. Teachers often describe challenging student behavior and related issues as the most stressful part of their teaching career and frequently request assistance with classroom and behavior management (Evans et al., 2012; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Lambert et al., 2009). In addition to disrupting instruction, students' challenging behavior interferes with their learning and the learning of others in the classroom (Kersey & Masterson, 2011; Sinatra, Heddy, & Lombardi, 2015; Sutherland & Wehby, 2001).

Education laws (e.g., IDEIA, ESSA) mandate that schools implement evidence-based practices that positively impact both student and teacher behavior. Researchers have identified multiple evidence-based classroom management strategies associated with preventing problem behavior, increasing appropriate social behavior, and increasing students' engagement with learning tasks to improve social and academic outcomes for a



diverse group of students (e.g., Cavanaugh, 2013; Sutherland et al., 2000). Effective classroom managers have students who experience a greater likelihood of academic and social success than students being taught in classrooms with ineffective classroom managers (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jenkins et al., 2015; Simonsen et al., 2008).

### **School Difficulties and Outcomes of Students with Challenging Behaviors**

General educators tend to be significantly less tolerant of certain types of overt, disturbing behaviors than special educators (Johnson & Fullwood, 2006; Drysdale et al., 2007); conversely, general educators' perceptions of problem behaviors have been documented as being more extreme than those perceptions of special educators (Johnson & Fullwood, 2006; Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006). Drysdale et al. (2007) surveyed 53 general education teachers and found that teachers were most negative about students with emotional and behavioral problems, especially if those problems were severe. Lohrmann and Bambara (2006) surveyed 14 general education elementary teachers and found that those teachers were apprehensive about whether students with disabilities who engage in challenging behavior would disrupt their classroom management and organization, whether the teachers would be able to meet the student's needs, and whether the teachers would be able to balance the students' needs with the needs of the rest of the class. In a study of teachers' perceptions of including students with behavior disorders in a general education classroom, Drysdale et al. (2007) found teachers perceived that students who engage in disruptive behavior in the classroom challenged their existing teaching skills, especially since these students required additional time for learning skills and mastering the curriculum.

Students with EBD have significantly poorer educational outcomes than typical students and students with other high-incidence disabilities (Baker, Clark, Maier, & Viger, 2008; Lane et al., 2008; Lane et al., 2011). These outcomes include lower graduation rates, below grade level academic achievement, low rates of employment, and low rates of college attendance (Baker et al., 2008; Bradley et al., 2008; Lane et al., 2008; Lane et al., 2011). In addition, students with EBD have high rates of participation in the juvenile justice system; about 50% of youth with EBD who drop out of school are arrested at least one time within 5 years of leaving school (Bradley et al., 2008; Quinn et al. 2005). Approximately 50% of incarcerated youth have EBD (Gagnon & Richards, 2008).

Students with EBD in general education classrooms typically receive fewer academic interventions and supports (e.g., small group, one-on-one reteaching) than students without disabilities or challenging behavior and students with EBD rarely receive academic intervention outside of the classroom (e.g., tutoring; Bradley et al., 2008; Scott et al., 2011). Research also indicates that students with EBD have lower participation rates during classroom activities, fewer interactions with the teacher, and fewer opportunities to respond and become engaged with the instruction (Bradley et al., 2008; Scott et al., 2011; Sutherland & Wehby, 2001).

Students with EBD typically engage in a variety of behaviors in school that interfere with both academic and social/emotional learning. These behaviors include externalizing behaviors that disrupt instruction (e.g., verbal outbursts, defiance, negative exchanges with other students) and behaviors that can affect the physical safety of the

student and others within the school building (Hayling, Cook, Gresham, State, & Kern, 2008; Mihalas, Morse, Allsopp, & Alvarez McHatton, 2008). Students with EBD may also display internalizing behaviors that result in overwhelming emotional stress (e.g., anxiety, depression, worry) or an inability to exert emotional self-control (Hayling et al, 2008). Both internalizing and externalizing behaviors may impact the learning of students with EBD in addition to the learning of other students in the classroom (Allday et al., 2012; Hayling et al, 2008).

Another concern about educational programming for students with EBD is the lack of professional knowledge and limited ongoing professional development for teachers (Lane, Jolivette, Conroy, Nelson & Benner, 2011; Lewis, Jones, Horner, & Sugai, 2010; Simpson, Peterson, & Smith, 2011). Researchers have reported that general education teachers are often unaware of critical factors related to the educational needs of students with EBD (Simpson et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2006). This lack of knowledge may be due to the limited training pre-service teachers receive in teacher education programs and limited in-service training for teaching students with EBD (Bradley et al., 2008; Mihalas et al., 2008; Simpson et al., 2011). Focused professional development may be one effective strategy for training regular education teachers (Allday et al., 2012; Simonsen et al., 2014).

### **Evidence-Based Practices**

Evidence-based practices are strategies that research has demonstrated to be effective by providing a strong, positive cause-and-effect relationships between the strategy and the improved academic or behavioral outcomes (Kretlow & Blatz, 2011). In

other words, educational interventions that are “evidence-based” must be strongly supported by evidence from objective, empirically-validated research studies that prove the strategy or practice works. In fact, one tenet of the ESSA empowers states and local education agencies (i.e., school districts) to use appropriate, evidence-based interventions that promote school improvement.

Researchers have found limited use of evidence-based practices in classrooms with students with EBD (Boardman et al., 2005; Gable et al., 2012). In a study of over 2000 teachers of students with EBD, Gable and colleagues (2012) found that most teachers of students with EBD were able to implement some academic support and curricular and instructional modifications but were unable to implement 19 other evidence-based practices identified by the researchers. This lack of implementation may be related to a lack of professional knowledge regarding implementing evidence-based practices for students with EBD combined with a lack of organizational and administrative support and resources for implementation of evidence-based practices (Bradley et al., 2008; Gable et al., 2012). When investigating the extent to which general education teachers use evidence-based practices for behavior management and academic supports, most of the general education teachers indicated that they usually used only one evidence-based practice (i.e., academic supports) and were not equipped to employ any other evidence-based classroom practice (Wagner et al., 2006). Students with emotional/behavioral difficulties often exhibit high levels of inappropriate and challenging behaviors; consequently, these students experience less engagement in class instruction and activities and decreased academic progress.

## **Student Engagement**

One evidence-based practice consistently associated with improved student behavior and positive educational outcomes is actively engaging students (Benner, Kutash, Nelson, & Fisher, 2013; Sinatra et al., 2015; Simonsen et al., 2008). Students who are not engaged in instruction are more likely to engage in disruptive behavior; teachers must create environments conducive to learning and ensure students are fully engaged (Kersey & Masterson, 2011; Sinatra et al., 2015; Sutherland & Wehby, 2001). Student engagement can include multiple components (e.g., behavioral, psychological, emotional, cognitive; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). For the current study, student engagement refers to both behavioral engagement and a student's involvement with his or her own learning and academic tasks.

Benner and colleagues (2013) recommended implementing positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) during instruction to maximize engagement and academic learning for students with EBD. Examples of PBIS-based strategies include providing students with explicit expectations for various instructional contexts, providing verbal prompts or behavior-specific praise statements to encourage on-task behavior, interdependent group contingency systems to increase instructional engagement (e.g. Good Behavior Game, Effortful Engagement Strategy), and using proximity control (Benner et al., 2013). Research indicates that increasing student engagement in instruction and academic tasks may reduce inappropriate behavior and increase the academic performance of students with EBD; therefore, behavioral interventions implemented for students with EBD (and all students with challenging behaviors) that

include strategies for increasing and maintaining student engagement are likely to have a positive impact on both social and academic behavior (Benner et al., 2013).

### **Behavior-Specific Praise**

Providing feedback to students with EBD can create a supportive teacher-student relationship (Mihalas et al., 2008); more positive interactions with students can improve relationships as well as the overall classroom climate, both of which are associated with improved learning outcomes (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Mihalas et al., 2008). Verbal praise has been reported as one of the most effective, natural, and nonintrusive classroom strategies to decrease problem behavior while encouraging and maintaining positive behavior (Cavanaugh, 2013; Simonsen et al., 2008; Sutherland et al., 2000). One evidence-based practice associated with improved student behavior is BSP.

BSP consists of a verbal statement that communicates positive, specific feedback to a student regarding an appropriate or desired academic or social behavior; BSP is most effective when it is delivered immediately following the desired behavior (Jenkins et al., 2015; Simonsen et al., 2008; Sutherland et al., 2000). Teacher-provided BSP has been associated with a reduction in students' off-task behavior (e.g., Allday et al., 2012; Fullerton et al., 2009; Myers et al., 2011; Sutherland et al., 2000) and in students' disruptive behavior (e.g. Dufrene et al., 2014; Haydon & Musti-Rao, 2011; Mrachko, Kostewicz, & Martin, 2017; Myers et al., 2011; Pisacreta et al., 2011). Research has shown that students with EBD receive less praise and more reprimands than other students (Briere et al., 2015; Scott et al., 2011) despite 30 years of research indicating the effectiveness of using BSP to improve the likelihood of socially appropriate behavior.

Specifically, researchers have demonstrated a functional relationship between higher rates of BSP and (a) decreases in students' disruptive behavior and (b) increases in on-task behavior (Allday et al., 2012; Fullerton et al., 2009; Myers et al., 2011; Sutherland et al., 2000). Researchers have documented a positive relationship between students' academic engagement time and academic achievement (Brophy, 2006; Hattie, 2009). Allday (2012) used a simple professional development intervention with low-intensity training to increase general educators' use of BSP delivered to all students in their classes and examined the effects of BSP on the behavior of students with EBD or at risk for EBD. When students received more BSP, the students with EBD or at risk for EBD increased their on-task behavior, engagement, and task completion (Allday et al., 2012). Similarly, Pisacreta (2011) trained teachers to provide a 1:1 ratio of praise to behavior corrections to determine if this ratio could decrease students' disruptive behavior in a general education classroom. Results indicated a functional relationship between higher ratios of praise-to-behavior correction and reductions in student disruptive behavior. Dufrene (2014) found that increased rates of BSP were associated with a decline in the rate of students' disruptive behaviors for students with EBD in an alternative school setting. In addition, research on promoting appropriate behavior in early childhood classrooms has shown teachers' increases in BSP statements lead to increased compliance and engagement (Fullerton et al., 2009) and improved behavior (Dufrene et al., 2012) for young students at risk for EBD.

## Summary

General education teachers need to be equipped with effective, easy to implement, evidence-based practices to meet the needs of the growing population of students with EBD, at risk for EBD, or who engage in challenging behavior in the general education classroom. These students are being included in general education classrooms more often and their presence can present numerous challenges for teachers and the learning environment. Students with EBD and those at risk for EBD are increasingly receiving some or all their education in the general education classroom; general education teachers often lack training on working with these students and may be overwhelmed by the challenges these students may present (Allday et al., 2012). Students with EBD and others who frequently exhibit challenging behaviors are likely to lag behind their peers in academic and social/emotional growth and are likely to experience poorer school and post-school outcomes. Despite the long history of the academic struggles experienced by students with or at risk for EBD, there is limited research and implementation of effective academic interventions (or interventions that positively impact academic achievement) for this group of students.

While research targeting improved academic outcomes for students with EBD is limited, there is enough to inform some foundational strategies for teachers. However, the gap between research on practices that effectively improve academic outcomes for this population and those practices being implemented continues to exist. One example of this disconnect is teachers' inconsistent use of praise for students with EBD. Praise has a robust research base supporting its effectiveness as an intervention that may improve



social and academic outcomes for students with EBD; however, praise is not used consistently in classrooms with students with EBD. This limited use of praise (especially BSP) may be related to teachers' perceptions and feelings about including students who engage in challenging behavior, a lack of professional knowledge regarding research to practice for students with EBD, and a lack of organizational support and resources for implementation of evidence-based practices. Supporting teachers' use of BSP in general education classrooms may help decrease the frequency of challenging behaviors and address the needs of students with EBD (especially those who are reinforced by adult attention) who are served within general education classrooms. To determine how best to support general education teachers' use of BSP as an intervention for improving the learning outcomes of students with EBD, at risk of EBD, or who engage in challenging behavior in the classroom, researchers should examine teachers' current level of knowledge and practices.

The current study examined if teachers' knowledge of and practices in providing BSP to students with EBD, at risk of EBD, or who otherwise engage in challenging behaviors aligned with the indications from current research; that is, do teachers have the background knowledge and skills to improve the learning-task engagement and academic performance of elementary students with EBD, at risk of EBD, or who engage in challenging behaviors in the classroom? For the current study, students with EBD, at risk of EBD, or who engage in challenging behaviors in the classroom are referred to as "students with emotional/behavioral difficulties." This study investigated the following research questions:

1. Do general education teachers indicate that they know the difference between general praise (GP) and behavior-specific praise (BSP)?
2. Which types of praise do general education teachers indicate they provide most often to students with emotional/behavioral difficulties?
3. Do general education teachers report need and desire for interventions/strategies for working with students with emotional/behavioral difficulties?
4. Do general education teachers perceive that students with emotional/behavioral difficulties interfere with overall student learning?
5. Do general education teachers indicate that they provide BSP to students with emotional/behavioral difficulties in the classroom?
6. Do general education teachers indicate that they are equipped to meet the academic needs of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties?

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

In this descriptive study, I used survey research to investigate two primary topics (organized by the six aforementioned research questions): (a) teachers' knowledge of and practices in providing BSP to students with emotional/behavioral difficulties and if that knowledge aligns with the indications from current research and (b) teachers' perceptions of needed supports and training needs for effectively including students with emotional/behavioral difficulties in general education classrooms. Survey research designs allow for efficient data analysis from a sample of a population while providing objective data that can be reasonably generalized to larger populations (Gliner, Morgan, & Leech, 2009). Prior to beginning this research, I obtained approval from the Texas Woman's University Institutional Review Board to conduct the study as described below.

#### **Participants and Survey Distribution**

Study participants were elementary general education, core-content teachers who had at least one student in their classroom with emotional/behavioral difficulties who engaged in challenging behavior. The study was conducted in a suburban school district in North Texas. First, I contacted the Chief Governmental Officer of the school district to inform her of the study, seek permission to conduct the study, inform her of the need for access to the listserv, and provide a copy of the *Invitation to Participate in Research Study* to attach to the email correspondence that would be disseminated. After receiving

permission, I used the school district email server to send two emails to teachers at all 17 elementary schools within the district. The first was an initial email invitation; the second email (sent one week later) included the original email and an addendum that said, “This is just a reminder about the opportunity to participate in research, described below. If you’ve already completed the survey, thank you for your time. If not, and you still wish to participate, the link and additional information are below.” Both emails contained a link to the survey and information about the purpose of the study.

### **Materials and Instruments**

The survey consisted of 29 items organized into four sections. The first section indicated voluntary consent to participate in the study, selection criteria, and basic demographics of the participants including gender, age range, years of practice, and type of teaching setting. The remaining sections focused on assessing teachers’ current knowledge of BSP, current praise practices, and need for behavioral and academic interventions for students with emotional/behavioral difficulties. The statements used a Likert scale with values ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree), with 3 being neutral. In addition, the survey contained four open-ended questions. The survey was developed with guidance from literature on conducting survey questionnaire research (Patten, 2001) and using existing literature on the following: classroom management, best practices for including students with EBD in the general education classroom, outcomes for students with EBD, teachers’ perceptions/attitudes and needs, praise characteristics, praise training methods needed to increase teachers’ use of praise, and researchers’

recommendations for future research. In addition, the survey was reviewed by an expert in the field who provided feedback prior to its administration. See Survey in Appendix A.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The survey was disseminated through a web-based surveying program, PsychData; teachers wishing to participate clicked on a link in an email to access the survey. The survey remained open for four weeks.

Data were analyzed using the PsychData analysis functions for descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency distributions, mean); in addition, I conducted a regression analysis to determine if there were any significant relationships between variables. Qualitative data from open-ended questions were analyzed to identify themes and patterns. To analyze data from the open-ended responses to survey item 24 (see survey in Appendix A), I wrote notes in the margins of each response, identifying important concepts and ideas (Creswell, 2013). I summarized these notes to identify major themes or topics and aggregated the responses according to these themes or topics and gave each category a label (or “code”). After color-coding method and labeling the data, I identified common themes across participants’ categories and across all categories created, then merged some similar categories. The major themes, example responses, and results from the quantitative analyses are reported in Chapter 4.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine if teachers' knowledge and practice of providing BSP to students with EBD, at risk of EBD, or who otherwise engage in challenging behaviors align with the indications from current research; that is, do teachers have the background knowledge and skills to improve the learning-task engagement and academic performance of elementary students with EBD, at risk of EBD, or who engage in challenging behaviors in the classroom? I used survey research to collect data from general education, core-content teachers who volunteered to participate in this study. Data from closed-ended and short response open-ended questions (e.g., "List the top two areas of intervention that you would like more training and knowledge regarding," "Provide an example of a behavior-specific praise (BSP) statement you may use in your classroom") were analyzed descriptively.

Overall, 30 participants completed and submitted the survey (see Appendix A for the entire survey instrument). Participants' responses to two of the first six questions on the survey determined if the participant met the criteria for participating in the study (i.e., the participant was currently teaching in general or special education and had students with emotional or behavioral difficulties in his or her classes). Five of the 30 respondents reported teaching in special education, so their surveys were excluded from the analyses since the study's purpose was to examine the knowledge and practices of general

education teachers. All of the remaining eligible 25 participants indicated they had students with emotional or behavioral difficulties in their classes.

Participants ages ranged from 26 to over 57; 24% (6 participants) were aged 26 to 32, 16% (4 participants) were aged 33-40, 36% (9 participants) were aged range 41-48, 12% (3 participants) were aged 49 to 56, and 12% (3 participants) indicated age 57 or older. Of the 25 teacher participants, 21 were female and four were male. The teachers' years of teaching ranged from 1 year to 29 years with an average of 13 years of teaching experience.

## **Survey Responses**

### **Perceptions of Students with Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties**

All participants indicated they had students with emotional or behavioral difficulties in their classes and 22 of the 25 (88%) perceived that these students interfere with overall student learning. Most participants indicated that emotional/behavioral difficulties do interfere with a student's engagement both during academic instruction (88%) and during academic tasks such as written assignments and tests (92%).

Twelve (48%) participants reported that students with emotional/behavioral difficulties generally achieve less academically (i.e. below grade-level skills, lower grades, lower test scores) than students without emotional/behavioral difficulties. When asked if they feel confident supporting the academic needs of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties, 11 (44%) participants reported they feel confident, six (24%) reported that they sometimes or somewhat feel confident, and eight (32%) indicated that they do not feel confident.

## **Praise**

All 15 participants who indicated they feel confident supporting the academic needs of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties reported they provide praise to students in their classroom, and 14 of 15 indicated they knew and understood the difference between general praise (GP) and behavior specific praise (BSP). Overall, 23 participants (92%) indicated they know and understand the difference.

Participants were asked to provide an example of a GP statement; sample responses include: “Good job,” “I appreciate how well you are working with your group,” “Today everyone did a wonderful job during group work,” “I love the way everyone is so engaged in the discussion,” “You did a great job on this assignment,” “Excellent explanation,” and “Good thinking/brain power.” Three GP statement examples provided did not fit the definition of GP.

Participants were asked to provide an example of a BSP statement; sample responses include: “Good job raising your hand and waiting your turn,” “I really like how you are sitting quietly,” “Thank you for keeping...hands to yourself,” “I like the way you raised your hand and waited to be called on before speaking,” “Johnny, you used a lot of detail in this paragraph and your words really help explain the setting,” “I love the way that you are sitting on the carpet on a voice level 0, with your hands in your lap,” “Jenny is setting a great example for our class when getting in line for specials,” and “I like how you showed your thinking on how to divide decimals.” All example statements provided fit the definition of BSP.



All participants reported providing praise to students in their classroom. Twenty-three out of 25 (92%) of participants indicated they provide general praise (GP) to students in their classroom; 22 (96%) indicated they provide BSP to students in their classroom. Sixteen (64%) participants indicated they use BSP more often than GP in their classroom, six (24%) indicated they use GP more often than BSP in their classroom. Twenty-two (88%) participants reported using BSP statements more frequently than GP statements with students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. Sixteen (64%) participants disagreed with the statement, “BSP and GP are equally effective at modifying behavior;” four (12%) agreed.

Specifically related to providing praise to students with emotional/behavioral difficulties in participants’ classrooms, data indicated that the majority (88%) provide BSP to students with emotional/behavioral difficulties; 20 participants (80%) also reported that BSP would be the easiest type of praise to implement and would likely increase their implementation of praise.

### **Training**

Twenty-two (88%) participants reported they would like strategies/interventions for managing the behavior of students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. When asked to list the top two areas of intervention in which they would like more training and knowledge regarding, themes or categories emerged through informal qualitative analysis. Participants gave responses including “modifying work for struggling learners,” “how to talk with parents about their child’s behavior needs,” “effective ways to communicate behavior daily between school and home,” “running and/or escaping

behaviors,” “motivation/reluctant learners,” “de-escalation techniques,” and “maintaining the rest of the class while dealing with a challenging student/situation.” Common themes included strategies needed for addressing disruptive behavior, strategies needed for working with students impacted by other factors (e.g. low SES, English learners, poor attendance, mental health diagnoses), lack of motivation, parent communication, knowledge and characteristics, and interference with teaching and others’ learning. The responses to this open-ended question are discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 5.

Twenty-three (92%) participants reported that they are more likely to implement an intervention that is easy to learn, easy to implement, and does not require materials. When asked which type of training they thought would work best for learning a new intervention, eight (33%) participants indicated “coaching,” eight (33%) indicated “direct” (i.e., one-time training with ongoing follow up and feedback), five (21%) indicated “direct, one-time,” and three (13%) indicated “indirect.” Seventeen participants (71%) reported that ongoing coaching and feedback on implementing BSP would be most helpful for them and increase their ability to implement the intervention effectively. The results from survey questions and statements are summarized in Appendix B.

I conducted regression analyses (using SPSS) to determine if a significant relationship existed between years of teaching experience and the following four different independent variables (predictors): using BSP more frequently than GP with students with emotional/behavioral difficulties, perceiving that students with emotional/behavioral difficulties generally achieve less academically than students without emotional/behavioral difficulties, perceiving that students with emotional/behavioral

difficulties interfere with overall student learning, perceiving that emotional/behavioral difficulties interfere with a student's engagement during academic instruction, and perceiving that emotional/behavioral difficulties interfere with a student's engagement during academic tasks. Regression analyses indicated no statistically significant differences in the likelihood of using BSP statements more frequently with students with emotional/behavioral difficulties related to years of teaching.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

General education teachers need to be equipped with effective, easy to implement, evidence-based practices to meet the needs of the growing population of students with EBD, at risk for EBD, or who engage in challenging behavior in the classroom. Students with emotional/behavioral difficulties are being included in general education classrooms more often and their presence can present numerous challenges for teachers and the learning environment. Students with EBD and those at risk for EBD are increasingly receiving some or all their education in the general education classroom; general education teachers often lack training on working with these students, as well as effective classroom management strategies, and may be overwhelmed by the challenges these students may present (Allday et al., 2012); many teachers actually leave the field due to burnout and stress related to student behavior (Drysdale et al., 2007; Evans et al., 2012; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

The goal of this study was to determine if teachers' knowledge of and practices in providing BSP to students with EBD, at risk of EBD, or who otherwise engage in challenging behaviors (referred to as "students with emotional/behavioral difficulties" in this study) align with the indications from current research; that is, do teachers have the background knowledge and skills to improve the learning-task engagement and academic performance of elementary students with EBD, at risk of EBD, or who engage

in challenging behaviors in the classroom? Data collected in this study provided information on general educators' knowledge, existing practices, and training needs related to BSP. Most of the results do not align with current research, but still may inform future research and teachers' training needs, indicating the need for caution when making broad generalizations.

While research exists on practices that effectively improve academic outcomes for this population, those practices not always implemented consistently or with fidelity. One example of this disconnect is teachers' inconsistent use of praise for students with EBD or emotional/behavioral difficulties (Landrum, Tankersley, & Kauffman, 2003; Reinke, Herman, & Stormont, 2013).

### **Praise**

Verbal praise has been reported as one of the most effective, natural, and nonintrusive classroom strategies to decrease problem behavior while encouraging and maintaining positive behavior (Cavanaugh, 2013; Simonsen et al., 2008; Sutherland, et al., 2000). All 25 participants in the current study reported providing praise to students in their classroom; the majority indicated they provide both GP and BSP to students in their classroom. Sixteen of 25 participants indicated they use BSP more often than GP, which does not align with existing research indicating that behavior-specific praise is used at a much lower rate than general praise (Landrum et al., 2003; Reinke et al., 2013). Despite their self-reported use of specific and general praise statements, most teachers in this study also indicated they do not feel confident supporting students' challenging behavior and that emotional/behavioral difficulties interfere with overall student learning.

Research has demonstrated that when teachers provide an increase in praise statements, especially BSP, disruptive behaviors often decrease and on-task behaviors increase (Allday et al., 2012; Fullerton et al., 2009; Myers et al., 2011; Sutherland et al., 2000). In the current study, the reported use of GP and BSP (including most participants indicating that they use BSP more frequently than GP with students with emotional/behavioral difficulties) was not associated with decreased disruptive student behavior during instruction or an increase in student engagement during both instruction and academic tasks as reported by the participants, which does not align with current research. Despite using GP and BSP, the participants indicated that students with emotional/behavioral difficulties interfere with overall learning and that most teachers lacked confidence in supporting the needs of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties. Despite more than 30 years of research indicating the effectiveness of using BSP to improve the likelihood of socially appropriate behavior (Briere et al., 2015; Scott et al., 2011; Sutherland & Wehby, 2001), the results from this study do not fully align with the research; the fact that teachers in this study use both GP and BSP in the classroom and use BSP more frequently with students with emotional/behavioral difficulties doesn't align with the research indicating that BSP is not being used in classrooms with students with or at risk for EBD, but the teachers in this study are not seeing the effectiveness of using BSP to improve appropriate behavior, as reported in the research. Therefore, the research to practice gap persists sometimes, as evidenced (albeit on a small scale) by the teachers in this study who reported that students with emotional/behavioral difficulties interfere with overall learning and engagement during

instruction and during academic tasks. The teachers in this study also indicated they would like strategies for managing these students' behavior (especially disruptive behavior); possibly, these teachers are not seeing the benefits of providing BSP statements or they may need additional training in the implementation of BSP or other strategies in addition to praise.

Twenty-two out of 25 teachers indicated they provided BSP statements more frequently than GP statements to students with emotional/behavioral difficulties. Slightly fewer (i.e., 68%) agreed that praise can positively change the behavior of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties. Educator preparation programs for pre-service teachers and in-service professional development (PD) providers should include additional information on and practice with BSP given its extensive research base and the demonstrated effectiveness of providing BSP to all students, especially to students with emotional/behavioral difficulties.

Twenty-three (92%) teachers in this study indicated that they know and understand the difference between GP and BSP. To help determine if participants know and understand the difference between GP and BSP, they were asked to provide example statements of each. For GP statements, all but three participants gave GP example statements that fit the GP definition, such as "Good job," "Good work," "Nice job, you're doing excellent," and "You did a great job on that assignment." The other three participants provided GP example statements that align better with the definition of BSP statements, like "Thank you for sitting on the carpet," "I appreciate how well you are working with the group," and "I love the way everyone is so engaged in the discussion."

For BSP statements, all participants' examples fit the definition of BSP, giving examples such as "I really like the way you raised your hand when you wanted to share," "I like how you completed your work in a timely manner," "You did such a good job staying on task and finishing that assignment," and "Thank you for reading quietly during independent time." Most teachers who participated in this study knew and understood the difference between GP and BSP, providing an affirmative answer to the first research question, "Do general education teachers indicate that they know the difference between general praise (GP) and behavior-specific praise (BSP)?" Sixteen participants indicated they used BSP more often than GP, which does not align with what researchers see in classrooms (e.g., Myers et al., 2011).

### **Training**

Researchers have found limited use of evidence-based practices in classrooms with students with EBD (Boardman et al., 2005; Gable et al., 2012) and researchers report that general education teachers are often unaware of critical factors related to the educational needs of students with EBD (Simpson et al., 2011; Wagner & Davis, 2006). Many teachers in the current study reported a need for more training in classroom and behavior management (especially for managing the behavior of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties), which aligns with findings in recent research.

The open-ended responses to survey questions indicated that participants wanted additional knowledge and characteristics to look for regarding students with emotional/behavioral difficulties. When compared to special education teachers, most general education teachers receive less training on managing behavioral problems that



interfere with the teaching process and they frequently request assistance with classroom and behavior management (Drysdale et al., 2007; Evans et al., 2012). The type and method of training (e.g., face-to-face, one-day, ongoing) likely impacts the probability of teachers implementing the content trained. Professional development providers should consider the teachers' preferred training methods to increase the likelihood of implementation of evidence-based practices. For example, most participants in the current study indicated that they preferred a direct, one-time training with ongoing follow-up and feedback or coaching (see Appendix C).

Research has demonstrated that teachers are responsive to training and consultation models that provide data-based feedback and that teachers often need such feedback to more systematically use specific strategies (Duchaine, Jolivette, Fredrick, 2011; Reinke et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 2012). Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that in-service teachers can be trained to give more BSP (Kalis et al., 2007; Myers et al., 2011; Reinke et al., 2007; Reinke et al., 2008; Sutherland et al., 2000; Thompson et al., 2012). To better meet the training needs for general education teachers, schools may consider well-designed co-teaching models in which general and special education teachers collaborate in instructing students with disabilities in general education classes where general education teachers could learn from the special education colleagues that may have more training in EBPs to manage challenging behavior. Additionally, when training teachers on new practices, professional development providers should include a plan to provide data-based feedback on implementation of those new practices.

Twenty-two (88%) participants reported they would like strategies or interventions for managing the behavior of students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. When asked to list the top two areas of intervention in which they would like more training and knowledge, responses varied. Through informal evaluation of qualitative data, six categories emerged: strategies needed for disruptive behaviors, strategies needed for students impacted by other factors, lack of student motivation and how to motivate, parent communication, knowledge and characteristics of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties, and student's behavior interfering with teaching and other students' learning. Participants' comments provided additional information about participants' perceptions of their training needs. If similar future studies with larger sample sizes yielded similar results, these topics could be helpful additions to in-service professional development and pre-service curricula. Since many of these strategies are associated with effective, evidence-based classroom management practices (e.g., Simonsen et al., 2008), professional development providers and educator preparation programs should ensure that teachers receive frequent, ongoing training in these practices.

### **Strategies Needed for Disruptive Behaviors**

Examples of participants' responses related to strategies needed for disruptive behaviors included, "How to handle a behavioral student that keeps interrupting when you are teaching," "Strategies on how to handle students with emotional/behavioral difficulties," "De-escalation...helping focus/work difficult tasks," Strategies for running [escaping] behavior and strategies for impulsive behavior," "More redirecting phrases.

More strategies to manage students who exhibit defiant or challenging behaviors,” “Proper verbal interaction when recognize situation may be going south,” and “How to manage a student who is defiant/does what they are not supposed to do on purpose and finds joy in upsetting the teacher.” Some of the behaviors mentioned in these examples (e.g., “proper verbal interaction,” “de-escalation”) could be addressed with BSP. For instance, teachers could use BSP for appropriate behaviors (especially for students who routinely engage in problematic behaviors) and for students who are behaving appropriately when target students behave inappropriately; BSP reminds all students of the expected behavior.

Even though most participants in this study report that they are providing BSP to students with emotional/behavioral difficulties, they are still requesting additional strategies, indicating that BSP alone is not enough to decrease inappropriate behavior. Teacher preparation programs and school staff who provide professional development must prepare teachers to meet the needs of students with challenging behavior and emotional/behavioral difficulties, despite reporting to use BSP statements with these students and continuing to request strategies to manage disruptive behaviors. Based on the varying behavioral needs of students in a typical general education classroom, all teachers could benefit from additional training in how to implement differentiated levels of support or intervention and how to acknowledge when students need more intensive levels of support or modifications as indicated by data. For example, a student with more severe disruptive behaviors or physically aggressive behaviors may need BSP statements combined with a tangible reward.

Because students within a classroom and within a school require differentiated levels of support in both academics and behavior, many schools have begun to implement multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS; this framework may also be called schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports [SWPBIS] for behavior support and response to intervention [RtI] for academic support). Teachers working in MTSS schools are trained on how to implement strategies and interventions across multiple tiers of academic and behavioral supports using data to make decisions on which students receive which supports. BSP is a “universal” intervention provided to all students (as the first, foundational level of behavior support); some students may require more intensive “tiers” of behavioral support. Therefore, teacher preparation educators and those who provide professional development to in-service teachers should help teachers understand that some students with emotional/behavioral difficulties may need more intensive levels of BSP and train teachers how to (a) use data to determine when students need additional support, (b) select an appropriate evidence-based practice to implement, and (c) evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention and modify as needed.

### **Strategies for Working with Students Impacted by Other Factors**

Examples of participants’ responses related to strategies needed for working with students impacted by other factors (e.g., attendance, socioeconomic status [SES], English as a Second Language [ESL], mental health/medical diagnoses) include, “ESL and autism,” “How to help my students with poor attendance (missing many days of school),” “Low socioeconomic,” and “Mental health.” Many professional development providers and school districts employ staff specifically trained in best practices for educating

students from low SES environments and for English Language Learners (ELLs). Students who are from low SES environments or who are ELLs often have additional learning needs and may not always access the regular curriculum in typical ways (e.g., they may require classroom accommodations or pull-out supports). Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners have emphasized the importance of implementing evidence-based practices (EBP) with fidelity. However, modifications to EBPs may be necessary, including cultural modifications when duplicating EBPs across cultures since most of the research on EBPs was conducted with middle-class, majority groups (Wang & Lam, 2017).

Effectively training educators in implementing BSP (or any other EBP) requires collaboration between professional development providers and staff trained in working with students from different cultures, students who are from low SES environments, students with mental health diagnoses, and ELLs. Additionally, clinical mental health providers (e.g., psychologists, psychiatrists, licensed professional counselors) and school-based mental health providers (e.g., Licensed Specialists in School Psychology [LSSPs], counselors) can provide critical information and help with necessary modifications to implementing BSP (and other EBPs) with fidelity for students who exhibit emotional/behavioral difficulties in the classroom. These collaborations (and resulting modifications) may increase the likelihood of teachers' success at implementing BSP for students contending with additional factors in addition to emotional/behavioral difficulties (Beaty-O'Ferrall, Green & Hanna, 2010; Wang & Lam, 2017). Collaborating with other professionals and implementing any necessary accommodations may be

another way to improve the limited use of EBPs in classrooms with students with EBD or emotional/behavioral difficulties (Boardman et al., 2005; Gable et al., 2012).

### **Lack of Motivation**

Examples of participants' responses related to "Lack of Motivation" include, "How to motivate a defiant student," "I just don't know how to motivate a student who is so disruptive...", "How to motivate students who have 'given up' on themselves," and "Strategies to motivate reluctant learners with ED." Research indicates that general education teachers are often unaware of critical factors related to the educational needs of students with EBD (Simpson et al., 2011; Wagner & Davis, 2006). Low (or lack of) motivation is common among students with or at risk for EBD; educating teachers on the characteristics of and best practices for students with or at risk for EBD may help teachers be more prepared for and equipped with strategies to motivate these students. Increasing positive teacher-student interactions by providing frequent praise (specifically BSP) could help increase students' motivation; praising appropriate behaviors exhibited may also provide students with motivation to engage in those same behaviors again.

Benner and colleagues (2013) recommended implementing positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) during instruction to maximize engagement and academic learning for students with EBD. Examples of PBIS include providing students with explicit expectations for various instructional contexts, providing verbal prompts or behavior-specific praise statements to encourage on-task behavior, implementing an interdependent group contingency system to increase instructional engagement (e.g. Good Behavior Game, Effortful Engagement Strategy), and using proximity control.

Opportunities to learn about and build fluency with these EBPs may equip teachers with additional strategies for addressing students who lack motivation.

### **Parent Communication**

Examples of participants' responses related to "Parent Communication" include, "Effective ways to communicate behaviors daily between home and school," "Behavior documentation strategies," and "How to talk with parents of a behavioral needs child." Educator preparation programs and professional development providers should provide teachers with knowledge and training in using behavior contracts, behavior point sheets/token economies, and behavior daily report cards (DRC), which are effective ways to document and track behavior (Owens et al., 2012; Simonsen et al., 2008). In addition, teachers require effective ways to communicate with families regarding students' behavioral performance and needs, including strategies for daily contact and documentation. Ideally, teachers could provide families with information about strategies being implemented in the school setting (e.g., behavior contracts), and families could implement these strategies at home. In addition, teachers could use technology applications to facilitate electronic communication with families as appropriate, which may be more efficient and effective (e.g., Class Dojo, ClassTag Parent Teacher App).

### **Knowledge and Characteristics of Students with Emotional/Behavioral Difficulties.**

Examples of participants' responses related to "Knowledge and Characteristics of Students with Emotional/Behavioral Difficulties" include, "When to provide praise and when to not provide praise for different students with ED," "Mental health," "Signs and signals of no return path," and "Proper verbal interaction when recognize situation may

be going south.” These comments indicate that participants may not feel knowledgeable about the characteristics of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties. Teacher preparation programs, especially general education programs, need to incorporate more coursework related to the characteristics and symptoms of high-incidence disabilities such as EBD, including ways to recognize signs of students in crisis and strategies for responding to behaviors indicating a need for more intensive supports (Drysdale et al., 2007; Evans et al., 2012; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). In addition, educator preparation programs and professional development providers need to ensure that teachers know how to access support for students who are struggling. Again, schools implementing SWPBIS will have an established, stable system in which students can access more intensive behavior supports (i.e., “Tier 2” or “Tier 3” supports); teachers in non-SWPBIS schools will need to know whom to contact to assist with providing additional supports to students with more intensive behavioral needs.

### **Behavior Interfering with Teaching and Others’ Learning**

Examples of participants’ responses related to “Behavior interfering with teaching and others’ learning” include, “A training that gives me real ideas of what to do with my other 21 five year-olds while I am tending to the behaviors of the one student when it happens during teaching time,” “Helping the rest of my class continue working when I have to work with a...,” and “How to keep the class learning and engaged when an emotionally disturbed student is disrupting often.”

One participant responded, “I don't think teachers need more training. We need to change the system that allows children that ruin the education of 19 other students to



remain in the classroom with just the teacher providing support. It doesn't work. Putting kids on a token board every time doesn't work.” While this response was an outlier (and the participant did not answer the question related to the top two areas of intervention in which he or she would like training), it indicates that some teachers are not aware of positive behavioral interventions (like BSP or token economies), the broad literature base supporting the effectiveness of these practices, or how to implement them properly (e.g., just “putting kids on a token board” does not sound like an EBP selected based on data or implemented with a specific, function-based objective). This teacher may currently have or have had some very challenging behaviors in his or her classroom without having sufficient training in strategies to increase appropriate behavior and reduce inappropriate behavior; he or she may also not know how to (or select not to) seek support from those in the school or district who have expertise in working with students with challenging behavior, or those support staff may not exist.

Like students, teachers likely require differentiated levels of support; not all will respond to the universal level of training, and professional development providers need to be able to provide more intensive supports as needed. Increasing and supporting teachers' use of BSP in general education classrooms and providing training specifically on characteristics of students with EBD or those at risk may help decrease the frequency of challenging behaviors in the classroom (especially for those students who are reinforced by adult attention) and teachers' feelings of efficacy in meeting the needs of these students.

## **Academic Supports**

Students with EBD in general education classrooms typically receive fewer academic interventions and supports (e.g., small group, one-on-one reteaching) than students without disabilities or challenging behaviors and students with EBD rarely receive academic intervention outside of the classroom (e.g., tutoring; Bradley et al., 2008; Scott et al., 2011). Research also indicates that students with EBD have lower participation rates during classroom activities, fewer interactions with the teacher, and fewer opportunities to respond and become engaged with the instruction (Bradley et al., 2008; Scott et al., 2011; Sutherland & Wehby, 2001).

Most participants indicated that emotional/behavioral difficulties interfere with a student's overall learning, engagement during academic instruction, and engagement during academic tasks. Twelve (48%) participants indicated that students with emotional/behavioral difficulties generally achieve less academically (e.g., below grade-level skills, lower grades, lower test scores) than students without emotional/behavioral difficulties, seven (28%) were unsure, and six (24%) did not agree that students with emotional/behavioral difficulties generally achieve less academically than students without emotional/behavioral difficulties. Participants' responses to these questions do *not* align with current research suggesting that students with EBD, at risk for EBD, or those who engage in challenging behavior in the classroom have significantly poorer educational outcomes than typical students, such as lower graduation rates, below grade level academic achievement, low rates of employment, low rates of college attendance (Baker et al., 2008; Lane et al., 2008; Lane et al., 2012), and higher rates of participation

in the juvenile justice system (Bradley et al., 2008; Quinn et al. 2005). This could be a function of the school district, teacher training, university background, or another variable specifically related to the participants in the current study.

Again, consistent, frequent use of BSP statements may mitigate some of the behaviors that interfere with learning and engagement. BSP statements are a simple, easy to implement, cost-effective academic intervention and may increase the academic engagement and performance of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties. Research shows that teachers are likely to favor inclusive practices, particularly when few instructional adaptations are required (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996); BSP meets those criteria.

### **Perceptions of Students with Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties**

General educators often have significant reservations about the likelihood of success for students with disabilities who are included in general education classrooms (Berry, 2011; Fuchs, 2010; Nagle et al., 2006). Findings from the current study indicate that students with emotional/behavioral difficulties may be creating more challenges for the participants, all of whom were general educators teaching students with emotional/behavioral difficulties in their classes. When students with challenging behavior are included in general education classrooms, teachers may experience initial opposition toward including these students because they perceive the problems as severe, demanding, and possibly the result of failure (of educator preparation programs and professional development providers) to prepare teachers with adequate strategies for dealing with behavioral problems (Drysdale et al., 2007). Results from the current study

also indicated that most participants perceived that emotional/behavioral difficulties interfere with a student's engagement both during academic instruction and during academic tasks such as written assignments and tests, which aligns with current research (Kersey & Masterson, 2011; Sinatra et al., 2015; Sutherland & Wehby, 2001; Simonsen et al., 2008). Students who are not engaged in instruction are more likely to engage in disruptive behavior; teachers must create environments conducive to learning and ensure students are fully engaged.

As mentioned in the previous section, 22 (88%) participants perceived that students with emotional/behavioral difficulties interfere with overall student learning. Perceptions like this may lead to students with EBD having fewer interactions with teachers in class and fewer opportunities to respond to and engage with the class discussion or activity (Bradley et al., 2008; Scott et al., 2011; Sutherland & Wehby, 2001). Additionally, when participants were asked if they feel confident supporting the academic needs of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties, 11 (44%) reported they feel confident, six (24%) reported that they sometimes or somewhat feel confident, and eight (32%) reported they do not feel confident supporting the academic needs of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties. Future studies could investigate this limited confidence and specific strategies to build confidence, which would likely include additional training in targeted areas (such as those indicated by participants in this study, e.g., strategies for managing disruptive behavior and what to do with the rest of the class when dealing with inappropriate behavior so that teaching and learning can continue).

Teachers' positive attitudes toward including students with EBD, at risk for EBD, or those who engage in challenging behavior can provide the motivation for pursuing successful strategies (Fuchs, 2010; Drysdale et al., 2007; Ross-Hill, 2009). One participant in the current study responded that he or she "rarely" feels confident; this participant has been teaching 29 years and "strongly agreed" that students with emotional/behavioral difficulties interfere with overall student learning, "strongly agreed" that emotional/behavioral difficulties interfere with a student's engagement during academic instruction and during academic tasks, and "agreed" that these students generally achieve less academically than students without emotional/behavioral difficulties. This respondent also indicated that he or she provides praise to students in the classroom but "neither agree[d] or disagree[d]" with the statement "Praise can positively change the behavior of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties." This participant's perceptions about the limited ability of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties may be related to his or her limited likelihood to use (or confidence in using) BSP.

Another participant who had 13 years of teaching experience and "strongly agreed" that students with emotional/behavioral difficulties interfere with overall student learning reported, "Depends on the individual needs of the student" in response to feeling confident in supporting the academic needs of these students. This teacher also indicated that he or she knows and understands the difference between GP and BSP, uses BSP more frequently than GP with students with emotional/behavioral difficulties, but "neither agreed or disagreed" that praise can positively change the behavior of students

with emotional/behavioral difficulties. Perhaps this participant (and the participant mentioned in the previous paragraph) have not observed positive effects related to praise, specifically BSP statements. Pre-service educator preparation programs and other personnel who provide professional development to in-service teachers need to supplement training with data about the effectiveness of EBPs (including BSPs) and multiple practical examples of how these EBPs can be implemented in the classroom for students with emotional/behavioral difficulties.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

Several limitations may have affected the findings of this study. The data came from a relatively small sample in a single North Texas school district and only teachers working in elementary schools received the recruitment email and survey link. Therefore, results cannot be generalized to larger populations of teachers at different grade levels and in different parts of the nation. Since data were collected through a survey, teachers self-reported on their practices, so their actual implementation of practices was not observed and cannot be verified. Self-reported data may be impacted by participants' understanding of the questions and the desire to provide responses they think are "most appropriate" or items that match up with best practices instead of their actual practice. Furthermore, due to the nature of the anonymity of the surveys, there was no follow up on answers that may have facilitated a follow up question. More information about some responses may have yielded a better understanding of participants' knowledge, practices, and perceptions. Future research should include interviews and focus group discussions and debriefing.

In addition, teachers' relatively positive attitudes and responses reflected were self-reported and again, may not reflect actual practices in their classrooms. Asking about attitudes, knowledge, and practices was still valuable because these perceptions serve as a basis for important special education and disability-related policy decisions; this knowledge is critical in the development and implementation of local, state, and national policies related to educating students with EBD, at risk for EBD, or for those who engage in challenging behavior in the classroom.

To date, both descriptive and experimental work in EBD have provided data on factors associated with learning and behavior, and this work should be continued. Specifically, single-subject studies in EBD can continue to help identify promising classroom-based interventions and enable us to learn more about teachers' actual classroom practices they are reporting.

### **Summary**

Researchers have identified multiple evidence-based classroom management strategies associated with preventing problem behavior, increasing appropriate social behavior, and increasing students' engagement with learning tasks to improve social and academic outcomes (e.g., Cavanaugh, 2013; Sutherland et al., 2000). Effective classroom managers have students who experience a greater likelihood of academic and social success than students being taught in classrooms with ineffective classroom managers (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jenkins et al., 2015; Simonsen et al., 2008). Effective classroom managers also have less stress, burnout, and likelihood of leaving the field (Drysdale et al., 2007; Evans et al., 2012; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). General education teachers

need effective, easy to implement, evidence-based practices (such as BSP) to meet the needs of the growing population of students with EBD, at risk for EBD, or who engage in challenging behavior in the general education classroom.

All stakeholders should recognize classroom teachers' daily challenges, their attitudes towards including students with emotional/behavioral needs, and their perceived needs. By increasing the level of support, available in-service training, and improved preservice preparation, teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are likely to improve, teacher efficacy is likely to increase, and student performance is likely to improve. Supporting teachers' use of BSP in general education classrooms may help decrease the frequency of challenging behaviors and address the needs of students with EBD, as well as improve the educational and social/emotional outcomes for these vulnerable students. Teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are important not only because positive attitudes can provide the motivation for pursuing successful strategies, but also because teachers' attitudes have the potential to affect students' attitudes (Drysdale, et al., 2007; Fowler et al., 2008), thus influencing the students' social and emotional adjustment and their academic performance (Fowler et al., 2008).



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## APPENDIX A

### Survey: Teacher Praise in Inclusive Classrooms

## Survey: Teacher Praise in Inclusive Classrooms

- 1) What is your age range?  
18-25                      33-40                      49-56  
26-32                      41-48                      57+
- 2) Are you male or female?  
Male              Female
- 3) Are you currently teaching General Education or Special Education?  
General Education                      Special Education
- 4) If teaching in General Education, have you ever taught in Special Education?  
Yes              No
- 5) How many years have you been teaching?

For the remaining questions below, the term “students with emotional/behavioral difficulties” refers to students with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders (EBD), students at risk for EBD, or students who engage in challenging behaviors in the classroom.

- 6) Do you have students with emotional or behavioral difficulties in your classes?  
Yes              No
- 7) Students with emotional/behavioral difficulties interfere with overall student learning.  
Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree or Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
- 8) Emotional/behavioral difficulties interfere with a student's engagement during academic instruction.  
Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree or Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
- 9) Emotional/behavioral difficulties interfere with a student's engagement during academic tasks, assignments, tests, etc.  
Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree or Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
- 10) Students with emotional/behavioral difficulties generally achieve less academically (i.e. below grade-level skills, lower grades, lower test scores) than students without emotional/behavioral difficulties.  
Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree or Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
- 11) Do you feel confident supporting the academic needs of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties?

- 12) I provide praise to students in my classroom.  
Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree or Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
- 13) I know and understand the difference between General Praise (GP) and Behavior-Specific Praise (BSP).  
Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree or Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
- 14) I provide General Praise (GP) to students in my classroom.  
Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree or Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
- 15) Provide an example of a General Praise (GP) statement you may use in your classroom.
- 16) I provide Behavior-Specific Praise (BSP) to students in my classroom.  
Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree or Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
- 17) Provide an example of a Behavior-Specific Praise (BSP) statement you may use in your classroom.
- 18) BSP and GP are equally effective at modifying student behavior.  
Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree or Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
- 19) I use BSP more often than GP.  
Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree or Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
- 20) I use GP more often than BSP.  
Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree or Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
- 21) I use BSP statements more frequently than GP statements with students with emotional/behavioral difficulties.  
Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree or Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
- 22) Praise can positively change the behavior of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties.  
Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree or Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
- 23) BSP and GP are equally effective at modifying the behavior of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties.  
Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree or Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
- 24) Please list the top 2 areas of intervention that you would like more training and knowledge regarding.

- 25) I would like strategies/interventions for modifying the behavior of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties.  
Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree or Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
- 26) When learning a new intervention or strategy, the type of training that works best for me is:  
Indirect    Direct (one time)    Direct (1 time w/ongoing follow-up & feedback)    Coaching
- 27) Which type of praise would be easiest to implement and increase your implementation of praise?  
Behavior-Specific Praise (BSP)    General Praise (GP)
- 28) Ongoing coaching and feedback on implementing BSP would be helpful and increase my ability to implement the intervention effectively.  
Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree or Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
- 29) I am more likely to implement an intervention that is easy to learn, easy to implement, and doesn't require materials.  
Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree or Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree



## APPENDIX B

Table 1: Results From “Teacher Praise in Inclusive Classrooms” Survey

## APPENDIX B

Table 1  
*Results From “Teacher Praise in Inclusive Classrooms” Survey*

Survey Questions or Statements	At Times	Yes	No
Do you have students with emotional or behavioral difficulties in your classes?		24	1
Do you feel confident supporting the academic needs of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties?	11	8	6

  

Survey Questions or Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Students with emotional/behavioral difficulties interfere with overall student learning.	12	10	2	1	0
Emotional/behavioral difficulties interfere with a student's engagement during academic instruction.	11	11	3	0	0
Emotional/behavioral difficulties interfere with a student's engagement during academic tasks, assignments, tests, etc.	10	13	1	1	0
Students with emotional/behavioral difficulties generally achieve less academically (i.e. below grade-level skills, lower grades, lower test scores) than students without emotional/behavioral difficulties.	5	7	7	6	0

I provide praise to students in my classroom.	20	5	0	0	0
I know and understand the difference between General Praise (GP) and Behavior-Specific Praise (BSP).	16	7	1	1	0
I provide General Praise (GP) to students in my classroom.	8	15	0	2	0
I provide Behavior-Specific Praise (BSP) to students in my classroom.	14	8	1	0	0
BSP and GP are equally effective at modifying student behavior.	1	5	3	15	1
BSP and GP are equally effective at modifying the behavior of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties.	1	2	6	13	3
Praise can positively change the behavior of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties.	7	10	7	1	0
I use BSP more often than GP.	8	8	5	4	0
I use GP more often than BSP.	0	6	3	15	1

I use BSP statements more frequently than GP statements with students with emotional/behavioral difficulties.	9	13	2	1	0
I would like strategies/interventions for modifying the behavior of students with emotional/behavioral difficulties.	8	14	3	0	0
Ongoing coaching and feedback on implementing BSP would be helpful and increase my ability to implement the intervention effectively.	5	12	6	1	0
I am more likely to implement an intervention that is easy to learn, easy to implement, and doesn't require materials.	9	13	1	0	1

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Note. Numbers represent number of participants that selected each answer

APPENDIX C

Table 2: Types of Training Desired When Learning a New Intervention or Strategy

APPENDIX C

Table 2  
*Types of Training Desired When Learning a New Intervention or Strategy*

<b>Types of Training</b>	<b>Participant Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Indirect	3	13%
Direct (one time)	5	21%
Direct (one time with ongoing follow-up and feedback)	8	33%
Coaching	8	33%

*Note.* Only 24 of 25 participants responded to this survey item

APPENDIX D  
Participants' Age Ranges

APPENDIX D

Table 3

*Participants' Age Ranges*

<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>Percentage of Participants</b>
18-25	0	0.0%
26-32	6	24.0%
33-40	4	16.0%
41-48	9	36.0%
49-56	3	12.0%
57+	3	12.0%