Transforming School Discipline

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There have been two systems which have been in use throughout all ages in educating youth: the preventive and repressive. ~John Bosco, 1816-1888

A century after John Dewey penned *Democracy and Education,* we are caught in a crossfire of debates about the very purpose of schools.[1] In her book *The Reign of Error,* researcher Diane Ravitch indicts the testing and privatization movements for undermining our traditional vision of schools as laboratories for democracy.[2] Political forces trounce both science and professional expertise as Dana Goldstein describes in *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession.*[3] To achieve genuine reform, schools must address the universal goal of education in every stable society: rearing respectful, responsible citizens.

School discipline always ranks high among concerns of parents and professionals.[4] Currently, three approaches to "discipline" vie for supremacy: Zero Tolerance, Positive Behavior Support (PBS), and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL).[5] Zero Tolerance can be cast aside since it fails to improve either school safety or student behavior.[6] In contrast, both PBS and SEL have their own extensive evidence base but differ in strategies for instilling discipline. We briefly sketch each approach and introduce an evidence-based model that incorporates the strengths of each.

Positive Behavior Support has roots in the 1960s when behaviorism was used in programs for children with disabilities.[7] It soon became a staple of special education, and federal funding is now promoting *Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports* (PBIS) as a blueprint for entire school cultures.[8] Behavior is seen as serving two functions: obtaining desired rewards and avoiding

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aversive events. PBS puts the emphasis on positive reinforcement rather than punitive interventions. Research on effects of PBIS includes the most commonly measured data on reduction of out-of-class referrals. While prominent researchers describe this model as "firmly linked to behavioral theory and applied behavior analysis,"[9] the PBIS website endorses holistic goals of promoting "social, emotional and academic outcomes."[10]

Social and Emotional Learning draws from research in developmental psychology dating back to Piaget and Vygotsky with a rich current literature on prevention science and positive youth development. Unlike adult-directed PBIS, Social and Emotional Learning seeks to build *self-discipline* as students engage in prosocial behavior under their own volition.[11] An extensive meta-analysis of school-based SEL programs showed significant gains in social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance.[12] SEL seeks to help children and adults develop knowledge, attitudes, and skills to understand and manage emotions, set positive goals, show empathy, form positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

PBS and SEL have much in common; most notably, both aim to promote positive behavior, improve school climates, and avoid exclusionary punishment. Yet as shown in the chart below, they differ in philosophy, goals, and strategies. Further, the strength of each model is the weakness of the other.[13] Thus, PBS has many interventions to manage behavior but lacks specific strategies to reach its stated broader goal of promoting quality of life. SEL targets broad social and emotional goals but lacks strategies for managing immediate behavior problems.

	Positive Behavior Support (PBS)	Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)
Research Base	Behavioral Psychology	Developmental Psychology
Primary Goal	Managing Student Behavior	Developing Student Self-Discipline
Primary Intervention	Administering Reinforcements	Building Interpersonal Relationships
Major Strength	Behavior Management Tools	Social and Emotional Skills
Major Limitation	Few Social and Emotional Skills	Few Behavior Management Tools

PBS emphasizes *demandingness* with clear behavior expectations, rules, and consequences. SEL calls for responsiveness through positive relationships and meeting developmental needs.[14] Since these are all viable concerns, there are calls for a synergy by bringing together these two models of discipline.[15] In fact, many states and countries are now building Social and Emotional Learning into school standards.[16] However, the complexity and conflicting assumptions of PBS and SEL can confound attempts at eclecticism.

Einstein once advised that everything should be as simple as possible but not simpler. Since thousands of variables may impact learning and development, successful schools and youth programs must focus on those essential elements that have the most profound impact.[17] The scientific principle of *consilience* can be used to tap knowledge from multiple sources in order to identify powerful simple truths.[18] While it may be futile to try to fuse together two complex systems, we can focus on common factors that create powerful positive change.

The Primacy of Needs

A consilience of knowledge from neuroscience, resilience research, and positive psychology have focused on a limited number of brain-based needs that account for success in learning and life, even in the face of adversity.[19] The cross-cultural Circle of Courage principles identified by Martin Brokenleg and colleagues have been expanded by trauma and brain research to focus on six essential developmental needs. These are portrayed in the accompanying Resilience Compass: Safety, Belonging, Achievement, Power, Purpose, and Adventure.[20] These six needs are tied to innate biological drives and form the scaffold underlying successful programs of positive behavior support, social and emotional learning, and positive youth development. They comprise the Model of Leadership and Service since these universal needs apply not only to young people but also the adults with influence in their lives.

Ironically, Abraham Maslow first described similar developmental needs in 1943 and placed them as the foundation of all healthy adjustment. He stated the primacy of needs in a powerful, simple way: failing to meet needs breeds illness, fulfilling needs prevents illness, restoring needs cures illness.[21]

A staple of the PBS model is to focus on three levels of intervention as portrayed in the pyramid on the following page. This is a variation of the

The Model of Leadership and Service

triad for providing public health and medical services depending on severity of the problem. At the foundation are universal prevention supports applying to all. Next are targeted interventions for a population of youth at risk. Finally are intensive interventions for students with complex difficulties. We choose to substitute a circular graphic to emphasize wrapping supports around students with different levels of needs. This places at the center of attention those most vulnerable students who typically get lopped off by exclusionary discipline practices.

Resilience rests fundamentally on relationships.

There is widespread interest in direct instruction in positive social skills, both in PBS and SEL. While there are many useful curricula, research shows that the most impactful interventions are relational rather than pedigogical. Natural supports in a culture of caring and learning have the most power in fostering growth and lasting change. This central finding of five decades of research on resilience is summed up thus: "Resilience rests fundamentally on relationships."[22] CF Learning provides relational training resources developed by an international team of experts for each level of support.[23]

Universal Prevention. This entails meeting developmental needs, both of adults and students. *Rolling with Resilience* (RwR) provides experiential training for strengthening families. *Cultures of Respect* builds teamwork structures with staff which are precursors to building positive youth climates. *Respectful Alliances with*

Levels of Support

Intensive Interventions

Supporting Students at Risk

Universal Positive Prevention
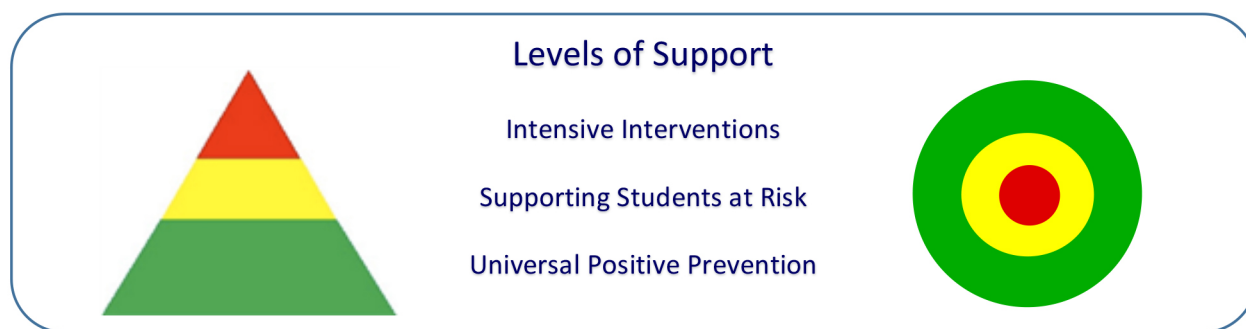
Youth fosters positive intergenerational bonds and enlists youth in peer helping. *Schools that Matter* provides specific indicators for an engaging curriculum, effective instruction, and positive school climates.[24]

Support for Students at Risk. School staff need concrete methods to build positive connections with challenging students who disengage from school and distrust adults. Practical trainings are also available for working with this population. *The Three Pillars of Care: From Trauma to Resilience* provides strategies for supporting children who have experienced extreme stress and adversity. *The Art of Kid Whispering* provides practical tools for communicating with hard to reach students. *Life Space Crisis Intervention* (LSCI) offers advanced strategies of talking with youth in conflict and using problems as learning opportunities.

Intensive Interventions. These are intended for the young people who are in imminent danger of imploding or exploding in school, being placed in more restrictive settings, and failing in life. By their very nature, these interventions are not prepackaged programs but a thorough assessment of how the student came to this place in life and how to develop positive plans. *Planning Restorative Outcomes* is an assessment protocol that uses the young person and others in the ecology as data sources in assessing needs and developing interventions. This model has been used in schools, juvenile justice, and treatment settings and is comprehensive methodology for conducting an ecological, developmental, trauma-informed, and strength-based assessment.

Conclusion

Two different traditions of discipline have achieved prominence in education—Positive Behavior Support and Social and Emotional Learning. Consilience often operates in natural ways as

narrow models undergo an evolution—or even a revolutionary paradigm shift. In a classic article on the evolution of Positive Behavior Support, the late Edward Carr and leading experts identified new directions for this model:[25]

- From Applied Behavior Analysis to multiple evidence-based models.

- From an expert-dominated tradition to student self-determination.

- From a focus on immediate behavior to long-term quality of life.

- From modifying behavior to meeting child-centered needs.

- From Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) to including ecological perspectives.

- Finally, desired outcomes are shifting from eliminating pathology to building strengths.

It is readily apparent that this evolution is bringing PBS and SEL into closer alignment. The needs-based Model of Leadership and Service is also attuned to each of these new directions in Positive Behavior Supports. Further, the six core needs of the Resilience Compass provide a clearer focus on the sometimes amorphous youth development goals for Social and Emotional Learning.[26]

In the final analysis, it is a truism and evidence-based principle: Programs don't change people; people do.[27] Zero tolerance fails because this amounts to giving up on our most needy students. Turning schools into test-prep centers ignores the science that connects school achievement with social and emotional learning. Teachers and students alike are ready for a new era where schools become powerful environments for learning and growth, something proposed by John Dewey a century ago.

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(Endnotes)

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