ABSTRACT

EFFECTIVENESS OF PEER-MEDIATED SOCIAL SKILLS INSTRUCTION ON INDICATORS OF PSYCHOPATHOLOGY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH

by Laura Florkey

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effect that a multicomponent small-group intervention that includes social skills training, role playing and peer monitoring had on indicators of psychopathology in at-risk African American elementary students. Twelve 4th and 5th grade students from an urban school district participated in the four week intervention. A weekly repeated measure completed by teachers and a pre-post measure were collected and analyzed to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Decreases in indicators of psychopathology were observed across all participants. The impact of this study on future research and the importance of preventative school-based interventions are explored.
EFFECTIVENESS OF PEER-MEDIATED SOCIAL SKILLS INSTRUCTION ON INDICATORS OF PSYCHOPATHOLOGY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH

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Literature Review

The school environment has a large impact on a student’s academic performance and overall educational experience. School administrators and educators strive to create safe school environments that foster learning and encourage students to reach their fullest academic potentials. This has become a difficult goal to accomplish due to the number of children engaging in disruptive, delinquent and antisocial patterns of behavior at school. Historically, the educational system has employed a reactive approach when dealing with students that display antisocial behavior problems. This approach has done little to curb the growing number of students who engage in negative behavior patterns throughout their educational careers. School districts face the challenge of finding alternative, proactive solutions that provide at-risk students with early intervention and support to address their behavior problems before they are exacerbated over time.

Educational research supports the importance of responding to the early signs of antisocial behavior problems in at-risk youth. Authors Beard & Sugai (2004) state that antisocial behavior patterns in young children often include less serious, but disruptive behaviors, such as, whining and noncompliance with teacher requests. If not corrected, these behaviors can intensify in later school years and become more serious problems, including, stealing, cheating and other criminal acts with significant negative consequences. Their findings also indicate that students with antisocial behavior patterns become more resistant to intervention later in their school careers. In addition, Broidy et al. (2003) identified that patterns of physical aggression and conduct problems beginning in childhood frequently continue into adolescence. Their research also indicates that these early behavior problems can be associated with later patterns of delinquency and violence.

Montague, Enders, & Castro (2005) also support the previous authors’ indications by demonstrating through their research that problem behavior patterns that begin in early childhood often continue to persist throughout adolescence. Montague et al. conducted a longitudinal study with first grade and kindergarten classrooms at two schools in a large urban district. The authors used The Systematic Screening for Behavior Disorders (SSBD) to screen students and used the results to identify whether students were at-risk for developing an emotional and behavioral disorder. Students found to be at-risk were reassessed each year into middle school. The
researchers found that teacher ratings of student behavior in the early school years significantly correlated with teacher ratings in the middle school years. The authors’ results suggest that it is imperative for educators to implement intervention and prevention programs with at-risk students as early in their school careers as possible to be successful in preventing later problem behaviors.

Antisocial behavior is an especially serious problem for inner-city districts that have a large number of students coming from disadvantaged neighborhoods. Students living in disadvantaged urban communities often face a multitude of stressors stemming from high rates of poverty and exposure to the disparaging effects of violence and crime. Research conducted by Ingoldsby & Shaw (2002) suggests that impoverished community conditions and the presence of family conflict play a critical role in the development of antisocial behavior patterns in children. Students that witness negative behavior patterns modeled by their family and community members may come to school lacking the prosocial skills needed to be successful. As a result of the contributing factors, these students may be at greater risk for later antisocial behavior problems and school failure. These findings reinforce the need for proactive interventions aimed at preventing the escalation problem behavior patterns especially in urban school settings.

*Treatment of Antisocial Behavior*

Research supports the idea that overly punitive school environments tend to be ineffective at reducing antisocial behavior patterns in students. In fact, punitive environmental conditions have been identified as a contributing factor to student problem behavior (Mayer, 2001). With these research findings in mind, schools have begun to create and implement proactive solutions aimed at decreasing student problem behaviors by encouraging and reinforcing positive student behaviors. Positive behavior support interventions provide a continuum of services aimed at increasing appropriate student behavior and preventing the escalation of student problem behavior patterns (Sugai & Horner, 2006). The primary tier centers on universal supports that are implemented school-wide. These school-wide supports typically emphasize strategies aimed at the prevention and management of problem behaviors including techniques such as teaching all students the behavioral expectations of the building and the implementation of systematic positive reinforcement strategies. Typically 80% of students
respond to tier 1 school-wide supports. The second tier provides additional small-group interventions to targeted students who require more than the universal supports and are demonstrating behaviors that put them at-risk for developing a behavior disorder. The last tier focuses on intensive individualized behavior supports for a small percentage of students who have been unresponsive to the behavioral interventions of the first and second tiers and who are at high risk for developing emotional and behavior disorders.

Social skills training is an important intervention that educators can use with students who fail to respond to school-wide positive behavior supports due to specific skill deficits. Past research studies have proven the effectiveness of social skills training programs in modifying the behavior patterns of individual students. Social skills training typically involves teaching students prosocial behaviors to replace the problem behaviors they are exhibiting. Social skills training can help at-risk students build and maintain positive relationships with their peers and teachers, which is a vital part of having a successful school experience. Gresham, Bao Van, & Cook (2006) conducted an intense social skills training of 60 hours in a small group setting with four elementary students with social skills deficits. The authors gave the students a large “dosage” of direct social skills instruction, involving: coaching, modeling, rehearsal of the newly learned behaviors and frequent feedback and reinforcement. The authors used coaching as a method of verbally teaching the students specific social skills. Modeling provided a way for the students to visually observe how to combine the components of a particular social skill. Rehearsal involved repeated practice of a social skill after it was learned. Feedback and reinforcement were used to improve the students’ performance of newly learned social skills. The children in this study received higher intensity training than most other social skills programs and they saw much larger effects. Three out of the four participants in the study exhibited a large decrease in the total number of disruptive behaviors exhibited in the classroom. The findings of this study suggest that social skills training programs can significantly decrease the number of negative behaviors demonstrated by participants.

Mathur, Kavale, Quinn, Forness & Rutherford (1998) conducted a quantitative synthesis of single-subject social skills instruction studies. They found that social skills instruction typically includes the following elements: skill identification, modeling, practice and reinforcement, and maintaining the use of learned skills in natural settings also known as
generalization. In their conclusion, the researchers express the concern that more studies need to be conducted on developing programs that focus on specific skill deficits in students and programs need to be created that contribute to long-term behavioral changes. It is imperative that educators introduce social skills intervention as early as possible with at-risk children in order to see more successful results and to stop antisocial behavior patterns from leading to serious negative outcomes.

**Peer Mediation and Peer Monitoring**

Peer mediation and peer monitoring are two important elements used to enhance the effectiveness of interventions that target students exhibiting problem behaviors in the classroom. In peer mediation, peers act as change agents by reinforcing and modeling appropriate social skills for students with behavior problems. Mathur & Rutherford (1991) conducted a review evaluating the results of peer-mediated interventions used to promote positive social skills in students with behavioral disorders. They state that there are many benefits to using peers in social skills interventions. The use of peers may lead to longer lasting behavior changes in target students because they are available to reinforce behaviors more frequently than teachers and because they create a more realistic social setting in which the target student can practice their positive social skills. A majority of the studies Mathur and Rutherford reviewed demonstrated that the use of peer mediation resulted in immediate and significant positive treatment effects on the target student’s behavior.

Christensen, Young, & Marchant (2004) used peer mediation and peer monitoring as important components of a positive behavior support (PBS) plan created for two students who exhibited antisocial behaviors. The PBS plan was created as an intervention “package” with multiple elements including, peer-mediated self management and peer reinforcement. Peer partners provided the two participants with praise and reinforcement for displaying socially appropriate behaviors and provided feedback when they exhibited inappropriate behaviors. The authors found that peer mediation is an effective means to facilitate behavior change with students in a general educational setting and they suggest that future research should explore further the use of peers to mediate behavior change.
Skinner, Cashwell, & Skinner (2000) used peer monitoring as part of a proactive model to combat antisocial behaviors exhibited in the classroom. The researchers developed a system to reinforce prosocial behaviors using peer monitoring as one of its components. According to the authors, educators and teachers often are not able to directly observe when a student demonstrates a prosocial behavior and therefore peers can be used to report instances of prosocial behaviors that teachers may not have the chance to witness. In the researchers’ model, students observed their peers and reported their instances of prosocial behaviors. Group contingencies were also put in place to support the prosocial behavior reporting referred to as “tootling.” Public postings were used to monitor the class’s performance and to be a reminder to students that they must keep track of their peers’ prosocial behaviors. The authors suggest that future research should be done to determine if peer-monitoring and programs similar to the one in their study improve student-student relationships and students’ acknowledgement of peers’ prosocial behaviors.

Justification for this Study

African American students and other ethnic minorities are disproportionally represented in special education. The United States Congress acknowledged the overrepresentation of minority students in special education by passing The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and making one of the goals of NCLB to close the achievement gap between minority and white students. In addition, African American students are disproportionally identified as having emotional disturbance (ED). Educational data included in the Twenty-Ninth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, indicates that African American students ages 6-21 are 2.28 times more likely to be served for ED than the same-age students of all other ethnic groups combined. Social skill interventions may be used as a preventative measure to combat the overrepresentation of African American students classified as ED, by intervening early with students who may exhibit at-risk signs before they develop a behavior or emotional disorder.

In addition, culturally diverse students may display social behaviors that are different than the behavioral expectations deemed appropriate in the mainstream school setting. This can lead to cultural misinterpretations and the overuse of punitive discipline practices with culturally
diverse students (Cartledge & Loe, 2001). Researchers have investigated strategies that educators can use to help culturally diverse students adjust to the social expectations of the school setting. In addition to using culturally responsive practices, educators may need to explicitly teach culturally diverse students the social behaviors needed to be successful in the school environment by using curricula and teaching practices that go beyond direct instruction by providing students with ample opportunities for practice and generalization of newly learned skills (Cartledge & Loe, 2001). The aforementioned research indicates that educators need to be sensitive to the needs of culturally diverse students and be prepared to provide their students with educational experiences and instructional opportunities that help them continue to develop the social skills needed to be successful in school and in later life.

**Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of this study is to add to the present knowledge of effective social skills interventions and techniques by replicating the Please Officers social skills interventions with a culturally diverse population. The Please Officers program was originally implemented over a two week period with twelve third to fifth graders. Participants in the original study demonstrated a significant reduction in the weekly number of problem behaviors they exhibited as measured by the Critical Events Index (Gebhardt, 2009). The first Please Officers study was carried out with a small sample of students from a limited population in Southwest Ohio (Gebhardt, 2009). Without replicating the study it is impossible to determine if the findings from the original study can be applied to other populations (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The current research study measures the effect that participation in a multicomponent social skills program, which includes direct instruction in three essential social skills, role playing, and the behavior monitoring of younger students had on measures of psychopathology.

Research Question: What effect will participation in a social skills training program which includes the following components: direction social skills instruction, peer modeling and peer monitoring have on measures of psychopathology in a new population of culturally diverse participants?
Based on previous research, it is hypothesized that participation in the treatment program will significantly decrease measures of psychopathology in a new population of culturally diverse participants.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of seven 4th grade and five 5th grade African American students from an urban school district in Southwest Ohio. The students were placed into two groups with seven students in one group and five students in the other. The students were selected based on teacher and principal referral and by meeting the requirements for being “at-risk” for developing an emotional behavioral disorder, defined by meeting a designated criteria on one or more of the following measures: number of office referrals, psychopathology ratings, and class-wide sociometric ratings. Parental consent and child assent was also obtained for each participant before they were included in the study.

Setting

The Please Officers program took place at the elementary school of the participating students. The social skills training was conducted in a small group setting in a private room. The skits were performed in front of selected classrooms. The peer-monitoring took place in a selected classroom during cooperative learning activities.

Dependent Measures

Office Discipline Referrals. The number of office discipline referrals for each child was obtained from the school office. Office referral data was recorded before and after the treatment program and was used as a pre and post-measure of antisocial behavior. Office discipline referrals can be a useful tool in identifying students who exhibit the signs of antisocial behavior and would benefit from a social skills training program. An office discipline referral is typically a written report requesting disciplinary action by the school administrators (Tobin, Sugai & Colvin, 2000 ). Office referrals are often made by school staff members when they witness a student exhibiting behaviors that violate the school’s rules and expectations. Tobin et al. state that discipline referral patterns in individual students can be predictors of later school failure and future incidents of violent behavior. With office referral information, administrators and
educators can be aware of students who are at-risk for school problems and provide them with the behavioral supports they need before it is too late.

Office discipline referrals are an important data-based decision making tool. Putnam, Luisnelli, Handler, & Jefferson (2003) analyzed office discipline referral data to identify classrooms that demonstrated a need for behavior intervention due to a rampant number of discipline referrals. The authors created a classroom-wide intervention and a student specific behavior support plan in collaboration with the teacher. With the implementation of these interventions, office referrals, significantly decreased. This research suggests that office discipline referrals are an important part of the problem-solving model. They can be used to identify school discipline problems, create effective interventions, and are also an objective measure that can be used to evaluate the results of the intervention.

Critical Events Index (CEI). The Critical Events Index (CEI) is another important measure that is an effective predictor of students who are at-risk for developing emotional and behavioral problems. The CEI is one element of the Systematic Screening for Behavior Disorders (SSBD) by Walker & Severson (1992) and is used as a method to identify students who are at-risk for developing externalizing and internalizing behavior disorders. The CEI is a behavioral checklist with 33-items that measure whether a child has exhibited a particular behavior in the past six months. Each item represents a low-occurrence, high intensity behavior, referred to as “behavioral earthquakes” (Gresham, MacMillan & Bocian, 1997). The behaviors included in the checklist have been identified as the early signs of the development of behavioral disorders in children (Todis, Severson, & Walker, 1990). According the researchers, the items on the checklist are indicators that would be examined when diagnosing a child with a behavior or emotional disorder. In their study on the effects a class-wide positive peer reporting on classroom behavior problems, Morrison & Jones (2006) used an adapted version of the Critical Events Index to screen for class-wide behavior problems and to assess if the effects of their treatment generalized to settings outside of the classroom. The researchers support the use of the Critical Events Index, as not only an important screening tool to identify students at-risk for behavior disorders, but also they suggest that it can be an effective instrument to progress monitor the effectiveness of behavioral support plans.
The CEI checklist used in this study is an adapted version from Morrison & Jones (2006) of a checklist created by Walker and Severson (1992) and it was used in first Please Officers study by Sarah Gebhardt. The CEI (see appendix A) was completed by the child’s teacher each week during the program. A child must exhibit at least one of the behaviors on the checklist to be eligible to participate in the program because this score indicates that the child is at-risk for developing an emotional or behavior disorder (Todis, Severson, & Walker).

Experimental Conditions

Each group involved in the study experienced three conditions: baseline, Please Officers program, and follow-up. The Please Officers program is the treatment condition and has three components: social skills instruction, role playing and peer modeling, and peer monitoring.

Baseline. Baseline data was collected for both groups starting at the same time. During this time no experimental conditions and no components of the program were implemented. The number of office discipline referrals and score on the CEI was collected during this time.

Please Officers. During this part of the study the Please Officers program was implemented with each group. The researchers initially planned on a two week long treatment phase. Before implementation, the treatment phase was extended from two to four weeks due to suggestions from the teachers and administrators of the school. They suggested that the participating students would require additional time for rapport and trust building with group leaders. The first week’s sessions focused on rapport building and the introduction of the program. For the first component of the program, the researchers taught the children three social skills using a method published by Boys Town titled, Teaching Social Skills to Youth (Dowd & Tierney, 2005). The first skill is trying new tasks, and the children can use this skill to make appropriate use of free time during class. The second skill is how to accept no as an answer, which was to help the children maintain a positive relationship with their teachers and other adults. The third skill the children were taught is how to use problem solving methods to resolve conflicts.

The direct instruction component of the Please Officers program was based on the Boys Town model of teaching social skills. Children were initially praised for their involvement in the Please Officers program and additional praise and feedback was offered throughout the
program. Based on their history of behaviors problems, the participants may rarely receive praise from the important adults in their life. Next, one of the three skills was identified by the researchers as the skill the students would learn about for the day. The researchers explained the skill to the children and described how it could be used in a variety of settings and situations. The students were given multiple opportunities to practice the skill and receive feedback and reinforcement.

After the students demonstrated that they understood the new skills, they practiced skits that focused on the appropriate use of the newly learned skills. The students then performed these skits for younger students at their school.

For last component of the Please Officers program, participants were given the opportunity to monitor younger students during cooperative learning activities and hand out “X-citations” to students who are using positive social skills. Teachers of the younger students could have used the “X-citations” as a group contingency. Before the students come into the classroom, the teachers explained to their students that the Please Officers would be monitoring them during the cooperative learning activities and would hand out “X-citations” to students they observed that were using positive social skills as they worked in groups.

Post-Treatment After the Please Officers program was completed the participants returned to baseline conditions and did not receive any additional social skills training.

Treatment Integrity The researchers included three treatment integrity measures to ensure proper implementation of the program. The first is a checklist of the steps to complete the Boys Town social skills training (see Appendix B). The second is a checklist of the steps for the classroom skits (see Appendix C). The last is a checklist for the playground peer monitoring component of the program (see Appendix D).

Design The researchers administered the intervention to one 4th grade cohort and one 5th grade cohort. Baseline data was collected for two weeks for each group. The Please Officers program was introduced to group A and then one week later to group B. After four weeks of the treatment phase each group returned to baseline conditions and data was collected for an additional four weeks to examine if the treatment effects were maintained.
**Procedure**

A school administrator in an urban elementary school was contacted and her written approval for the implementation of the Please Officers program was obtained. Next, teachers and administrators nominated students who meet the criteria to participate, based mostly on their office referral data. The parents of these students were contacted and their written consent and child assent was obtained. After consent was received the researchers collected baseline data on the number of office referrals and score on the Critical Events Index (CEI). The treatment phase was then implemented according to the design. During treatment, the students received social skills training. They then taught the skills they learned to younger children by performing skits in front of the classroom. During a cooperative learning activity, the participants monitored the younger students’ behaviors and had the opportunity to acknowledge the students they observe demonstrating positive social skills by granting them an “X citation” for using prosocial behaviors. The treatment phase of the study was conducted over four weeks. Then the researchers evaluated the effectiveness of the Please Officers program by examining students’ weekly scores on the CEI and the pre-treatment and post-treatment office discipline referral data.

**Data analysis**

The researcher graphically recorded the dependent variables for the three phases: baseline, treatment, post-treatment. Visual analysis of the data points in each phase was used to interpret the treatment effects via the examination of differences in the trend and level of the data points between phases. The participants’ score on the Critical Events Index (CEI) and during baseline were compared to changes in CEI score during and following the introduction of the Please Officers program. Office discipline referral data was recorded before the program and compared to office discipline referral data recorded after the program. In addition, the researcher collapsed the data and conducted a Freidman two-way ANOVA to evaluate if changes in the mean CEI score and office discipline referrals across the baseline, treatment and post-treatment phases were at a level that is statistically significant.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Researchers received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before beginning the recruitment of participants and data collection. Consent and assent was obtained
from parents and children. No deception was used with the participants of the study. No harm on the participants was anticipated and the risks were minimal. Confidentiality of the participants’ names and information were maintained.

Results

Critical Events Index (CEI). During the study, classroom teachers were instructed to complete the Critical Events Index (CEI) weekly on each participating student. The researcher collected the completed CEI checklists at the end of each week. There were weeks in which teachers were unable to complete the checklists and therefore the researcher was unable to collect data from these weeks. The CEI data was collected for two weeks prior to treatment to establish a baseline for all participants. It was also completed for four weeks during the treatment phase and for an additional four weeks after the program was completed to examine if the impact of the program was maintained. The results are reported for the two cohorts of participants.

The impact of the Please Officers program on the Critical Events Index score for the 4th grade cohort are displayed aggregately in Figure 1 and individually in Figures 2a-2g. Of the seven 4th grade participants the CEI score decreased from a weekly mean of 12.05 (range, 19 to 7) during baseline to a mean of 7.74 (range, 19 to 0) during treatment. The effects of the Please Officers program continued to decrease during the post-treatment phase with a mean of 3.39 (range, 8 to 0). A visual analysis of the 4th grade participants’ results demonstrate that 5 out of the 7 participants saw a decrease in their CEI score from baseline through the end of the intervention phase and 5 of the 7 fourth graders maintained decreases in their CEI score in the 4 weeks after the program.
Figure 1: Mean Critical Events Index score for 4th grade cohort

*Figures 2a-4e Indicates a break in data. Figure 2a: 4th grade participant
Figure 2b: 4th grade participant

![Graph of Child 4B's progress over 10 weeks, showing improvement during Treatment and decline in Post-Treatment.]

Figure 2c: 4th grade participant

![Graph of Child 4C's progress over 10 weeks, showing a decline during Treatment and improvement in Post-Treatment.]

14
Figure 2d: 4th grade participant

Figure 2e: 4th grade participant
Figure 2f: 4th grade participant

Child 4F

Figure 2g: 4th grade participant

Child 4G
The impact of the Please Officers program on the Critical Events Index score for the 5th grade cohort are displayed aggregately in Figure 3 and individually in Figures 4a-4g. Of the five 5th grade participants, the CEI score decreased from a weekly mean of 4.8 (range, 17 to 0) during baseline to a mean of 3.6 (range, 11 to 0) during treatment. The effects of the Please Officers program continued to decrease during the post-treatment phase with a mean of 1.76 (range, 6 to 0). A visual analysis of the 5th grade participants’ results demonstrate that 4 out of the 5 participants saw a decrease in their CEI score from baseline through the end of the intervention phase. Four out of five 5th grade participants maintained decreases in their CEI score in the 4 weeks after the program.

Figure 3: Mean Critical Events Index Score for 5th grade cohort
Figure 4a: 5th grade participant

Figure 4b: 5th grade participant
Figure 4c: 5th grade participant

Figure 4d: 5th grade participant
Figure 4e: 5th grade participant
In addition to using visual analysis to analyze the results, the researcher also decided to collapse the data across groups and compare the means between the baseline, treatment and follow-up phase for all participants. A Freidman two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the difference between the average Critical Events Index (CEI) scores of all participants during the pre-treatment phase (M=9.04), the treatment phase (M=4.48), and post-treatment phase (M=1.92). A Freidman two-way ANOVA indicated that a significant change in CEI scores occurred over the course of the three treatment phases, $X^2 = 12.76$, df = 2, p<.05. The CEI scores decreased by 4.56 events between the pre-treatment and treatment phases and decreased by 7.12 events between the pre-treatment and post-treatment phases.

Figure 5: Mean Critical Events Index score for all participants

![Mean Critical Events Index Score for All Participants](image-url)
Office Discipline Referrals (ODR). A Freidman two-way ANOVA was also conducted to examine the differences in the number of office discipline referrals among all the participants across all treatment phases. It should be noted that the researcher was not able to collect all of the office discipline referral data for the participants, therefore the results should be interpreted with caution. No significant differences were found between the three phases based on the collected office discipline referral data.

Table 1: Office Discipline Referral Data

<table>
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<tr>
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Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of the Please Officers program on measures of psychopathology with at-risk African American students in an urban school district. African American students are disproportionately indentified as needing special education services under the disability category, emotional disturbance (ED). The overrepresentation of African American students identified as ED amplifies the need for school-based prevention programs focused on providing at-risk students with support before their symptoms escalate.

The findings from this study indicate that the Please Officers program may be an effective method of decreasing early indicators of psychopathology in students displaying antisocial behaviors. The Please Officers program replicated the results of a previous research study by decreasing symptoms of internal and external behavioral disorders in a culturally diverse population of African American students. The Critical Events Index (CEI) used as the repeated measure of participants’ behavioral incidents decreased after the introduction of the Please Officers program and continued to stay below baseline levels during the post-treatment phase for most of the participants. In contrast, office discipline referrals (ODRs) used as the pre/post measure displayed an increase rather than a decline. The findings from these two measures suggest that brief weekly, repeated measures are more sensitive to monitoring changes in students’ behavior overtime than a pre/post measure. An alternative explanation for the increase in ODRs could be attributed to the facts that ODRs are also closely controlled by school policy and teacher behavior patterns. Teacher tolerance for certain behaviors could have diminished as school year progressed. In addition, the school’s discipline policy may have also experienced changes throughout the year. These additional factors could have partially contributed to the observable results.

Teacher Perceptions of Program

A Teacher Opinion Survey Form was given to the teachers of the students that participated in the program to determine their evaluation of the Please Officers Program and their opinion of the intervention’s impact on their students. Teachers were asked to report their impressions about the successfulness of the program and to provide their recommendations and suggestions. A review of the responses demonstrates that teachers observed a positive impact on
their students while the program was in session. Teachers reported that their students looked forward to their involvement in the program and their time with the leaders. They felt it was nice for the students to be guaranteed something positive in their week. Teachers identified that they appreciated that there was no loss of class time because the group was conducted during lunch time. One teacher suggested that it would be helpful to find a way to streamline the paperwork process, such as an electronic or online form because she found it burdensome to maintain organization of the weekly checklists. Teacher feedback can be used to further improve the Please Officers program and to successfully implement it in a variety of educational settings.

Figure 6: Teacher Perception Data
On a scale of 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), teachers rated the program on items as shown in the graph:
Personal Reflection on the “Joining In” Process

One important aspect of this research study to highlight is the acceptability of the study by the school staff and the integration of the researchers into the culture of the school building. The process of gaining approval and “buy in” by school staff entailed negotiation, compromise and trust building. During the planning process multiple meetings were held between the school staff and the researchers to build trust and rapport. The culture of the school staff highly values the importance of building relationships and trust. Initially the researchers planned a two week program and modified the program based on teacher and staff recommendation. This modification played a critical role in working successfully with the school and in the collection of reliable data. Each school team has its own values and building culture. Staff members and teachers provided valuable insight into the culture of their building and students. The researchers were able to incorporate their insight into the implementation of their program.

Many valuable lessons for future research in school settings can be taken from this researcher’s experience. During the development of educational studies, it is vital for researchers to view their treatment programs from the perspective of the students and the educators involved. The implementation of research studies in educational settings can be a process of negotiation and compromise. Each school building has its own culture and values that need to be respected and may need to be incorporated into the research study. Modifications based on teacher suggestions and student needs were incorporated into the Please Officers program. In return, the school staff approved the research study and provided their support and resources. Most importantly they allowed the group leaders to work with their students and become temporary members of their team.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of the study have been identified and should be discussed further. First, the repeated measure used to determine the effectiveness of treatment relied on the classroom teacher’s account of each student’s behavior for the week. Teachers were provided instruction in how to properly complete the Critical Events Index (CEI) form. Teacher’s typically approximated the number of behavioral incidents by reflecting on the student’s behavior at the end of each week. This may have impacted how accurately the checklist scores represented the
student’s actual behavior incidents for the whole week. In addition, the CEI forms were not always promptly completed by teachers and in some instances were not completed at all for that week. Researchers should explore ways to streamline the data collection process and investigate ways to make it easier for teachers to complete required forms and checklists. An easier less time-consuming data collection procedure may increase teacher compliance and improve the collection and accuracy of the data. For example, one teacher suggested that posting the checklists online would allow her to easily enter her students’ data at her computer without the added responsibility of keeping track of additional papers and folders. Another limitation of the study was that office discipline referral data could not be collected for all students. At the time of the study the participating school did not use a computer-based analysis tool which would organize the office discipline referrals and make them readily accessible for all students. The researcher was able to collect several written referrals from individual teachers, but was informed that the collection may not contain all of the referrals that the participating students had obtained for the year. Despite the aforementioned limitations, the data collected demonstrates that nearly all the participants exhibited decreases in their behavior incidences as indicated by the weekly Critical Events Index score and it can be reasonably assumed that these decreases were attributed to the Please Officers program.

Future research can use the findings and limitations of the Please Officers program to expand the current knowledge of social skills interventions and to continue to investigate the impact these interventions have on indicators of psychopathology in at-risk and culturally diverse students. Researchers can explore the addition of behavioral modification strategies to the Please Officers program. Self-monitoring and contingency management could be added to encourage participants to use their newly learned skills in the classroom and to help them monitor their own reduction in the number of problem behaviors or “critical events” they exhibit. A small number of the participants in this study saw reductions in their critical events score during treatment, but failed to continue this downward trend during the post-treatment phase. Future studies could also investigate the addition of booster sessions after the treatment phase. These subsequent sessions could be sporadically implemented throughout the remainder of the school year to allow for additional practice and maintenance of the recently learned skills. Lastly, further work should be
conducted to create a plan that allows allow teachers and school staff members to take control of the intervention and incorporate pieces of it into their school’s positive behavior support model.

Conclusion

The primary implication of this study is that the Please Officers program may be implemented as an effective component of a proactive tiered service model of delivery. At-risk students that fail to respond to school-wide positive behavior interventions are in need of more targeted support, commonly identified as a Tier 2 interventions. The Please Officers program was implemented as a Tier 2 intervention with students that were in need of more intensive support to address their behavior concerns and prevent the escalation of problem behaviors. The participants in this study appeared to have benefited from the multiple components that comprised the Please Officers intervention. Social skills training, peer modeling, and peer monitoring combined to create an intervention that demonstrated successful results with African American students that were identified as being at-risk for emotional and behavior disorders. The findings from this study support the need for school-based programs and interventions that remediate students’ behavioral challenges before they continue to escalate. Educational researchers need to continue to identify proactive behavioral intervention strategies that can be implemented in the school setting. It is anticipated that this study will contribute to future research and the continued struggle to create safe schools in which all students have the ability to reach their fullest potential.
References


APPENDIX A
Abbreviated CRITICAL EVENTS INDEX
for School Environment

Name of Student: ___________________________  Dates: __________________

TEACHER: Please indicate how many times the child has exhibited each of the following behaviors during __________________ (specify time interval).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>BEHAVIOR</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3 or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Stealing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Tantrums</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Physically assaulted an adult</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Exhibits painful shyness</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sad mood/depression</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Physically aggressive with peers</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Damages others’ property</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Obsessive-Compulsive Behavior (e.g., excessive hand-washing)</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Inappropriate sexual behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Self-abusive</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Injures others with weapons</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Inappropriate affect/crying</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Somatic complaints (e.g., reported a headache)</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Talks of suicidal thoughts</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Exhibits thought disorders (e.g., hears voices)</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Ignores teacher warnings</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Uses obscene language</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Teased, neglected, or avoided by peers</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Lack of interest in activities</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Comments:

Adapted from Walker & Severson (1990). Based on school-related behaviors exhibited by moderate and high risk students in Gresham, Macmillan, and Bocian (1996)
Appendix B
Checklist for Social Skills Training – Boys Town Program

Please Officer(student) Name: _________________________
Teacher Name: _________________________
Please Chief (social skill trainer) Name:_____________________
Social Skill: __________________________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill Step</th>
<th>Please Chief completion check</th>
<th>Teacher completion check</th>
<th>Please Officer completion check</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Give initial praise.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Identify the skill and give examples.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Describe the appropriate behavior (give the skill steps).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 1 ______________</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 2 ______________</td>
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<td>Step 3 ______________</td>
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<td>Step 4 ______________</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 5 ______________</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Give a rationale (reason)/Request acknowledgement</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Practice.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Give feedback.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Give a positive consequence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Schedule a follow-up practice.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date and Time ______________</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Offer praise and encouragement throughout.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Appendix C
Checklist for Classroom Skit Development

Please Officer(student) Name: _________________________
Teacher Name:_______________________
Please Chief (social skill trainer) Name:_____________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skit Development Steps</th>
<th>Please Chief completion check</th>
<th>Teacher completion check</th>
<th>Please Officer completion check</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Prior to skit development, Please Officers have completed Boys Town social skills training.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Identify social skills to be included in skit and review with Please Officers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Introduce Please Officer to skit scripts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Assign roles in script.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Practice skit.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Appendix D
Checklist for Peer Monitoring Steps

Please Officer(student) Name: _________________________
Teacher Name:_______________________
Please Chief (social skill trainer) Name:_____________________
Social Skill: ___________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peer Monitoring Steps</th>
<th>Please Chief completion check</th>
<th>Teacher completion check</th>
<th>Please Officer completion check</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Inform school staff and teachers of specified class times where monitoring will take place.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Allow teachers to introduce Please Officers and X-citations to their class and offer group contingency reward plan for collection of X-citations if teachers choose to provide rewards.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Provide Please Officers with identifying badges and X-citations to issue for “catching” other students exhibiting positive social skills during group activities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Review examples of what positive social skills look like.</td>
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</table>