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Developing Communication Skills in Preschoolers

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Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

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Abstract

This school improvement plan looks at how the implementation of a Functional Communication Training Program in preschool classrooms can improve academics, social skills, and eliminate challenging behaviors. The literature review examines research that details the importance of communication and social skills curriculum for young learners. Children who can communicate effectively are less likely to display disruptive behaviors and are more likely to succeed in building strong relationships throughout their academic careers.

Keywords: functional communication training, academics, professional development, social skills, challenging behaviors

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Developing Communication Skills in Preschoolers: A School Improvement Project

Participation in quality early childhood education has been shown to have positive effects on a child's academic and social outcomes (Camilli & Barnett 2010). Young learners benefit from early social interactions and activities with their peers. Positive play experiences with classmates are critical for building social communication skills in preschoolers (McClelland & Marrison 2003; Odom et. al. 2006). Children with delays in social communication may be at an increased risk for social isolation and subsequently miss out on building strong peer relationships (Hansen et.al. 2014). The key problem is deficits in communication cause challenging student behaviors which result in decreased constructive peer interactions. Without effective interventions to address the communication deficits, the child's experience in an educational setting will continue to deteriorate. (Bono et al. 2004; Charman et al. 2005). That is why it is important to go beyond math and literacy to educate the whole child. Children who show increased social skills in kindergarten are two times more likely to obtain a college degree, 54% more likely to graduate high school, and 46% more likely to have a full-time job by age 25 (Teaching Strategies, LLC, 2023). Public health scientists are now studying how low levels of social and emotional functioning are the cause of many public health problems such as substance abuse, obesity, and violence (Jones et al. 2015). That is why we want our children to become caring adults who are creative, resilient, curious, and empathetic. We want these future citizens of the world to have healthy, strong relationships, and positive approaches to lifelong learning (Teaching Strategies, LLC, 2023).

The purpose of this school improvement plan is to reduce challenging behavior in preschoolers by helping them to communicate in a way that serves the same objective as disruptive behavior (Durand & Moskowitz 2015). If teachers and staff can determine the

function or reason for the problem behavior and teach the children how to convey the same

message in a more appropriate way, these distracting behaviors will decrease in frequency or

fade away completely (Carr & Durand, 1985). Teaching replacement skills for problem

behaviors is an evidence-based practice known as Functional Communication Training (FCT).

FCT is the most widely used and researched function-based behavioral treatment

(Ghaemmaghami et al. 2021). The success of functional communication training in decreasing

problem behaviors combined with teaching communication skills has made it a sought-after

treatment for individuals with developmental delays or disabilities (Carr & Durand, 1985).

The FCT intervention would begin by completing a formative assessment on the student

which would identify the conditions associated with the problem behavior. Once the function or

reason behind the behavior is identified, teachers, parents, and staff would instruct the student on

how to use a more appropriate alternative response (Hanley et al. 2007). This intervention would

also include providing families with resources to use at home to further develop communication

skills outside of the classroom setting. This approach would help to build relationships with

family members by providing an alliance that encourages positive communication amongst all

stakeholders.

Research for this project's literature review was conducted using journal articles

available through the DeWitt Library at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa and online

through the ERIC files. Most of the articles used in this capstone project were peer-reviewed and

published within the past ten years. The authors' purpose in these articles was to research the

efficacy of functional communication training in individuals with problem behaviors. The

research articles showed a substantial reduction in challenging behaviors, however complete

elimination was difficult to achieve (Ghaemmaghami et al. 2021). Investigations on classroom

environment, parent – teacher relationships, and efficacy over time were topics included in these resources. This scope of research shares the benefits of implementing a detailed functional communication training program in the preschool classroom setting.

The expectation is that preschool students at Lincoln Elementary will be taught to use strategies to effectively communicate with staff and peers. The students' stakeholders (teachers, parents, and staff) will demonstrate replacement actions and modeling that encourages positive social interactions. When children are taught how to express themselves at an early age, they can strengthen their communication and social skills throughout their educational career. This will boost peer relationships and help to shape confident and caring lifelong learners.

Functional communication training occurs when educators can decrease challenging behaviors in children by replacing these behaviors with forms of communication that serve the same purpose (Durand, V. M., & Moskowitz, L. 2015). FCT is used in homes, schools, and in the community by family members as well as a range of professionals (Dunlap, Ester, Langhans, & Fox 2006). Research on FCT has been successfully used with individuals across all ages, developmental levels, language, and diagnosis (Mancil 2006). There is increasing demand for effective interventions for children at younger ages more than ever before. Because FCT can be easily implemented and the child can recruit reinforcers without an interventionist present, this approach is ideal for use with young children in their home, community, or preschool setting (Schindler & Harner, 2005). The following literature review will share studies documenting the importance of strong interventions in the classroom and home settings in order to build communication skills in preschoolers and young children. When children can effectively communicate their wants and needs, disruptive behaviors will decrease and positive relationships with peers will increase.

Review of the Literature

This literature review summarizes the research around four themes of Functional Communication Training. The first theme discusses the value of FCT and why researchers found it to be an effective intervention. The second theme is about the importance of parental involvement when implementing FCT and how studies found this to be key to its success rate. The third and fourth themes shared in this literature review are in regard to professional development for educators and an appropriate curriculum for use in the training of FCT. Researchers found these four themes to be crucial components to reducing challenging behaviors in young children.

The Value of Functional Communication Training

In the study done by Durand & Moskowitz (2015), the authors reported on the effectiveness of Functional Communication Training, the steps involved in using FCT, and how this approach can be used to reduce challenging behaviors among preschoolers. According to their findings, much of the misbehavior seen in children can be viewed as a form of communication. If we can determine the "messages" of the children's behavior problems and teach them to communicate the same message more appropriately, their problem behavior would not be necessary and would be reduced (Durand & Moskowitz, 2015, p. 1) Not only have researchers and therapists been able to effectively implement FCT with young children, but parents and teachers have also been successful in using FCT. Research suggests that FCT is an effective strategy for addressing the behavior problems of young children. However, this study also found that it is important to tailor FCT procedures to fit the needs of families in home environments as well as adapt them for school settings. For this to be accomplished, a thorough formative assessment (FA) must be conducted. These can be time-consuming and need to be

completed in highly controlled environmental conditions. Both situations may limit the

feasibility or practicality of FCT implementation (Durand & Moskowitz, 2015).

According to a study done by Ghaemmaghami et al. (2021), FCT has been shown to

result in substantial reductions of a variety of topographically and functionally different types of

problem behavior in children. Examples of problem behaviors include acts of aggression such as

hitting, kicking, and biting and disruptive behavior such as spitting, whining, or running from

adults. The authors reviewed a total of 208 empirical studies of FCT which included 744

applications of functional communication training across 640 participants. The findings showed

that FCT resulted in an 80% reduction of problem behavior in 90% of the applications (668 out

of 744) when it was first introduced. Although FCT was found to be a flexible and easily

implemented intervention, the researchers did not have data on the efficacy and effectiveness of

FCT in a home setting or other non-controlled environments. Recommendations for future

studies are to implement FCT and document its rate of success in natural, real-world settings

(Ghaemmaghami et al. 2021).

Another study done by Lindgren et al. (2020), compared Functional Communication

Training to "treatment as usual" and found that the FCT treatment achieved a mean reduction in

problem behavior of 98% compared to limited behavioral improvement in children receiving

"treatment as usual" during a 12-week period. Treatment as usual was considered to be a time

out from a preferred task or activity. The research also found that social communication and task

completion improved with FCT. This allowed students to build stronger relationships with their

peers and other adults in the classroom environment. The authors of this study suggest that FCT

can successfully treat many different problem behaviors in diverse populations and across a

range of environments. However, the limitations discussed in this study were in regard to long

term use and effectiveness. The researchers were unable to confirm success rates of FCT six months down the road and beyond. Future research recommendations are to study the prevention of resurgence problem behaviors when a child's appropriate requests are ignored and the development of strategies to ensure treatment generalization across home and community settings (Lindgren et al., 2020).

Similar findings were observed in the study done by Durand (1999). The author evaluated the effectiveness of FCT as an intervention for problem behaviors in young children. He concluded that the results of using FCT were successful with individuals who had limited communication skills. Durand also found that positive effects of FCT could extend to teachers and caregivers who were unfamiliar with the intervention. Students were able to recruit their reinforcers from untrained adults, which resulted in reduced levels of problem behavior (Durand, 1999, p. 17). The use of FCT was found to promote teacher and peer relationships, strengthen learning, and build independence in our young learners.

Parental Involvement

The following four studies discuss the importance of parental involvement in behavioral interventions for children. When teachers and parents work together to ensure fidelity of a program, success rates increase with positive behaviors. A child's challenging behavior will decrease if the same strategies are used at school and in the home environment. Teaching parents on how to use specific strategies and interventions in their home will ensure generalization and longevity of increased positive results throughout different settings. Working alongside parents will help our future citizens of the world to build strong, healthy relationships and become lifelong learners.

The first study reviewed was completed by Wacker et al. (2017). In this study 103 children and their parents participated in a research project that studied the effects of FCT on destructive behaviors. Parents conducted a formative assessment on their child in order to determine the function of the behavior. When the cause for the behavior was identified, the parents taught their child to make the request more appropriately. For example, the child was taught to say "play" to request a brief break from a work task. Over the course of ten months, all participants showed a mean reduction in problem behaviors by 86% – 90%. The researchers in this study concluded that FCT produces positive long-term effects due to the improved changes in behavior over a long period of time. However, the researchers also show that the effects of treatment are fragile, and that destructive behavior will often revert to baseline levels unless the intervention is continued. The study shared that resurgence of challenging behaviors often occurs because of problems with the implementation and fidelity of the program (Wacker, et al. 2017).

In another study done by Akemoglu & Tomeny (2020), the researchers examined the effects of parent-implemented early communication interventions during shared book reading. Three mothers were trained to use a set of communication teaching strategies such as modeling, FCT, and time delay. After parents practiced the three different strategies, the children exhibited more communicative acts. All three mothers reported that they noticed improvements in their children's communication and engagement during storybook reading. Overall, this study found that parental coaching and training with fidelity was the factor that helped improve the children's communication skills (Akemoglu & Tomeny, 2020).

In a similar study reviewed, the author Bearss et al. (2015) evaluated the efficacy of parent training versus parent education in disruptive behaviors. The parents who engaged in training were provided specific strategies on how to manage disruptive behavior. Parents

receiving education were provided information on disruptive behaviors but no management strategies. The study found that the 24-week parent training program was superior to parent education for reducing disruptive behaviors in children. After reviewing surveys and checklists filled out by parents, those in the training program showed a reduction of problem behaviors by 47% to 55%. The reduction in disruptive behaviors with the group that received only education on behaviors and not strategies was between 31% and 34% (Bearss et al. 2015). The research from these reviews shows that parent inclusion in teaching interventions is critical to a student's success.

An additional literature review authored by Tonge et al. (2014) studied the effects of parent education on adaptive behaviors, autism symptoms, and cognitive language skills of young children. The researchers conducted a randomized group comparison design involving a parent education and counselling intervention and a parent education and behavior management intervention. The results from the study showed that parent education and behavior management interventions resulted in significant improvement in adaptive behavior and autism symptoms in young children. They concluded that a 20-week parent education program including skills training for parents of young children with lagging communication skills, autism, or challenging behaviors provides increased improvements in adaptive behavior symptoms for low-functioning children. However, the authors of this literature review do recommend a long term follow up with the studies participants to determine whether there are any continual and consistent benefits of early interventions (Tonge et al. 2014).

Professional Development for Teachers and Paraeducators

Effective training and professional development for teaching staff is critical to ensure interventions are implemented with fidelity and successful student outcomes are achieved. In the

study done by Hogan et al. (2015), researchers evaluated the benefits of teaching instructional staff different strategies to correctly implement behavior intervention plans in a classroom setting. Training consisted of verbal instructions, modeling, and rehearsal of procedures. Results from the study showed that training and professional development improved school staffs' implementation of behavior intervention plans. For this research project, four female instructional staff were trained and observed. Their baseline scores before training averaged around 80% fidelity for implementation of the intervention plan. After training all four staff members scored an average of 100% on implementation of the behavior intervention plan with fidelity.

Even though the staff's success rates increased after professional training, the study discussed several limitations. One limitation was the potential reactivity of staff's behavior during observations. 3 out of the 4 participants mentioned being nervous and that they felt like they were taking a test. A possible solution to this issue would be to video tape the staff versus having the researcher present. Another limitation mentioned, was that data was not collected on student behavior. Therefore, it is unknown whether improved staff performance resulted in better student performance. This study recommends future research should include data on students' inappropriate behavior and/or compliance to determine whether staff performance influences student behavior (Hogan et al. 2015). Overall, this study found it very beneficial to spend time educating staff on how to work with students who exhibit challenging behaviors and / or lagging communication skills.

A similar study done by Luczynski & Hanley (2013), also showed significant benefits to teaching school staff strategies for working and communicating with challenging student behaviors. In this research project, authors evaluated the effects of the Preschool Life Skills

Program (PLS) on the acquisition and maintenance of functional communication and self-control skills. Teaching strategies included instruction, modeling, role play, and differential reinforcement. The targeted behaviors were hitting, pinching, grabbing, slapping, scratching, and throwing. The teaching staff were coached by the interventionist on different types of responses to verbalize when a child was exhibiting a targeted behavior. Example phrases were, "say excuse me," or "may I have (item)?" The findings from this study continue to highlight the importance of identifying effective strategies to increase social skills and decrease problem behavior in preschool classrooms. Researchers found the PLS program to be a very successful strategy. This program resulted in a 67% increase in functional communication skills and an 88% increase in delay tolerance. The study suggests that training functional communication skills in students and staff will positively change the developmental trajectory of child outcomes with respect to problem behaviors in the classroom.

However, this research project also shared several limitations and recommendations for future study. The first limitation was that data was collected only during center time. A recommendation for future study would be to collect data across the entire school day to promote generalization of positive behaviors and responses across a broader range of activities. Another limitation expressed in this study was the small group size of the students (six). It is suggested to practice PLS strategies in a whole group class environment to allow all students and staff to participate in the teaching and learning of socially acceptable communication skills. A final limitation was the amount of time given to the study, which was three months. Future research could be performed over a longer period to ensure that acquisition, generalization, and maintenance of positive social skills in preschool students is sustained. (Luczynski & Hanley, 2013).

Research conducted by Gore et al. (2017), discusses the effects of quality professional development for teachers and school staff. It tested a pedagogy-based, collaborative PD approach for impact on the quality of teaching. A cluster randomized controlled trial involving eight teachers at each of 24 schools found significant positive effects on teaching quality (d ¼ 0.4), independent of school type (primary/secondary), school location (urban/rural), and years of teaching experience. These effects were sustained six months later. The findings from this study highlight how robust pedagogical frameworks can be used to guide preservice and/or in-service teacher development and enhance collaborative processes for professional development (Gore et al. 2017).

In comparison, a study done by Yoo (2016), examined the effects of professional development on teachers' self-efficacy through 148, K-12 teachers and school educators. The teachers' Self-Efficacy Scale (TSES) was administered twice with a five-week gap. The findings indicated that teacher self-efficacy increased as a result of their professional development experience. The sense of self efficacy has been widely studied in the field of education as it has been recognized as an important factor that influences student achievement and behavior (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Tschannen Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). It also provides important information with regard to teacher quality and sustainability. The high correlation between the quality of a teacher and student performance is a widely accepted notion, and thus the focus on teacher quality has had a long history in the field of education. The current research findings have shown that teachers' professional development effort does have a positive effect on teacher efficacy. In addition, the descriptive self-analyses of teacher efficacy in this study have shown that gaining new knowledge was positively related to teacher outlook (Yoo, 2016).

Functional Communication Training Curriculum

Social skills are very important to children's development. Children's social skills usually include showing an interest in others, initiating and sustaining interactions, taking part in group play or goal-directed group activities, responding appropriately to peers' aggressive behavior, and effectively solving social problems (Jamison et al. 2012; Odom et al. 1999; Van Hecke et al. 2007). These skills are required for positive relationships with peers, which satisfy the need to belong, protect against victimization, and promote cognitive and social development (Miles and Stipek 2006; Parker and Asher 1987). Participation in quality early childhood education has been shown to have positive effects on a child's academic and social outcomes (Camilli & Barnett 2010). That is why it is important to go beyond math and literacy to educate the whole child. We want our children to become caring adults who are creative, resilient, curious, and empathetic.

The following research project done by Szumski et al. (2017), compares the effectiveness of two preschool curriculums aimed at developing communication and social skills. The first program was Play Time / Social Time (PT/ST) and the second was 'I Can Problem Solve' (ICPS). The experiment took place in a classroom setting. Fifty-two children participated in the study. Data on each participant was collected and analyzed. Comparison with a control group indicated that both programs were effective in developing social skills. The PT/ST program was more effective than ICPS in developing interaction skills; both programs improved children's ability to cope with difficult social situations. This study also shared some limitations to their research which were small group size, only one questionnaire was used, and preschoolers' communication skills were not assessed prior to the study. These limitations could impact the effectiveness of the program's results. Future research recommendations are to conduct a long-term study to determine if the skills are remembered and transfer into other areas of the students' day (Szumski et al. 2017). Overall, the study was considered a success. It was able to show that

the two interventions, PT/ST and ICPS, were more effective than the standard preschool curriculum in developing social and communication skills. Therefore, it is recommended that prek-12 schools implement a specific curriculum that targets social, emotional, and behavioral skills.

In contrast to the studies above, Durand & Merges (2001) compares the functional communication training program along with other behavioral intervention techniques and shares factors that predict success. The study identified four factors that seem to influence the success or failure of FCT: response match, response mastery, response milieu, and the consequences for challenging behavior. The first study of functional communication training directly addressed the issue of response match. After conducting a functional analysis of the challenging behaviors of four students, they were taught responses that matched the assessed function of their behaviors as well as responses that did not match the function of their challenging behavior. In each case, the students' challenging behavior was reduced only when they used the communicative response that matched the function of their behavior. The remaining three elements of FCT were also necessary for reductions in problem behavior, generalization across people, and maintenance across time. This study concluded that the results from the research were encouraging and that many cases of severe challenging behavior will be positively affected by FCT (Durand & Merges, 2001).

Yang et al. (2021) conducted research on how to support social-emotional learning and communication skills in children through teacher facilitation of conflict resolution. The teachers implemented six steps for facilitating a preschool child's conflict resolution and conducted pre- and post-tests through observational checklists and event sampling. According to the findings, the children developed conflict-resolution skills and behavioral self-regulation. The teacher

facilitation of conflict resolution to support social-emotional learning proved to be effective and would be a beneficial curriculum to teach early childhood teachers (Yang et al. 2021).

School Profile

Community Characteristics

Waterloo, Iowa is in the Upper Midwest of the United States. It is the major metro of the Cedar Valley Region of Northeast Iowa. As the Black Hawk County Seat, Waterloo is the hub for government, advanced manufacturing, healthcare, education, employment, and retail for the region with a labor force of over 300,000. Diversity is Waterloo's key strength. The population of over 70,150 is made up of 17% African Americans with growing Latino, Congolese, and Burmese populations among others. There are 45 different languages spoken in the Waterloo schools (Discover Waterloo, n.d.).

School District Characteristics

The Waterloo School District has over 10,000 students across 21 campuses. The district remains one of the largest in the state of Iowa, providing education for grades pre-kindergarten through twelfth. It currently encompasses all of Waterloo, Evansdale, Elk Run Heights, Gilbertville, and parts of Cedar Falls in addition to other unincorporated areas within Black Hawk County. The district is one of the leading employers across the Cedar Valley with approximately 1,400 employees. Around 40% of the teaching staff in the Waterloo School District hold advanced degrees. Waterloo Community Schools are committed to providing students with the tools and resources they need to become the best version of themselves. With student enrichment programs such as Life Labs, the Waterloo Career Center, Success Street, and more, the district ensures their students have the support they need to work toward their dreams.

Whether they're looking to continue their education or find a fulfilling career after graduation, the goal with every student is to provide them with a diploma and a plan (About Waterloo Iowa School District, n.d.).

School District Early Childhood Characteristics and Mission

The preschool program in Waterloo, IA has nine different locations throughout the community. The early childhood classrooms are in elementary buildings and have anywhere from one to five preschool rooms per building. Each classroom can accept up to sixteen students. All teachers have a teaching license from an accredited college and follow the teaching strategies GOLD. The purpose of Waterloo's preschool program is to provide quality developmentally appropriate education that promotes lifelong learning (Waterloo School District Early Childhood, n.d.). The Waterloo School Early Childhood Program believes in educating the whole child. The program believes parents are a child's first and most important teachers. They believe schools must be able to accommodate the unique experiences and abilities of all children. They believe young children learn best through play and active learning. They believe in the importance of community and family partnerships and the impact they have on student learning. The program also believes in multicultural education that respects, understands and celebrates the similarities as well as differences in our world (Waterloo School District Early Childhood, n.d.).

School Building Characteristics

Lincoln Elementary School is a public school located in Waterloo, IA. The student population of Lincoln Elementary School is 474 and the school serves PK-5. The student performance levels at Lincoln Elementary show that 36% of students scored at or above the

proficient level for math, and 36% scored at or above that level for reading. The school's

minority student enrollment is 80% and the student to teacher ratio is 12 to1. The student

population is made up of 51% female students and 49% male students. The school enrolls 85%

of economically disadvantaged students. There are 41 equivalent full-time teachers and 1 full-

time school counselor (Lincoln Elementary School, n.d.).

Parent Involvement

Parents are an integral part of the Waterloo Preschool Program. Each preschool teacher

conducts a home visit with their students' family before the start of the school year. The purpose

for the home visit is to develop an educational partnership between home and school by learning

about the family structure, child-rearing practices, language preferences and other cultural

practices. Parent-teacher conferences are held twice a year, once in the fall and once in the

spring. Parents are kept informed throughout the year by at least one of the following modes of

communication: weekly emails, monthly newsletters, SeeSaw, Facebook private groups, Google

Photos, and/or the school website. Throughout the year each preschool location provides various

family involvement opportunities through events such as movie night, breakfast with

grandparents, literacy night, and the fun fair. Parents are also encouraged to attend field trips and

volunteer in the classroom throughout the school year (Preschool and Partner Handbook, 2021-

22).

Student Learning Goals

Preschoolers at Waterloo Community Schools grow their imaginations every day. They

learn through creative play and engaging activities. Student learning goals across all preschool

sites are as follows: "Children will have the ability to learn at individually high levels, within a

safe and supportive environment, with the collaborative efforts of all stakeholders, promoting the

highest level of learning." (Preschool and Partner Handbook, 2021-22). These goals are

monitored and measured using Teaching Strategies GOLD, feedback from parents and students,

as well as observational data. To support and ensure progress on these learning goals, the

preschool teachers gather monthly to discuss data and create action plans.

Teacher Instructional Strategies

Teachers utilize Creative Curriculum© as a framework for providing developmentally

appropriate learning opportunities for students. Children engage in inviting areas around the

room that will stimulate and encourage imagination, play, creative expression and foster

appreciation for the arts i.e. music, drama, and dance. Preschoolers participate in small group and

individual learning while teaching staff ask thought provoking questions. They also engage in

early-literacy skills and activities addressing proper book handling, letter recognition, beginning

sounds, and writing to lay the foundation for reading. Preschoolers in the Waterloo School

District engage in beginning math, spatial & science concepts such as counting, sorting,

patterning, and recognition of shapes, colors and beginning reasoning and logic. At times,

children will engage in pre-coding and have access to technology. They also engage in social

studies, social interactions, and social emotional learning such as sharing, problem solving,

appropriate ways to get attention and making friends. Children will learn about community and

citizenship and engage in health and nutrition activities such as brushing teeth, following simple

recipes, healthy food choices, the importance of rest, and hand washing (Preschool and Partner

Handbook, 2021-22).

Assessment Practices

Student assessment is done primarily using Creative Curriculum Gold Assessment©, observation and anecdotal notes. The preschool program also participates in the IGDI's developmental pre-literacy screener administered fall, winter, and spring; as well as the GOLD Assessment. Planning for instruction occurs daily and the student data from these assessments and screeners drive classroom instruction (Preschool and Partner Handbook, 2021-22).

Professional Development

Waterloo Community Schools designates one workday per month to allow time for professional development for teaching staff. Each individual teacher takes professional development that pertains to their identified areas of growth through the district or through the Area Education Agency. The preschool team, which is made up of teachers, para-educators, the administration team, and AEA staff, meets monthly. During the monthly meetings the preschool team also looks at IQPPS standards, Teaching Strategies GOLD, and FAST data. Every Friday, the preschool team meets for lesson preparation and team professional development opportunities. Teachers and para-educators discuss current issues and concerns in their school building, as well as provide support and encouragement to one another.

Needs Assessment

Challenging behaviors in the classroom can impact a student's learning and development. When students exhibit disruptive behaviors, participation in preschool activities get interrupted and peer relationships become difficult to form. There can be many reasons why problem behaviors occur in the preschool setting. Four common causes behind preschool behaviors are basic needs not being met, environmental issues, the behavior of other classmates, and struggles with communication skills. It's important for preschool students at Lincoln Elementary in Waterloo, Iowa to be intentionally taught how to effectively communicate with family, school

staff, and peers. Positive communication is essential to building a child's self-esteem and creating a harmonious classroom. Studies show that young children who struggle with social communication skills are at an increased risk for significant behavior and learning problems. Deficits in communication can cause social isolation and challenging student behaviors which result in decreased constructive adult and peer interactions. When students are taught appropriate social communication skills (appropriate requests and responses) to replace inappropriate behavior, problem behaviors will be reduced. This will change the way a child interacts with family and peers and help the child function more successfully in daily life (Wacker, 2017).

Stakeholders (teachers, parents, and staff) at Lincoln Elementary need to teach replacement skills and use modeling to encourage positive social interactions between students. The authors Durand & Moskowitz are quoted as saying, "Much of the misbehavior seen in children can be viewed as a form of communication. If we can determine the messages of the children's behavior problems and teach them to communicate the same message more appropriately, their problem behavior would be reduced (Durand & Moskowitz, 2015)". When children are taught how to express themselves at an early age, they can strengthen their communication and social skills throughout their educational career. This will boost peer relationships and help to shape confident and caring lifelong learners.

Therefore, it is extremely important for parents, teachers, and administration to agree on what communication responses to teach, under what circumstances, and in what setting. This is why continuing education for teachers and school staff is needed. Professional development will help improve communication skills for both staff and students in the classroom and subsequently boost student learning outcomes. When staff feel comfortable with a unified program and know what and why they are doing it, interventions and teaching strategies run more smoothly. Staff

will have a sense of confidence and be more willing to share their new knowledge and support with parents. Once staff and families are working together, student growth and achievement will soar.

Lincoln Elementary needs to implement a professional development program on Functional Communication Training to all preschool stakeholders. Studies have shown that FCT can successfully treat many different problem behaviors in diverse populations and across a wide range of environments (Wacker, 2017). FCT is an evidence-based practice that teaches replacement skills for problem behaviors. However, the success of an intervention often relies on the support it receives from parents, teachers, and administrators. Without considerable planning and effort on the part of these individuals, meaningful changes in behavior may not occur. When parents and teachers have a shared consensus on student performance, they are more likely to team up and work through challenging student behaviors together. Parents need to have a clear picture of how their child is performing in the classroom. This will build trust between families and teachers. It will also ensure both parties prioritize students' safety and security, academic progress, mental health, and emotional well-being.

Data Analysis

Data Summary

Data was collected from seven PreK-12 teachers working in the Waterloo Community School District. These educators had anywhere from one to twenty years of teaching experience and have taught multiple grade levels (see figure 1 below).

Figure 1

Years of Teaching Experience

Question 1: How many years have you been teaching? 7 Responses


Years of Teaching Experience
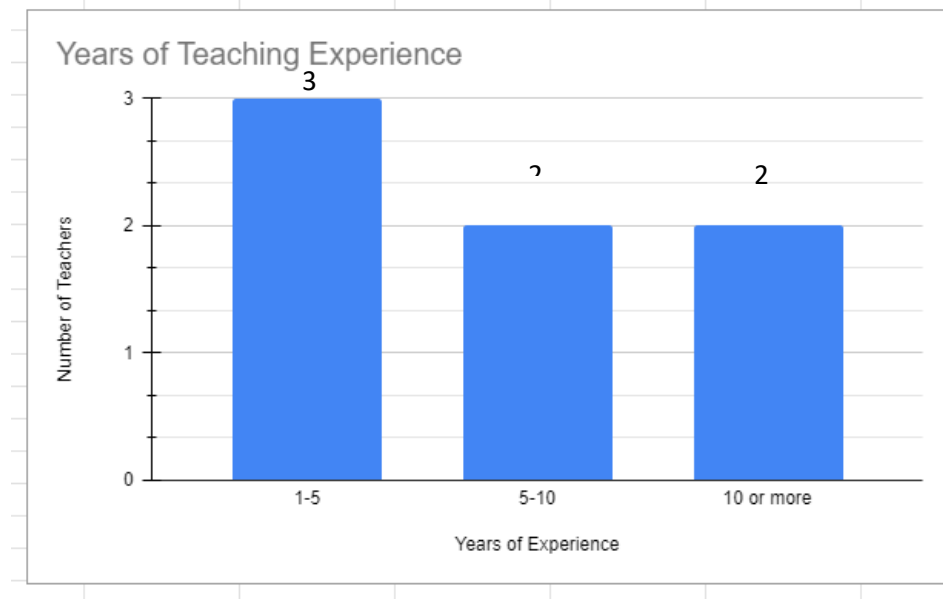
The seven teachers were asked to fill out a Google Survey in July of 2023 regarding student behaviors this past school year (2022-2023). They answered a mixture of fill in the blank, multiple choice, and open-ended questions about challenging student behaviors in the classroom. Examples of some of the survey questions included (See Appendix A) 1) What do you consider to be a challenging behavior? 2) How do you handle disruptive behavior in your classroom? 3) Have you had sufficient professional development in managing students with challenging behaviors? Challenging behavior is considered to be students who yell, hit, bite, refuse work, or disrupt other students learning in the classroom or school setting.

The PreK-12 teachers were asked if they encountered students with challenging behaviors in the past school year. 100% of the teachers said that they had anywhere from 2-7 students with challenging behaviors in their classroom (see figure 2 below) and that they expect to have at least that many students with problem behaviors every school year. When asked if

they remember a school year without challenging behaviors, 100% of the teachers responded,

"No."

Figure 2

Question 2: How many students exhibited disruptive behavior in your classroom this past school

year? 7 responses
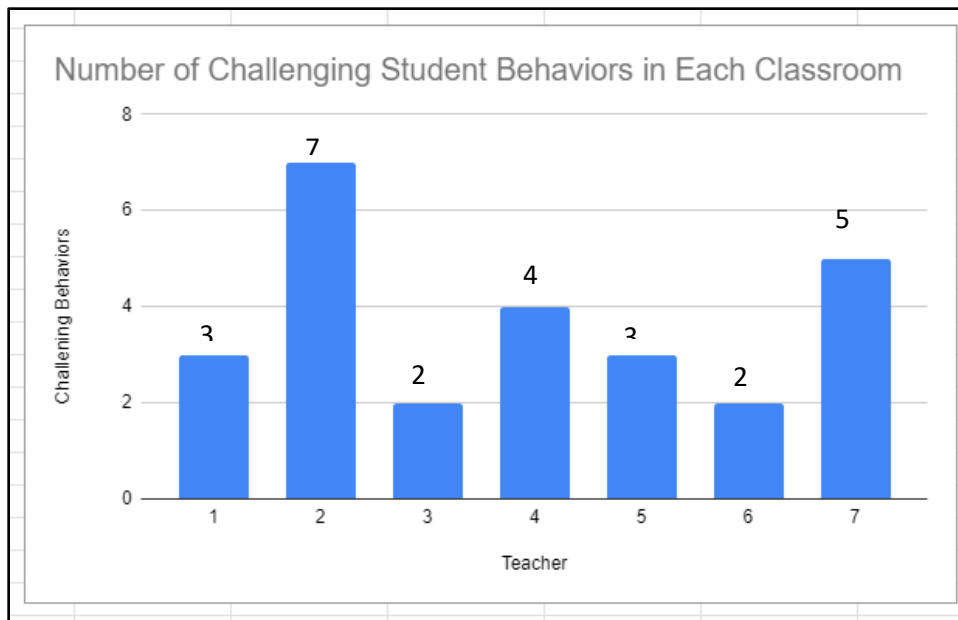
The survey asked the teachers what they felt was the reason for the problem behavior.

They were given four choices to pick from, basic needs not being met (hungry, thirsty, or tired),

struggles with communication (adults not understanding requests), escape from school associated

tasks (class work such as reading, writing, or math), and attention from teachers or peers. Almost

half of the challenging behaviors were because students wanted to escape from a task or

schoolwork (see figure 3 below). Students seeking attention was the second highest number with

six out of twenty-six students behaving inappropriately for this reason. Five students out of the

twenty-six displayed disruptive behaviors due to struggles with communication. Teachers shared

those students felt frustrated and angry when the adult in the classroom wasn't understanding

their needs or requests.

Figure 3

What was the cause for the challenging behavior? 7 responses
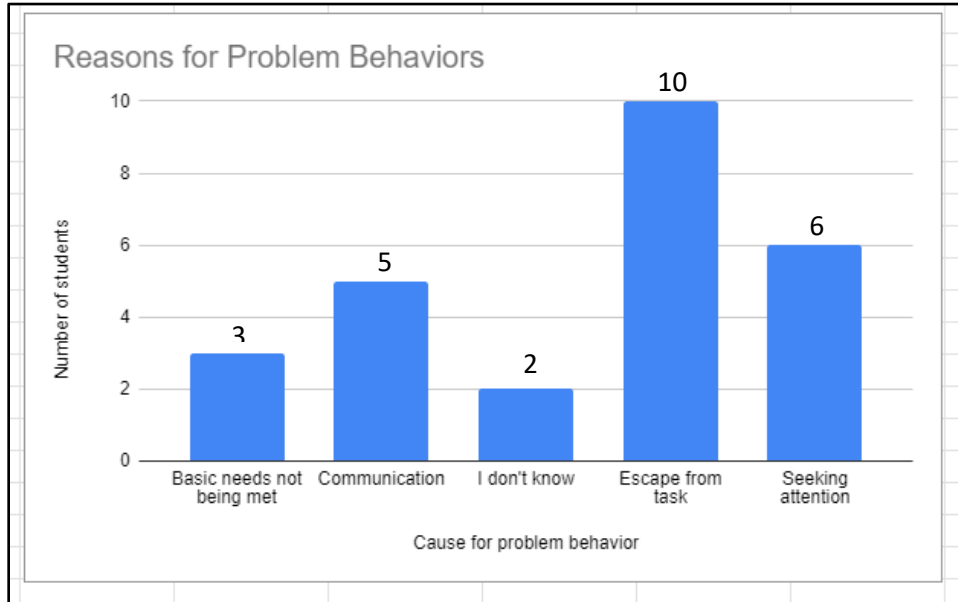
Some of the other questions on the survey were, "were you able to help the student

replace their problem behavior with a more positive response or approach?" Three teachers

responded, "No." Two teachers responded, "Some of the time." And two teachers responded,

"Most of the time." Another question on the survey was, "did you feel supported by the building

administration team when dealing with problem student behavior?" Four teachers did not feel

they had building support and three teachers did feel they had the support of the administration

team. Over half of the teachers surveyed responded that they would like additional professional

development on how to manage students with challenging behaviors.

The data from the Google Survey suggests that teachers would appreciate additional support and professional development on how to work with students who exhibit challenging behaviors in the classroom. According to data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Teacher and Principal Survey, relationships between teachers and their administrators are often negative. Nearly half of teachers reported not feeling a great deal of support or encouragement. 6 out of 10 reported not feeling a lot of cooperative effort among staff members. And 71.3 percent of teachers reported not having much control or influence on selecting the content, topics, and skills they will be teaching in their classrooms (Challenging Working Environment, 2019. Pg. 1). After reviewing these statistics, the information presented shows that the school district would benefit greatly from professional development involving how to resolve challenging student behavior in the classroom.

School Strengths

The Waterloo Schools Early Childhood Program has several strengths. Some of their strengths include the use of the Iowa Early Learning Standards to guide expectations for their students and instructional practices. This helps teachers adequately measure student growth and achievement. Teachers incorporate guided play, which is also known as play-based learning, into their classroom environments allowing for fun, engaging, and creative experiences that are student directed and teacher facilitated. Guided play encourages language development and builds social and emotional skills. Waterloo Schools builds strong community and family partnerships and recognize the impact they have on student learning. This is evidenced by the many activities they lead throughout the school year. There is an event or activity inviting parents and the community to the school locations every month. Some of the activities on the school calendar include a family fun night, neighborhood bar-b-que, and game night. The district

goes to great lengths to interact and engage with family and community members. Educators

welcome and invite family input and encourage participation. They value community

involvement and understand that parents are a child's first and most important teachers

(Preschool and Partner Handbook, 2021-22).

School Challenges

Managing and teaching a room full of preschoolers isn't always easy regardless of the

district or school. It takes skill and patience. Some of the daily challenges of teaching young

children include dealing with difficult behaviors such as throwing tantrums and biting and/or

kicking. Some children may have learning challenges that require special attention, and many

children learn at a different pace from one another. Each child is unique with differing behaviors

and interests. It's important for teachers to create engaging and innovative lessons and activities

to motivate their students. However, planning age-appropriate learning activities takes a large

chunk of time. Teachers must learn to balance the needs of their students and keep their

classroom running smoothly.

Assessment Options

Assessments can be conducted to better understand the needs of students, teachers and

staff. Assessment tools are the methods used to measure the skills, abilities, knowledge, and

fluency of a specific subject area and estimate the progress of a person's education. When it

comes to assessment in schools, there are several techniques that teachers can use. Observation,

parent collaboration, portfolios, checklists, rubrics, and tests are some of those assessment tools

for teachers. These tools provide a good overview of each child's performance in the classroom.

Observation is an essential assessment tool that can be used regularly. Teachers can informally

watch and record student responses, behaviors, interactions, and performance. This information

guides teacher instruction and improves the quality of a student's education (Assessment Tools

for Preschool Teachers, n.d.).

Parent collaboration as an assessment tool builds strong communication between families

and schools. The two sides work together to create an optimal learning environment both at

home and at school. Checklists and rubrics improve a person's chance of success by outlining the

required elements of a task or assignment. Students and adults are better able to understand what

you want them to do and where they should focus their energies. Lastly, portfolios as assessment

tools enable others to show what they know regarding a specific topic or subject. Those

providing a portfolio to present information may find the assignment to be a richer and more

rewarding experience. Overall, assessments help us to create a plan of action to strengthen

potential weaknesses and determine factors that influence a person's learning environment

(Harnessing Parent Teacher Collaboration, 2021).

Action Plan

Proposed Improvement Plan

Based on the information provided by the teachers at the Waterloo Community School

District, action needs to be taken to improve communication skills between preschoolers, their

parents, teachers, and school staff. The purpose of this school improvement plan is to reduce

challenging behavior in preschoolers by helping them to communicate in a way that serves the

same objective as disruptive behavior (Durand & Moskowitz, 2015). The first step in

implementing the school improvement plan is to interview and assess parents and staff on their

abilities and comfort levels in regard to understanding and managing challenging behaviors in

children. If teachers and staff can determine the function or reason for the problem behavior and teach the children how to convey the same message in a more appropriate way, these distracting behaviors will decrease in frequency or fade away completely (Carr & Durand, 1985). Once the leadership team understands stakeholders' needs and requirements, they can choose a curriculum that best fits their staffs' expectations. Next, the building administration team would look at the calendar for the school year and devote professional development time to training teachers and staff in this new social-communication curriculum.

Instructional coaches would begin by teaching staff replacement skills for problem behaviors exhibited in preschool students. This is an evidence-based practice known as Functional Communication Training (FCT). FCT is the most widely used and researched function-based behavioral treatment (Ghaemmaghami et al. 2021). The FCT intervention would begin by completing a formative assessment on the student which would identify the conditions associated with the problem behavior. Once the function or reason behind the behavior is identified, teachers and staff would instruct the student on how to use a more appropriate alternative response (Hanley et al. 2007). This intervention would also include providing families with resources to use at home to further develop communication skills outside of the classroom setting. This approach would help to build relationships with family members by providing an alliance that encourages positive communication amongst all stakeholders.

Impact on Teaching and/or Learning

Implementing a social and functional communication curriculum will have a significant impact on the teaching and learning occurring at the Waterloo Public Preschools. It will help to reduce disruptive behaviors in the classroom and provide staff with strategies for teaching positive replacement behaviors. Teachers will need to set aside approximately 15 minutes for a

social communication mini lesson during their school day. Educators will share appropriate ways to make requests and respond to others in the classroom. They will use modeling, role-play, and direct teaching to help preschoolers socially communicate with their teachers and peers. Once a skill has been taught, it will be discussed and practiced throughout the day to ensure understanding. When children are taught how to express themselves at an early age, they can strengthen their communication and social skills throughout their educational career. This will boost peer relationships and help to shape confident and caring lifelong learners.

Alignment to Research

Research shows that deficits in communication cause challenging student behaviors and without effective interventions to address communication deficits, a child's experience in an educational setting will suffer. (Bono et al. 2004; Charman et al. 2005). Young learners benefit from engaging in early social interactions and activities with their peers. Positive play experiences with classmates are critical for building social communication skills in preschoolers (McClelland & Marrison 2003; Odom et. al. 2006). Participation in quality early childhood education has been shown to have positive effects on a child's academic and social outcomes (Camilli & Barnett 2010). An intervention for strengthening social communication skills is Functional Communication Training. FCT is the most widely used and researched function-based behavioral treatment (Ghaemmaghami et al. 2021). The success of functional communication training in decreasing problem behaviors combined with teaching communication skills has made it a sought-after treatment for individuals with developmental delays or disabilities (Carr & Durand, 1985). Using FCT in the Waterloo Community School Districts Early Childhood Program will cultivate students with healthy, strong relationships, and positive attitudes towards lifelong learning.

Summary

The proposed improvement plan will consist of three phases. The first phase for reducing challenging student behaviors by improving communication skills in preschoolers would be to educate preschool teachers, staff, and administrators about the benefits of Functional Communication Training. This step is essential in ensuring staff understand what skills can be developed and learned through FCT, how they impact a child's development, and the need for strengthening these skills at the preschool level. This information could be presented to teachers and administrators through a presentation during professional development or sent out in an email. Next, educators teaching preschool will be given an implementation plan that provides details on how many minutes to spend each day working on FCT and lessons to use with their students. This information could be presented to educators through a presentation during summer professional development or end-of-year professional development. This would allow time for discussion and questions before the start of the implementation plan. Finally, educators and administrators would discuss and review how to assess students and the necessary procedures. This will allow for more desirable intervention results.

Implementation of School Improvement Plan

Introduction

Implementing the FCT school improvement plan will help to reduce disruptive behaviors in the classroom and provide staff with strategies for teaching positive replacement behaviors. The FCT plan would begin by completing a formative assessment on the student which would identify the conditions associated with the problem behavior. Once the function or reason behind the behavior is identified, teachers and staff would instruct the student on how to use a more appropriate alternative response (Hanley et al. 2007). There are several variables to remember

with implementation of the FCT plan, these include the time it will take to complete the

intervention, challenges that could arise during implementation of the program, and the

necessary roles everyone will support during the FCT process. It is important to allow sufficient

training time for teachers and staff. If they are not given adequate time for training, the FCT

improvement plan will be unsuccessful (Bearss et al., 2015).

Training will help increase teacher confidence and readiness for implementing this new

curriculum. The first step of this school improvement plan is the training of school staff, which

would take approximately three to six professional development sessions ranging from around 60

minutes per session. The second step would consist of preschool teachers working with the

instructional coach in the classroom modeling the expectations and response techniques to use

with their students. After teachers have identified students with disruptive classroom behaviors,

they would assess the child to determine what is causing the challenging behavior (Bearss et al.,

2015). Next the teacher would work with the student and instructional coach to find suitable

alternative behavior responses. Progress monitoring and collaborative team discussions will

happen throughout the school year (every 4-6 weeks) to track any difficulties that arise, as well

as any changes in behaviors and academics. This school improvement plan does have potential

limitations which include the need for approval from the principal as well as teacher readiness

for implementation of the new strategies (Durand & Merges, 2001).

Timeline

The total timeline for this school improvement plan would entail one academic year (see

figure 4 below). After the first year of training and review, classroom teachers would train

parents and new staff. The first step in the plan is to determine teacher readiness. During this

time teachers would be sent a survey and given one week to respond. The administration team

would look over the responses and determine professional development training days for the

FCT curriculum. Teachers would then participate in three professional development sessions that

are approximately 60 minutes in length for FCT training. Once the teachers have been trained in

this curriculum, the instructional coach would spend two weeks with each teaching team in the

classroom to assess, model, and practice appropriate requests and responses from staff and

students. Following implementation of FCT, coaching cycles, and progress monitoring would

continue throughout the remainder of the academic year.

Figure 4

Monthly Timeline

August	- Survey teachers about classroom behaviors. - The administration team reviews survey responses and schedules professional development on the school calendar.
September	- Begin professional development on Fridays for approximately 60 minutes.
October	- Teachers work with instructional coaches in the classroom and begin implementing the intervention. - Teachers observe and take notes on how the process is going.

	- Information is shared at team meetings once a week.
November – April	- Teachers independently implement the intervention. - Coaches check in with teachers to ensure fidelity. - Team meetings continue to discuss what is going well and what improvements are needed once a week.
May	- The administration team sends out a survey to teachers about their experience with the new intervention. - Admin review and share survey results. - Email and newsletter go home to parents offering three free training sessions on this intervention over the summer.

Role Clarifications and Assignments for Teachers and Staff

Before beginning to teach functional communication skills in the classroom, several roles and assignments must be addressed. First the administration team must work to find time to

inform and train staff on the curriculum and its processes. Once teachers are adequately trained, they can work with the coaching staff to begin implementation of the FCT program in their preschool classroom. This step begins with the classroom teacher assessing the student to discover the reason for the misbehavior. He or she must provide specific examples of what the child is doing. For example, the teacher shouldn't say the child is being oppositional, the teacher needs to say specifically that the child cries when he or she doesn't want to do schoolwork (Bearss et al., 2015).

After the teacher has determined the reason for the disruptive or challenging behavior, the teacher and the instructional coach work together to find effective reinforcers to support the frustrated student. An example of a reinforcer or stimulus would be a favorite toy. A child cries because he or she does not want to put on their coat. A reinforcer would be to offer the child time with their favorite toy if they put on their coat. Coaches, teachers, and staff can use observations, surveys, visuals, and varied questions when attempting to determine the best reinforcer for each individual child. Once a reinforcer is selected, staff guide students to produce a form of communication that will get them what they want in a particular situation. Instead of crying, an educator would teach the student to ask for a break. Visuals can be used for students who are non-verbal. Educators continue the FCT process throughout the school year by teaching students how to request assistance, requests breaks, and ask for help or attention (Durand & Merges, 2001).

Progress Monitoring

Each teacher will take weekly notes based off of their observations in the classroom to identify success and challenges with the FCT curriculum, changes in behavior or academics, and possible needs for re-clarification. The teachers will bring these notes to their weekly teaching

team meetings with the instructional coach to discuss what is working and what isn't as well as

any additional questions or concerns. Teachers will submit an additional survey at the end of the

school year sharing their experience with the new FCT curriculum. Staff will be asked their

personal opinions in regard to FCT, any pros or cons, suggestions, and areas of need or

improvement. All information collected will be analyzed by the administration team to determine

the success of the FCT program, next steps, and possible changes for the following school year

(Durand & Merges, 2001).

Limitations

There are a couple potential limitations with the FCT intervention. The first is the

necessary support from parents, teachers, and administrators. Without considerable planning and

effort on the part of these individuals, even the best-designed plans may not successfully result in

meaningful behavior change (Durand & Merges, 2001). Another potential limitation is adequate

staffing to ensure proper implementation of the program. When teachers are feeling

overwhelmed or frustrated due to lack of support, it is difficult for them to learn a new

curriculum and follow it through with fidelity. It is also important to have a designated individual

to monitor and record the integrity of the intervention, to ensure that the plans are progressing as

expected, and that the student is receiving the best efforts possible. Finally, it is crucial that

continued support with FCT is available to ensure that all stakeholders have access to the latest

knowledge concerning the intervention for severe behavior problems. Support for the curriculum

needs to be evaluated periodically in order to improve the chances for the program's success.

Conclusion

One of the most unpleasant responsibilities required of any educator is working with an individual who resists teaching. When a student kicks, screams, rips up schoolwork, or passively ignores efforts to get him or her to attend to a task, teaching becomes a major challenge and learning becomes highly unlikely. Understanding and managing problematic behavior continues to be a priority among educators. Behaviors such as aggression, self-injury, and tantrums are among the most frequently cited obstacles when working in a classroom setting (Durand & Merges, 2001). Interference with academics, as well as community and family activities are also at risk when a child is inconsolable and disruptive. Deficits in communication are a common cause of challenging student behaviors. The research in this paper stresses the importance of teaching alternative communication strategies to reduce challenging student behaviors. It provides information on how to implement a program to support children who are disruptive and aggressive in the classroom and helps to ease the frustration in teachers, parents, and staff who are struggling to understand the child's needs.

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Appendix

Sample Teacher Survey

What do you consider to be a challenging student behavior? *

Your answer

How do you handle disruptive behavior in the classroom? *

Your answer

What do you believe your child's biggest needs and concerns to be when related *
to their education? Be as specific as possible.

Your answer

Have you had sufficient professional development in managing students with *
challenging behaviors?