Editorial

What’s Inside

Highlights From This Issue

Lessons from the Principal’s Office

What does it take for a student to be sent out of class to be disciplined? Does this change as students move through their school years? What can we learn from visits to the principal’s office? An increasing number of research studies are looking at office discipline referrals (ODR) as a way of assessing how well schools are faring in their efforts to improve academics and the behavior of their students. There are built-in problems with comparing these referrals across classrooms and schools since different teachers have different criteria—some being more or less tolerant to student behavior—but these referrals do seem sensitive to major changes in schools such that they decrease as school climate improves. In a major analysis, a group of researchers from the University of Oregon (Scott Spaulding, Larry Irvin, Robert Horner, Seth May, Monica Emeldi and Tary Tobin) and the University of Connecticut (George Sugai) report in this issue on ODR data across more than 1,500 schools in the U.S. Among their findings is that the majority of students (about 80%) are never sent out of class or it happens only once in a year. And there are age differences. Elementary school-aged students primarily are disciplined for fighting with fellow classmates, middle school students for being defiant or disruptive with teachers and staff, and high school students for being late or skipping class. According to lead author Scott Spaulding, “These data help describe patterns of office discipline referrals within schools, across students from various grade levels, and for different problem behaviors. The findings add to our understanding about school-wide practices for addressing problem behavior and should allow us to further examine the ways referral data are used.” The information from this study should prove useful to schools in their efforts to track their students and help improve the educational experience.

Through the Eyes of Teachers

More and more, challenging students are benefitting from being in regular classrooms with their peers. But being placed in a regular class does not automatically produce students who are well-behaved. As a result, regular education teachers are increasingly faced with students who test their patience and skills. What do regular education teachers think about their students who misbehave? And what strategies do these teachers use when dealing with classroom problems? This information is important for assessing how well teachers will be able to address the needs of students who present difficulties in a classroom setting. In an attempt to answer these questions, researchers from Georgia State University (Amy Dutton Tillery, Kris Varjas, Joel Meyers and Amanda Smith Collins) interviewed 20 kindergarten and first grade teachers about their beliefs and practices surrounding behavior management in the classroom. An important finding was that teachers focused primarily on the individual child, and less on classroom-wide or school-wide practices to improve behavior. They also found that despite recently receiving training in practices such as response to intervention (RtI) and school-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS), they were somewhat unfamiliar with these new initiatives in the education field. Lead author Amy Tillery told us, “General education teachers face many challenges in the classroom and are being asked to assume more and more responsibilities. This study provides information about how teachers meet these challenges and underscores the need for more extensive training and assistance.” More research is needed on how teacher perceptions influence their behavior management practices and additional work is required for strategies to improve these perceptions should they prove to be obstacles.

A Teacher in the Palm of Your Hand

There is growing evidence that children with autism may learn certain skills better by watching video models compared to observing live models. This is extremely important information for those involved in teaching these students because showing a child what to do—rather than having them watch a video—is one of the most common teaching strategies. A number of research
studies now demonstrate that skills such as engaging in conversations with peers, playing with others and a variety of community and vocational skills can be taught by having these students watch videos of someone performing the tasks. New data are published in this issue showing that using a hand-held video player (video iPod) can be used as a viable and more portable means of providing effective video models. Researchers from the University of Tennessee (David Cihak, Cynthia Fahrenkrog, and Catherine Smith) and the University of Georgia (Kevin Ayres) tested this technique with four elementary school students with autism. They created videos and students watched corresponding videos of themselves walking to the designated location with other students who moved from activity to activity (for example, from the bathroom to the classroom) while being well-behaved. The study found that the students with autism who watched the videos were much better able to transition to other activities on their own. David Cihak commented, “This study adds to the versatility of video modeling as a portable, socially acceptable, self-operated prompting system that facilitates students with autism to access the least restrictive environment.” This study is an excellent example of using new technologies to advance the education of students with autism.

**Video Mimicry**

Although it is often said that “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” for children with autism it has much more practical importance. To be able to imitate the behavior of others opens up a whole new world of things you can learn to do in a relatively short amount of time. Regrettably, children with autism often lack the ability or the will to imitate others, therefore limiting the ways they can be taught new skills. A variety of techniques are used to teach these children to imitate, and in this issue researchers Vickie Kleeberger and Pat Mirenda (University of British Columbia) report on the use of videos to teach imitation skills to one preschool-aged boy with autism. Among their findings was that video modeling (watching a video of adults imitating another adult in different activities) along with prompting and social praise was successful teaching this boy a variety of play activities. “It was encouraging to find that video modeling can be effective to promote generalized imitation in natural contexts,” says Professor Pat Mirenda. “We believe that our use of a general case analysis to select imitative games and songs also contributed to the successful outcome.” Why do children with autism have such a difficult time imitating others, and does this tell us something about the nature of autism? “Imitation is one of the foundational mechanisms of social engagement,” says Ami Klin, the Harris Professor of Child Psychology and Psychiatry at the Yale Child Study Center, who conducts groundbreaking research on social engagement among persons with autism. Klin notes, “Hypotheses abound, from underdeveloped mirror neuron system to attenuated social motivation. In many ways, the context of this study is the best context for battling these hypotheses into a functional explanation: if we can teach imitation, we can try and understand what aspect of this skill was or was not achieved, and is or is not generalized to other samples of modeled behavior.”

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