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Developments in the Implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports in Australian Schools

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Abstract

Education jurisdictions across Australia have significant experience with initiating and building the implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in schools. This column describes the nature of the Australian education system and contextualizes the way PBIS had been implemented. Future directions to enhance the scaled implementation of PBIS across Australia are also presented.

Introduction

Australia has a currently projected population of just over 25.4 million people, living across six States and two Territories (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2019). Almost 3.9 million of Australia's population (15%) are of school age and are enrolled in approximately 9,500 Australian schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2018). Since Federation, each Australian State and Territory has jurisdiction for the regulation and registration of schools within their borders as well as the provision of schooling (Australian Government Department of Education and Training [AGDET], 2019). The Federal Government, although it does not operate schools or employ teachers, does have a role in education policy and the provision of funding to States and Territories to support schooling (AGDET, 2019).

Each Australian State and Territory is considered a stand-alone education jurisdiction, with each jurisdiction providing schooling in Government-funded schools, Catholic schools and Independent schools. The three largest education jurisdictions in Australia are, in order,

the States of New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2018). Across Australia, approximately two thirds of all students are educated at one of the 6,646 schools operated by State or Territory Governments, with the remaining students educated at one of the 1,753 Catholic schools or 1,078 independent schools operated by private education providers (ABS, 2018; ACARA, 2018).

Across Australia, schools typically provide 13 years of education, starting with a foundation year (known by a range of names across education jurisdictions) before progressing their way through an additional 12 years of schooling. Education is mostly provided from the foundation year until Year 6 in primary (elementary), and from Years 7 – 12 in secondary (high schools). Additionally, across Australia, 482 special schools still exist for the education of some children with disability with enrolment subject to policies determined by each State and Territory (ACARA, 2018).

Across Australia, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is gaining momentum across all education jurisdictions in primary, secondary and special schools (Cumming, Strnadová & Dowse, 2014). *Positive Behaviour Interventions and Supports Australia*, the peak PBIS body in Australia, estimates that 3,000 (31%) Australian schools have been trained to implement PBIS. This paper discusses the reasons for the uptake of PBIS, the ways in which the framework has been implemented across education jurisdictions, and future directions for the use of PBIS in Australian schools.

Investment in Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

Over the past 20 years, Federal and State Government policy initiatives have considered the significant interaction of curriculum reform, skill development, and academic achievement with social cohesion and student wellbeing (Ministerial Council on Education,

Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008; Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [AGDEEWR], 2009). In 2003, the Federal Government's *Student Learning and Support Services Taskforce* prepared the *National Safe Schools Framework* (AGDET, 2016). Developed in collaboration with Commonwealth, State and Territory Government and private education authorities as well as other relevant stakeholders, the Framework encouraged Australian schools to address the psychological and emotional safety and wellbeing of all students. It was a catalyst for education jurisdictions to adopt positive approaches to the management of student behavior. In 2018, the Australian Government launched the *Australian Student Wellbeing Framework* (AGDET, 2018). This framework extended the Government's commitment to the creation of positive learning environments where students feel safe, connected and respected.

Implementation

The expansion of the PBIS framework implementation across the Australian education systems has varied, yet common themes are evident. The following vignettes serve as illustrative examples of three Australian States that have made the largest efforts to implement, evaluate, and scale PBIS in Government schools. The nomenclature of PBIS, and its fidelity and sustainability, has varied across time and each of these locations, and this is also discussed.

New South Wales.

In the State of New South Wales (NSW), the education of over 800,000 students enrolled across 2,200 Government schools is administered by the Department of Education (NSW Government Department of Education [NSWDOE], 2019).

During the 1980s and onwards, links between NSW-based academics, education system administrators and school leaders, often working within the special education field,

were built with the University of Oregon. At the latter, the fusion of systems design, evidence-based instructional practices and applied behavior analysis, was to take shape during the 1990s. Following a seminal forum organized by the *Australian Association of Special Education* in 2005, which featured Professor Tim Lewis (University of Missouri), NSW Department of Education administrators in Western Sydney commenced a trial program in selected Government schools (Mooney et al., 2005). The *School-Wide Positive Behavior Support Implementer's Blueprint and Self-Assessment* (Algozzine et al., 2004), formulated by the US's Technical Assistance Center, strongly guided the implementation process. In the early stages, the nomenclature was locally devised as 'Positive Behaviour for Learning' (PBL). In 2006, a momentum was generated, with other NSW regions adopting the PBIS Blueprint, but with localized leadership structures and nomenclature. Across NSW, each regional team employed coordinators to lead implementation, involving the similar objectives of building training and coaching capacity using phased rollouts for self-selecting schools.

The framework of PBIS resonated in educational circles, due its capacity for organizational transformation, proactivity and socially valid practices. In 2015, PBL was recognized by the NSW Department of Education as a State-wide strategy and awarded uniform resources and team structures across NSW. The PBL framework was congruent with a new student Wellbeing Framework that acknowledged the importance of teaching social behavior, and how social learning interacted with academic achievement (New South Wales Government Department of Education & Communities [NSWDEC], 2015a) and the core determinants of student wellbeing were likely to be connectedness to an environment (NSWDEC, 2015b). PBL has now been adopted by more than 50% of NSW public schools, and many Catholic and independent schools (State of New South Wales, 2017).

Queensland.

Education Queensland is responsible for the administration of education to over half a million students in the State of Queensland (Queensland Government Department of Education & Training [QGDET], 2018). In 2004, the Department was seeking knowledge about proactive school-wide disciplinary systems that emphasized prevention by establishing competent learning and teaching cultures; providing rapid, efficient and effective behavioral supports with at-risk problem behavior (including those with disabilities); and increasing the intensity of behavioral supports as the intensity of problem behavior increased (QGDET Ministerial & Executive Services Unit (MSU), 2012). In promoting the introduction of ‘School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support’ (SWPBS), departmental officials argued “the promulgation of various ‘school discipline packages’ throughout schools across Queensland, for example Glasser, Assertive Discipline, and the LaVigna and Willis Applied Behavior Analysis program, had commonly failed to address the multi-faceted behavioral and organizational challenges facing school staff” (QGDET MSU, 2012).

An initial State-wide three-year pilot designed to support eight Government schools had, within 18 months, rapidly expanded to 71 schools, with two regions adopting the Framework as an organizational model (QGDET MSU, 2012). This initial uptake was mainly by primary schools, with later implementation efforts undertaken in secondary, Prep to Year 12, and specialist schools, and extended to kindergarten settings in 2011. In 2016, the term “Positive Behaviour for Learning” replaced SWPBS to emphasize the importance of safe and supportive environments on student learning outcomes (QGDET, 2019). Presently over 50% of Queensland Government schools have been trained in Positive Behaviour for Learning.

Victoria.

Approximately 619,000 students are educated in Victorian Government schools (Victorian Government Department of Education & Training [VGDET], 2019). Early trials of ‘School-Wide Positive Behaviour and Support’ (SWPBS) in Victorian Government specialist

schools in 2007, and mainstream schools from 2009-2011, resulted in calmer classrooms, reductions in behaviors of concern including bullying, as well as improvements in staff morale, student learning and social skills, and increased staff awareness of wellbeing concerns for students (McDonald, Astbury & St Ledger, 2011).

As the scale of implementation grew to 8% of Victorian Government schools over seven years, and the demand for access to training to support implementation increased, the Victorian Government committed to a further trial of SWPBS from 2014-2015 using a different model of coaching. Under this model, the scale of implementation further grew to 19% of Government schools using a mentoring model. Rather than using external coaches to mentor schools, schools wishing to adopt SWPBS were mentored by a school experienced in SWPBS implementation, with mixed success (Poed, 2016).

In 2018, the Victorian Government committed further to the implementation of SWPBS through the appointment of a State-wide SWPBS team, and 17 regional coaches to support schools to increase engagement, improve academic outcomes, and strengthen student behavior (Parliament of Victoria, 2018). Presently, almost 26% of Victorian Government schools have been trained in School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support.

Discussion

These three vignettes offer insights into the array of implementation approaches across Australia. With education the responsibility of each state or territory, there has been a lack of opportunity to develop a coordinated approach to PBIS implementation across Australia. For this reason, the Association for Positive Behaviour Support Australia [APBSA] was established in 2013 as a network of the Association of Positive Behavior Support. This association aims to improve the access to, scope and fidelity of implementation of PBIS across Australia. Some key areas for future direction, identified as part of PBISA's strategic

plan, include data and coaching systems, teacher training, and national models of recognition and technical assistance.

Data Systems.

Implementation fidelity is often deemed highly significant for determining educational outcomes (Pas & Bradshaw, 2012), but implementation data across each State is not reliably summarized. Australian schools use a range of formative measures to determine implementation fidelity, such as well-validated instruments including the *Tiered Fidelity Inventory* (Mcintosh, et al., 2016), *School-Wide Evaluation Tool* (Horner, Todd, Lewis-Palmer, Irvin, Sugai & Boland, 2004) and *Benchmarks of Quality* (Cohen, Kincaid & Elfner, 2007), supplemented with less structured interviews and direct walk-through observations. Typical summative measures include academic data, Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs), School Disciplinary Absences (SDAs), suspension and expulsion rates. However, unlike our counterparts in the United States, there is no national data collection system due to Australian privacy legislation which regulates the transfer of data on school-age children across State or Territory borders. In the first instance, each state could aim to summarize data using common categories.

Coaching systems.

The *Blueprint for School-Wide Positive Behavior Support Training and Professional Development* (Lewis, Barrett, Sugai, Horner, Mitchell & Starkey, 2016) incorporated the concept of coaching capacity to recognize the long-standing idea that successful implementation depends upon reliable and accurate feedback (Joyce & Showers, 1982). Each Australian State has experimented with coaching systems, and the experiences of each jurisdiction needs to be assessed to inform system building.

Teacher training.

A factor affecting the scale of implementation of PBIS across Australian education jurisdictions is the level of teacher awareness (Hepburn & Beamish, 2019). In some institutions, PBIS and evidence-based practices are included in preservice teacher classroom management courses, but these typically compete for space with classroom management approaches and models, both evidence- and non-evidenced based (O'Neill & Stephenson, 2014). Important tasks, such as including behavioral function into teaching strategies (Allday, 2018), require a broader agreement among universities, teacher accreditation authorities, and educational administrators.

National recognition model.

While some States have implemented a recognition model, aimed at identifying and acknowledging schools implementing PBIS with fidelity, there is need to create a national system for accrediting schools on the basis of their fidelity of implementation.

Conclusion

At the surface level, the process of implementation appears to be straightforward. In reality, the implementation of a school-wide system often requires the presence of interacting components, such as effective leadership, community readiness and staff competencies. New layers of complexity can be encountered when adding tiers that focus on specialized systems of support. Across Australia, implementation efforts have varied significantly, and the scale of adoption of PBIS is limited by the capacity of each system to provide coaching to ensure implementation fidelity. In the United States, the Federal Government funding has provided funding to build systems capacity to support the implementation of PBIS with fidelity. While there is no equivalent funding model for PBIS, the Australian Federal Government is committed, through its Wellbeing Framework (AGDET, 2018), to supporting student well-being initiatives. The experience of implementation in each state indicates that federal

funding would be a prudent investment. The APBSA has a key role in offering technical assistance to improve the already considerable efforts made by Australian schools.

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