

## **Creating Community and Support Using Native American Values in an Inclusive Third Grade Setting: An Action Research Case Study**

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### **Abstract**

This action research case study describes the collaboration of five third-grade teachers and a special educator to create a grade block system of support for all students to encourage learning and to meet school-wide and classroom expectations. Three goals guided the development of this integrated system: to create an inclusive caring classroom community, to provide positive behavioral support to all students, and to integrate strong ties and values of the local Native American culture. This article describes classroom and community activities, including class meetings and service learning projects. A case study of Steven, a classmate with Emotional-Behavioral Disorders (EBD) who needed intensive support, is presented. After a functional behavior analysis was conducted, individualized strategies were developed and implemented based on his needs. These included modifying assignments and encouraging peer compliments and positive attention. Results of an AB research design indicated a substantial drop in Steven's disruptive behavior after the implementation of these individualized interventions. Recommendations for practitioners based on the integrated classroom system are presented.

Schools and classrooms are complex social environments where teachers and students work together to intentionally or unintentionally create climates of support or climates of futility for students with and at risk for Emotional-Behavioral Disorders (EBD). There is strong evidence that schools and classrooms that function as supportive democratic communities have positive effects on academic outcomes and on social, emotional, and moral development of students as well (Battistich, 2010). When children with EBD are members of classrooms that foster a sense of community by generating acceptance, support, and belonging, they can thrive. When a sense of community is missing, children with EBD can be alienated and antisocial behavior can be exacerbated (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002; Smit & Liebenberg-Siebrits, 2002). Inclusive classrooms that offer positive classroom climates with a strong sense of community can provide optimal conditions for behavioral support for students with EBD (Hieneman, Dunlap, & Kincaid, 2005; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). Being responsive to and integrating student culture is essential for developing a sense of community, improving classroom climate, and supporting students with learning and behavioral disabilities (Bal, Thorius, & Kozleski, 2012).

In the third-grade block of a school with a predominately Native American population, teachers with a strong commitment to inclusion developed practices that

enhanced community, supported students with learning disabilities and EBD, and integrated local culture. This article describes an action research case study focusing on the development of these practices and the embedded support of one student with EBD.

### Inclusive Classroom Community and Support

Three perspectives guided the work of the third-grade block teachers: developing a sense of an inclusive community through class meetings and service learning, providing positive support to all students through School-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (SWPBIS), and integrating culture through the infusion of Native American values. While a community approach to classroom management and SWPBIS come from differing perspectives, they compliment each other well, and they are each enhanced by integrating culture. Each perspective is briefly discussed below (see Figure 1).

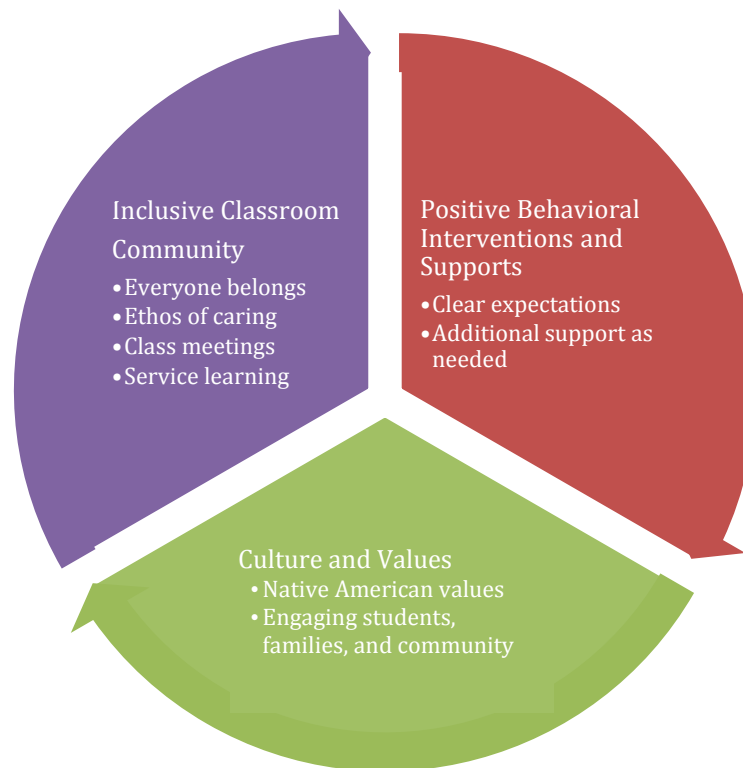


Figure 1. Themes that guided teacher practices

## Inclusive Classroom Community

Taking a community approach to classroom management involves attention to relationships with and among students. From a social constructivist perspective, relationships play an extremely important role in teaching and learning (Vygotsky, 1978). In the classroom, students' behavior is influenced by the quality of the relationships within their peer group (Ellis & Zabatany, 2007; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). With a sense that they are valued and respected members of a learning community, children are ready to learn, more likely to enjoy school, and less likely to engage in risky or inappropriate behavior (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009; Levine, 2003; Ozer, 2005; Stewart, 2003; Watson & Battistich, 2006).

Classroom management practices that take a community approach have several things in common with regard to their perspectives on children (Watson & Battistich). First, they take a positive view of children, including their inclination toward and motivation for learning and their responsiveness to kind and respectful treatment. Second, rather than seeing children as isolated individuals with appropriate or inappropriate behavior, they consider each child and his or her subsequent behavior within the social context of the classroom. Third, in classrooms that take a community approach, there is an intentional effort to create a climate of mutual caring and respect. In community-oriented classrooms, rather than being controlled by strict rules and motivated by rewards and consequences, children are guided to see the effects of their actions on others and on their learning. Rather than being threatened with punishment, students are guided and supported in meeting expectations of the classroom community and are taught to solve problems peacefully. Additionally, practices that generate community in the classroom involve students, teachers, and school personnel in getting to know each other, setting mutually agreed upon expectations, and solving problems that affect the classroom community. Classroom meetings and service projects are two community-oriented practices.

**Class meetings.** During class meetings, students share compliments, acknowledge and provide solutions for their concerns, and share their life experiences. Class meetings are beneficial for teaching, practicing, and reinforcing social and problem-solving skills, and improving classroom behavior (Leachman & Victor, 2003; Battistich, 2010; Battistich, Schaps, & Wilson, 2004; Sorsdahl & Sanche, 1985). Sharing compliments gives students positive recognition from their peers and teachers for things they are doing well. In an ABAB design, Cihak, Kirk, and Boon (2009) demonstrated that positive peer recognition via *tootling* decreased disruptive behaviors in a third grade classroom. Tootling is the opposite of tattling and involves teaching peers to look for and report positive behaviors of their peers. Other researchers have also documented the positive effect of peer recognition on classroom behavior (Bowers, Jensen, Cook, McEachern, & Snyder, 2008; Moroz & Jones, 2002; Morrison & Jones, 2007; Skinner, Cashwell, & Skinner, 2000).

Through problem solving and sharing experiences in class meetings, students learn and practice social skills such as listening to and responding positively to each other, showing empathy, and generating solutions to problems. Practicing social skills in authentic situations has been well established as a critical component of social skills instruction (Gresham, 2002). Sharing life experiences helps students get to know one another and can generate a sense of belonging (Noddings, 2005). Classroom meetings are an important component of several evidence-based elementary school programs, including the Responsive Classroom (Brock, Nishida, Chiong, Grimm, & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu, 2007) and Caring School Community (Watson & Battistich, 2006).

**Service learning.** Service learning contributes to a sense of community, as it gives students a common goal and an uplifting shared experience. In a review of research, Billig (2000) noted that among other benefits, service learning has a positive effect on the social-emotional development of children and improves student-teacher relationships, as well as peer relationships, within schools. In a more recent meta-analysis of the impact of service learning on students, Celio, Durlak, and Dymnicki, (2011) document evidence that service learning has a positive effect on student development of social skills; academic performance; and students' attitude toward school, learning, and themselves.

**Inclusion of students with EBD.** Students with EBD are more likely to experience rejection by their peers than students without EBD (Carter & Spencer, 2006; Kuhne & Wiener, 2000), and some studies indicate that rejected students are prone to aggressive behavior (Rabiner, Coie, Miller-Johnson, Boykin, & Lochman, 2005). Some teachers may respond to disruptive and aggressive behavior by using punishment or exclusion via office visits (i.e., office discipline referrals, ODRs), suspension, or expulsion (Bowman-Perrott, Benz, Hsu, Kwok, Eisterhold, & Zhang, 2013). Experts agree that exclusionary and punitive practices are not only ineffective, but they can make matters worse by contributing to disengagement of children and youth and raising early dropout rates (Bowman-Perrott et al.; Reschly & Christenson, 2006). Children and youth with EBD are often viewed as the most difficult students to include in general classrooms (Kauffman & Landrum, 2009), but they should be considered integral members of a classroom community. Caring adult-student relationships and supportive, accepting classroom environments can facilitate the successful inclusion of students with EBD (Mihalas, Morse, Allsopp, & McHatton, 2009).

### **School-Wide Positive Behavioral Support**

In order to get along in the classroom community, children need to know what is expected and how to behave. Children with EBD often need additional support beyond clear expectations in order to thrive in the community. School-wide positive behavior support (SWPBIS), a three-tiered system for improving school climate, has been a popular model implemented in many schools across the US. This system involves identifying and reinforcing expectations, as well as providing additional behavioral

support to students who need it (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012). This systems-based approach and problem-solving framework guides school teams in selecting and implementing evidence-based, culturally appropriate practices related to student behavior. SWPBIS applies the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework with an emphasis on prevention, progress monitoring, problem solving, and the use of evidence-based practices (Sugai, 2011).

**Tier 1.** The first tier of SWPBIS is preventive in nature. One of the basic premises is that students need very clear expectations for their behavior, as well as consistent positive feedback. There is considerable evidence that when implemented carefully, focused on data-based decision making, and monitored for success, the primary level of SWPBIS can improve school and classroom climate, reduce office discipline referrals and suspensions, and increase time for academic instruction (Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010; Sugai, Horner, & Lewis, 2009; Sugai & Simonsen, 2012).

**Tier 2.** Tier 2 interventions are for students who do not respond to the primary level of support. They are commonly initiated for specific students who may be at risk for challenging academic or behavioral problems. These secondary interventions may involve counseling groups, social skill instruction, group contingencies, or increased structure and supervision (Sugai et al., 2009).

**Tier 3.** Finally, the tertiary level is for a small number of students who need more intense intervention or who do not respond to Tier 1 and Tier 2 support. Support at this level is individualized, based on the unique needs of the child. The tertiary level involves analyzing the function of behavior, changing conditions that sustain inappropriate behavior, providing behavioral supports, and teaching replacement behaviors (Hawken, Vincent & Schumann, 2008).

## **Native American Culture**

Both a community approach to classroom management and SWPBIS require integration of culture. Gay (2000) suggests culturally responsive classrooms use the cultural knowledge and experiences of students to make life in the classroom more relevant and effective. Use of the Circle of Courage and the presence of elders in the school represent two examples of integrating culture.

**The Circle of Courage.** Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (2002) describe the values inherent in traditional Native American culture: the spirits of belonging, generosity, independence, and mastery. These spirits are considered essential for emotional health and well-being and are represented as the Circle of Courage. The value of promoting the Circle of Courage with children and youth has been well documented (Brendtro & Larson, 2006). The four values of the Circle of Courage are typically represented in a medicine wheel, a Native American cultural symbol. The Circle of Courage fits well with a community approach to classroom management. Class meetings and service learning generate belonging, generosity, independence,

and mastery. For example, in class meetings, students gain a strong sense of identity (belonging) with their classroom community and engage in problem solving (independence). In service to others (generosity), children often find connections (belonging), can demonstrate their competence (mastery), and develop responsibility (independence).

**The presence of elders.** In Native American Culture, Elders are highly revered members of the community. Children are taught from a very young age to respect all Elders. Because this respect is taught well before children enter school, it is essential for Elders to be seen within the school community. Their presence, along with their interactions with students in school, give students a chance to view the school through the eyes of someone respected and important in their lives. The wisdom that Elders can impart to students from their life experiences bring relevance and meaning to students' school experiences, as well as the norms and expectations promoted by the school.

### **Integrating Three Perspectives**

The three perspectives that guided this study (inclusive classroom communities, SWPBIS, and local culture) mutually inform and enhance each other, despite heralding from different foundational theories. SWPBIS is rooted in behavioral theory (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012) while community-focused classroom management is grounded in social constructivist theory (Watson & Battistich, 2006). Hence, it appears that SWPBIS and community-focused approaches come from two differing perspectives on children; however, the two approaches share similar goals of improving school and classroom climate and relationships among students and between students and teachers. Consequently, the practices supported by an inclusive community approach and SWPBIS are complimentary as both focus on learning in the classroom. Further, both approaches are enhanced through the integration of local culture.

As an example, class meetings are an opportunity for children to learn and remind each other of school and classroom expectations and to receive recognition for meeting them. Also a strong sense of belonging and an ethos of caring generated through class meetings and service learning create conditions for students to invest in and meet expectations. Class meetings provide an opportunity for Tier 2 interventions such as modeling and role-playing of social skills. Finally, peer support can be a valuable resource for students who need Tier 3 behavioral support in the SWPBIS model. In a community where everyone belongs and students care for each other, peer support can flourish.

SWPBIS that is culturally responsive considers desirable and undesirable behavior from multiple perspectives (Ball et al., 2012). It engages families, students, and other stakeholders in discussions about cultural patterns and values that may be related to student behavior in school and involves students, family, and community in every phase of SWPBIS process from examining school data to determining school

expectations and how they should be taught and reinforced. Integrating a community perspective, Native American culture, and SWPBIS provides all students, including students with EBD, with opportunities to be positive members of their classrooms, as illustrated in the following case study. Table 1 summarizes the similarities and complimentary goals and practices of these three perspectives.

Table 1. Integration of Three Perspectives

	<b>Community Approach</b>	<b>SWPBIS</b>	<b>Native American Culture</b>
<b>Goals</b>	Create a sense of community in the school and classroom	Create a positive school climate	Infuse cultural identity
	Create caring relationships with and among students	Teach prosocial behavior	Include the wisdom of community elders
	Create a climate of acceptance and support for all students	Support all students, including those with problematic behaviors	
	Increase time for learning	Increase time for learning	Emphasis on Mastery
<b>Practices</b>	Community- enhancing activities (e.g., <i>getting- to-know- you</i> activities) service learning)	Use data-based problem solving framework	Emphasis on Belonging
	Class meetings	All adults respond to behavior in a consistent fashion	Meetings based on tribal government
	Service Learning		Emphasis on Generosity
	Recognize students who meet expectations at class meetings	Identify, teach, and reinforce school-wide and classroom expectations	Ceremonies to honor students quarterly
	Teach social skills in the context of class meetings	Direct instruction of social skills	Emphasis on independence
	Teach and engage students in problem solving through class meetings	Use individualized strategies to support students with problematic behavior	Guidance of elders within the school community

## Action Research Case Study

Through a grant from a local university, all teachers in a 13-county region were asked to identify problems or situations that called for intervention and support for students at-risk for or with EBD. A team of third grade teachers from one school asked, "If highly qualified teachers are using evidence-based strategies, creating differentiated lessons and/or using the best scripted programs, but student learning seems to be minimal, especially for students with behavior disorders, what is missing?" Through a several-month process of reflection, collaboration, and data gathering, in which a university faculty member, the second author, acted as a participant observer, the teachers determined that they needed to create caring classroom communities (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Noddings, 2005; Peterson, 1992). Teachers were given time in the spring to plan their processes to implement the following fall. This time was critical, as it gave the teachers time to research practices and plan collaboratively. The goal was to create a caring classroom community that supported all students, including those with EBD. The purpose of the present action research case study was to determine the effects of this community approach on classroom climate, office discipline referrals, and student behavior.

## Method

### Classrooms and Participants

The elementary school in the present case study was a Title 1 K-12 school in a rural area of the southeastern United States with a population that was 99% Native American. The school had close ties to Native American culture in the community. In addition, 99% of the students were eligible for free or reduced lunch. The third-grade block included five classrooms with a total of 106 students, including 30 students with mild to severe learning disabilities (LD) or EBD. One teacher and one assistant taught in each classroom. A special education teacher, Mrs. Voohres (all names are pseudonyms), worked with all the teachers in the third-grade block.

In Mrs. Wilson's class, the target classroom of the present study, there were 22 students; 10 were identified with LD, and one student, Steven, was identified with EBD. Mrs. Wilson worked collaboratively with Mrs. Voohres, and she spent time each day in Mrs. Wilson's room co-teaching, monitoring student progress, and making modifications in lessons and materials.

Steven was identified for special education services at the age of six. Behaviors documented through direct observation by 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teachers included refusing to work, making negative comments, taunting classmates, yelling, banging on desks, shoving, and throwing classroom furniture. His noncompliant and disruptive behavior in previous years had earned him a reputation for being a bully, and it was anecdotally reported that teachers feared having him in their classes. During his third-grade year, Steven had frequent temper tantrums and was sometimes physically violent. For example, during a writing assignment in Mrs. Wilson's class, Steven refused to



participate. Mrs. Wilson attempted to help by suggesting he choose a different writing topic. When she reminded him to start working, he said, “I don’t want to do this anyway,” shoved his chair, and then threw his desk and chair.

When Steven was in second grade, teachers responded to his disruptive behaviors by sending him home early. Early dismissal may have served to reinforce one function of Steven’s behavior, *avoidance*. At seven years old, he often commented: “I don’t want to be here,” “I don’t want to do this,” and “You can’t make me.”

### Third-Grade Block Interventions

In the spring of Steven’s second-grade year, teachers in the third-grade block spent time planning classroom practices designed to promote community and enhance the learning climate during the upcoming school year. In order to develop a sense of community and a positive classroom climate focused on learning, the teachers incorporated classroom community- building activities, SWPBIS processes, and cultural connections. Table 2 summarizes the practices they chose to incorporate.

Table 2. Practices Implemented by Teachers in the Third-Grade Block

Inclusive Community	SWPBIS - Tier 1	Integration of Culture
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Class meetings</li><li>• Service projects</li><li>• Teaching students to recognize positive behaviors in their peers</li><li>• Engaging students in identifying solutions to classroom concerns</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Review of office discipline referral data</li><li>• Identification of classroom expectations</li><li>• Recognition by teachers and peers of students who meet expectations</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Opportunities for Generosity, Belonging, Mastery, and Independence</li><li>• Focus group with elders</li><li>• Incorporation of the Medicine Wheel</li><li>• Sitting in a circle</li><li>• Election of Chief and Vice Chief Grand Council meetings</li><li>• Use of Native symbols, including Sacred Eagle Feather</li></ul>

**Class meetings.** The grade-level team decided that class meetings would be held weekly to praise students for their behaviors and deeds above and beyond the normal “call of duty,” to problem solve any issues or situations that might arise during the week, and to teach and role play classroom expectations. A “concern box” and a “compliment box” were placed in the classroom. Compliment and concern slips were made available in the classrooms so that students could write them as they felt it was

needed. Teachers, counselors, and other school personnel were also welcome to put compliments and concerns in the box. Compliments and concerns were all addressed at the class meetings.

The compliments were to be written in the form of the value or expectation that the student showed and then the deed that prompted the compliment (e.g., "Jane was caring because she sat by John to help him with his math"). Likewise, the concerns were to state the behavior or issue with a reason to justify the concern as opposed to a statement just "tattling" about a behavior (e.g., "Jack has been leaving his backpack at home so he doesn't turn in his homework and can't come out to play with us").

In the community, the tribal chief and vice chief are elected officials. Hence, to fashion the classroom government after the tribal government, a chief and a vice chief were elected from each third grade class, with new people elected each month to allow more students the opportunity. The chief directed the meeting while the vice chief recorded what happened during it. Additionally, a talking stick, used in the class meeting was a cultural symbol, and in the case of the third grade, the symbol was a sacred eagle feather. As other grades began to adopt class meetings, they chose other cultural symbols for their talking sticks.

As it was time for class meetings, the children moved their chairs into a circle; the agenda for the class meeting was written on the board. Class meetings procedures were as follows:

1. The meeting starts with the recitation of a classroom covenant. "We promise to be truthful, responsible, respectful and caring toward all."
2. The chief reads each compliment from the box.
3. The chief reads the concerns one by one. After each concern is read, students have an opportunity to talk about the concern. A *talking stick* is passed around the circle and only the person holding the stick has permission to speak. The student is not required to speak, but is given the opportunity to do so. Passes are allowed.
4. The chief asks for solutions to the concern. The chief passes the talking stick around the circle again and all children have the opportunity to offer a solution. The vice chief, with assistance from an adult if needed, writes down all of the suggested solutions.
5. The chief reads each solution and calls for a vote. The solution with the most votes is the one the class will try. All students become an active part of whatever solution is chosen.
6. Concerns from previous weeks are revisited to see if each concern has been addressed or if a new solution is needed. If a new solution is needed, one is chosen from the list of choices written down by the recorder.
7. After all concerns have been addressed, the chief can call for a *go-around* about a specific topic such as "What did you do on the snow day?" or the

leader can call for a *free- go- around* in which students can share something happening in their lives.

Once each month, all five 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classes met together for a grand council meeting. At these meetings, the chiefs each shared what their respective classes were working on, their progress, and their accomplishments. The floor was then open to any student who had something positive to say. Ideas for service learning projects were also discussed.

**Service learning.** Service learning was incorporated throughout the school year. The service activities in which the students engaged began within their own school community, then reached out to the greater community, and finally to the global community. One of the school projects arose from a concern that the restrooms were not clean. The five third grades took on the responsibility of keeping restrooms clean. They even made posters as reminders to their schoolmates to keep the restrooms clean. For a community project, the students visited elders in a local nursing home. Beyond their community, students collected supplies for coal mining families in Kentucky and for a boys' home in Brazil. Through these projects, students learned to be concerned not only about themselves and their classmates, but for the world at large. Having something to contribute to the classroom, school, local community, and the larger world helped children develop responsibility and generosity. Having a shared purpose also strengthened the spirit of community.

**Integration of culture.** The team of third grade teachers asked community elders including parents and grandparents of the students in their school to help identify the values they most wanted to foster in students. Small focus groups of elders were held within the school to identify important cultural values. The values of truthfulness, respectfulness, responsibility, and caring emerged as the important themes for developing their new classroom practices and articulating classroom expectations consistent with the ideas of SWPBIS. Those themes were depicted on a medicine wheel to illustrate their interconnectedness (i.e. a circle connects all things with no beginning and no end).

One advantage of classroom meetings for this school was that they were easily fashioned after tribal government. In their community, tribal leaders sit in a circle and all members have opportunity to speak and contribute. By sitting in a circle, all members are able to see each other's face as discussion ensues signifying there is no hierarchy or that one person is not more important than another. All of the people of the tribe get together to voice concerns, ask questions and show support of the tribal leaders' actions at regular intervals.

Finally, teachers integrated the tenets of the Circle of Courage, belonging, mastery, independence and generosity in their practices by intentionally selecting practices that nurtured each area. Class meetings fostered belonging and

independence, service learning fostered generosity, and sound academic instruction fostered mastery.

**Classroom expectations.** Based upon the themes generated by community and family members, teachers decided to build their communities around the universal values of respectfulness, responsibility, truthfulness, and caring; these four words would be the foundation for all situations for the students whether they related to behavior and social issues or curriculum and learning. In line with Tier 1 of SWPBIS, these words and the concepts that they represented were introduced and practiced beginning with the first day the students stepped into their classrooms. The values were broken down into specific classroom expectations that demonstrated the universal values. These expectations were taught to students in each of the third grade classrooms. To give students consistent positive feedback regarding expectations, teachers used praise and verbal identification of specific acts to acknowledge students demonstrating appropriate behavior. As needed, teachers also reminded, redirected, and re-taught expectations. Table 3 gives an example of expectations that were developed.

Table 3. Expectations for the Hallways

Area	Respect	Responsibility	Truthfulness	Caring
Hallway/ Steps	Walk quietly	Go directly to destination	Elevator use with adult or a pass	Give right of way to younger students
	Be mindful of personal space	Stay to the right	Demonstrate hallway expectations when no one else is around	Hold door open for others

### Interventions for Steven

Teachers in the third-grade community planned to use Tier 1 supports and individualized Tier 3 supports for Steven based on results of a functional behavioral analysis (FBA).

**Functional behavior analysis.** Three weeks into the third grade year, a FBA was conducted for Steven. Data were collected concerning his disruptive behavior, including a description of the behavior, the settings and time of day in which it occurred, and the antecedents and consequences that preceded and followed it. Results of the analysis indicated that Steven’s disruptions served dual functions of (a) gaining teacher and peer attention and (b) avoiding academic work. Steven’s family was notified and

encouraged to participate in the development of a behavioral support plan; however, family members did not attend the school-based meetings.

**Teacher support.** Mrs. Wilson used principles of Tier 1 support to praise Steven's appropriate behaviors, such as respectful responses to teachers, starting his work in a timely manner, transitioning well from one activity to another, calming himself down, and participating in classroom discussions. She reminded him of classroom expectations and she redirected his off-task behaviors before they escalated. Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Voohres also used Tier 3 support, to modify his academic assignments. He was given work in small, easy-to-accomplish segments, thereby addressing his need to avoid academic work (Nahgahgwon, Umbreit, Liaupsin, & Turton, 2010).

**Peer support.** Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Voohres decided to involve Steven's classmates in implementing a support plan for him. During a class meeting in which he was not present, they asked for peer help to increase Steven's positive comments and interactions within the classroom community. The teachers were careful not to reveal confidential information about Steven, including his special education status.

First, the group devised a plan to seek help from an administrator when the teacher determined that Steven's negative comments and disruptive behavior might escalate to a dangerous level. One student was designated as the *runner*. If necessary, this student, or a *back-up runner*, would deliver a pre-written note to the principal's office asking for assistance with Steven. The class also devised a plan for staying safe, moving out of Steven's way, and ignoring his disruptive behavior.

Secondly, the class had a discussion led by Mrs. Voohres about ways to help Steven and encourage his positive participation within the classroom community. The third graders agreed to look for things that Steven was doing well so he could be given compliments during class meetings. By acknowledging Steven for what he was doing well, the class was fulfilling his need to gain attention.

**Using strengths.** Steven's teachers recognized his talent as an artist. After initial prompting from Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Voohres, his classmates and other third-grade block students and teachers asked him to draw. He was sought out to illustrate student-authored books, to draw templates for students, to paint bulletin board pictures, and so forth. Through this strength, Steven gained positive attention from his peers and his teachers.

## Research Design

Case study action research allows teachers to focus on a particular classroom goal with the intention of improving practice (James, 2006). It is participatory in that it puts the teacher in the role of researcher, and it is systematic and cyclical, allowing for continued learning and reflection (Kember, 2000). This methodology was particularly well-suited for the work of the teachers and faculty participant observer in the present

study. Unlike strict scientific research, this approach was easily incorporated into the life of a classroom. To achieve the study's goal, the teachers planned, implemented, and evaluated classroom practices that utilized SWPBIS, developed a sense of community, and integrated the culture of their students.

## Data Collection

In order to document the effectiveness of the integrated system for the classroom and Steven, teachers collected data using (a) direct observation, (b) anecdotal notes, (c) sociograms, and (d) office discipline referrals (ODR).

**Direct Observation.** During Steven's third-grade year, Mrs. Voorhes collected baseline and intervention data for 17 days, tracking his disruptive behavior during morning academic periods. *Disruptive behavior* was defined as making negative comments, banging on a desk, shoving desks, and verbally refusing to do work. Time sampling was used to determine the percent of disruptive behavior he exhibited during a two-hour block. At the end of each 10-minute segment, Mrs. Voorhes recorded if Steven were exhibiting the target behavior.

**Anecdotal notes.** Through out the entire school year, both Mrs. Voorhes and Mrs. Wilson recorded notes of their observations regarding the behavior of the class and individual students, including Steven. They recorded student behaviors and student comments that provided instances of students using solutions generated in class meetings, evidence of community and overall improvements in student behavior.

**Sociogram.** At the end of the school year, students were asked to nominate classmates they would most like to play or work with. Mrs. Voorhes asked each child to write the answers to the following questions: (a) With whom would most like to eat lunch? (b) With whom would you most like to play at recess? and (c) With whom would you like to complete a class project? Afterwards, Mrs. Voorhes completed a sociogram of students' responses. Sociograms provide a visual representation of the social dynamics in a classroom by determining the pattern of friendships, popularity, and peer rejection and have been used to determine potential bullies (Cole, Cornell, & Sheras, 2006).

**Office Discipline Referrals.** The school administration routinely collected ODRs for each classroom. The total number of referrals per year were gathered for the five classrooms in the third- grade block two years prior to implementation, the year implementation began, and one year after.

## Results

### Direct Observation of Steven's Disruptive Behavior

Baseline data were collected for seven days during the first month of school (see Figure 2). Mean disruptive behavior during a two-hour block was 53% (range, 25% -

75%) with an ascending trend, indicating disruptive behavior was escalating over time. During 10 days of the intervention phase, which included teacher and peer support, Steven's mean disruptive behavior decreased substantially to 12% (range, 0% - 33%) with a descending trend.

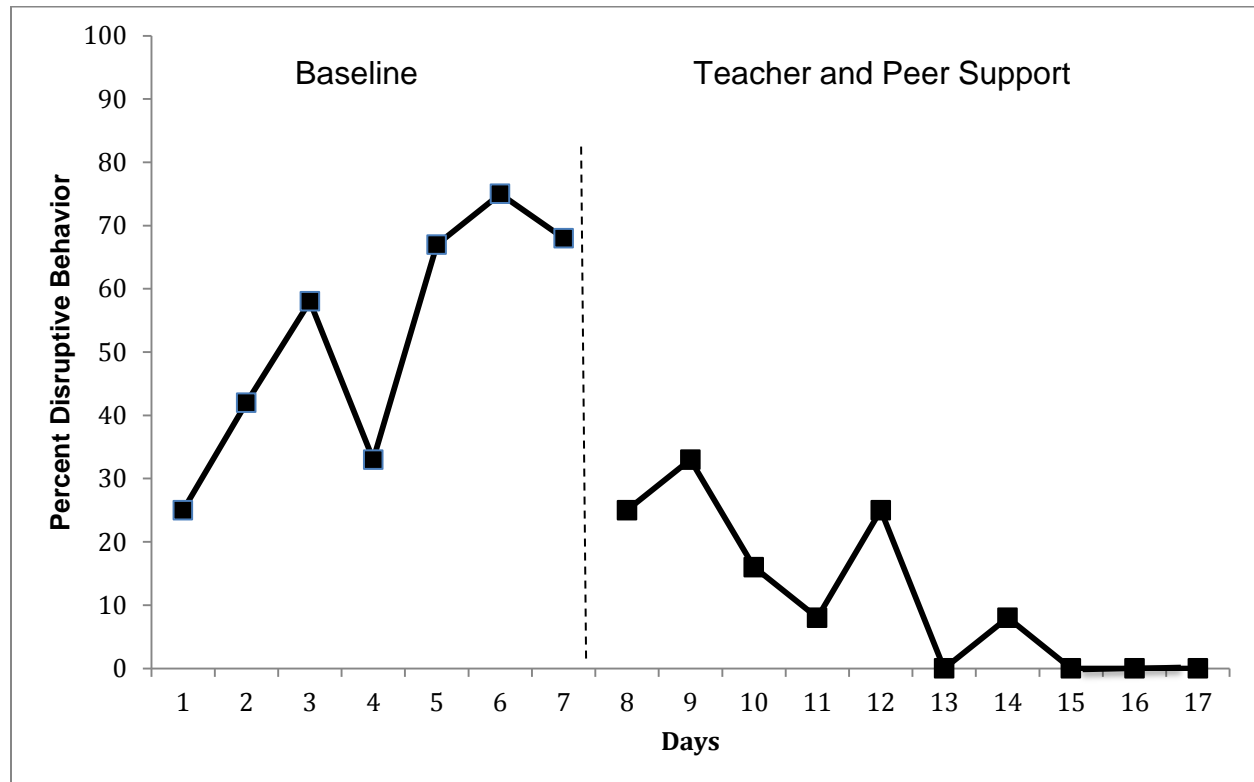


Figure 2. Steven's disruptive behavior during morning academic period

### Anecdotal Notes

**Classroom.** Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Voohres noted that students reminded each other of classroom expectations by saying, "Remember, we are peace keepers!" They expressed concern for their classroom functioning by writing statements including "We are taking too long to line up at recess" and "We are fighting over pencils." They expressed concerns for their classmates in caring ways. For example, in one class meeting a student wrote: "I am concerned for Jake, he isn't getting his work done and can't play with us at recess." Student-generated solutions ranged from giving each other reminders and keeping extra pencils on the tables to changes in classroom seating arrangements. Teachers were impressed with not only the solutions generated for these concerns, but the level of commitment on the part of the students to seeing them work. Frequently, when class meetings ended, the children applauded each other and exclaimed "Good meeting! Good meeting!" All of the third grade teachers anecdotally noted reductions in classroom problems and increased time for learning.

Classroom meetings served several purposes in supporting students to meet expectations. Not only were they a good vehicle for students to model and role-play expectations, but they also provided opportunity for children to receive recognition from their peers and other teachers in the school through compliments from teachers and peers. Often a spontaneous round of applause was given for the student receiving a compliment. Furthermore, class meetings allowed students to provide input for solutions for issues and problems that the students encountered and faced within that week. The problems were not contrived; they were very real in the lives of the students. Finally, class meetings contributed to community by giving all the students a voice, a sense of belonging, and an opportunity to contribute to the well-being of the community.

**Steven.** After implementation of teacher and peer supports, several positive changes in Steven's behavior and positive interactions with classmates were noted by Mrs. Voohres. After Mrs. Wilson reduced the size of Steven's assignments and his classmates began the compliment intervention, the classroom plan for managing his disruptive behavior (i.e., send a runner to the office) was implemented only two times during the remainder of the school year. Mrs. Voohres noted that Steven's hostile comments dissipated and his day-to-day attitude and behavior seemed to improve. With more appropriate academic demands, he seemed willing to complete academic assignments. By giving him work in small segments that were easily accomplished, the need to escape academic work was addressed. Because Steven's disruptive behavior was maintained in part by negative attention from his teachers and peers, shifting the focus of attention to positive behavior, especially from his peers, was effective in addressing his need for attention. The integrated classroom system of support provided Steven with prosocial replacement behaviors and a sense of community and belonging.

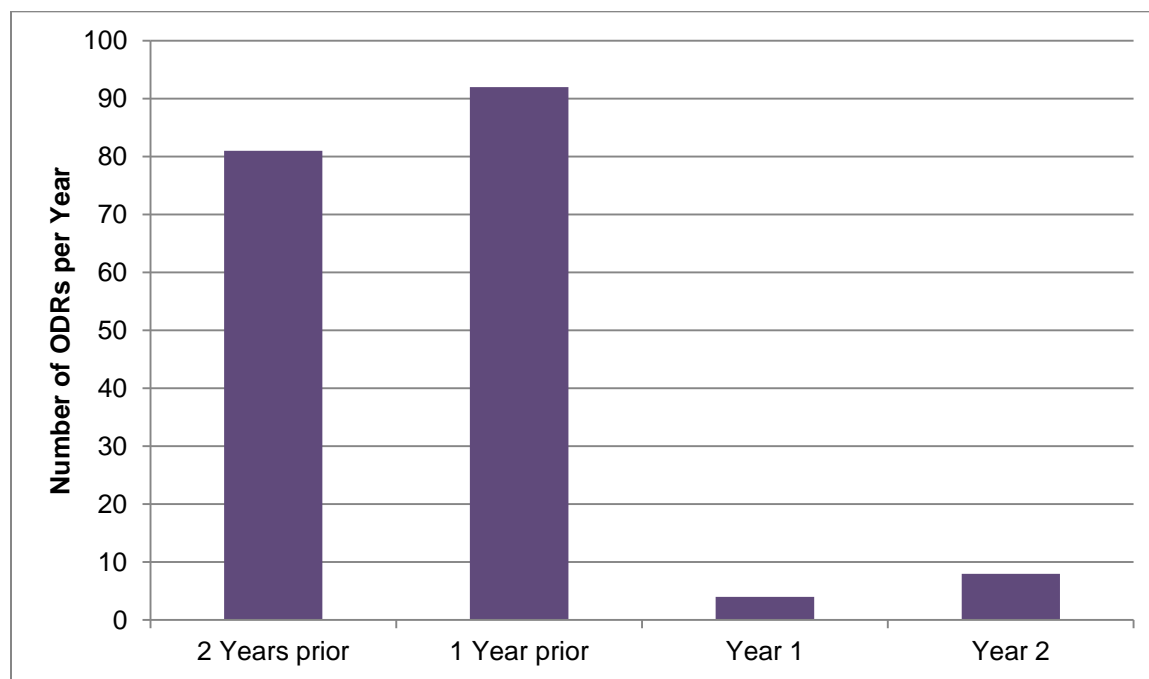
### **Sociogram**

The results of the sociogram showed that no student was excluded by his/her peers by the end of the school year. While some students were clearly nominated more often by peers than others, each student had at least two nominations as someone other students wanted to socialize and work with in the classroom. Steven had at least one nomination for each category and was nominated by six of his peers to work on a project and to play with on the playground.

### **Office Discipline Referrals**

Office discipline referrals from the five classrooms in the third-grade block indicated that ODRs decreased substantially during the first two years of implementation of the integrated community system. Office referrals decreased by 93%, from an average of 87 per year before the introduction of the integrated system to an average of 6 per year after implementation (see Figure 3).





*Figure 3.* Office Discipline Referrals from the Third-Grade Block. Total number of office discipline referrals in third-grade classrooms before and after implementation of the integrated community approach.

### Discussion

The third grade teachers at this elementary school created a grassroots effort to improve school and classroom climate. For Steven and other students with learning and behavioral challenges, inclusion became a reality as teachers and classmates became invested in finding ways to support all members of classroom communities. Class meetings, clear classroom expectations, and service projects that exemplified the Native American values helped to develop a strong caring community where all students could thrive. A strong ethos of caring was developed, students were given the opportunity to fully participate, and they were guided in their efforts to provide effective peer support for classmates. By tying the community practices to the culture of the students, the practices became more meaningful for not only students and teachers, but for school staff, families, and community members as well.

### Recommendations

Based on the experiences of these teachers, the following are recommendations for creating a positive classroom climate, developing community, and supporting students with learning and behavioral needs.

**Gain Commitment from Staff.** Start with a small group of committed teachers. Too often professional development opportunities for teachers attempt to provide packaged programs or recipes for school discipline and classroom management. The

success of the practices implemented by this school were due in part to the willingness of a small group of teachers to be reflective of their practices and to make changes. They were willing to take a step back, meet after school, look at best practices, consider the culture of their students, and rethink the way their classrooms operated. Each school and community is unique. Buy-in and commitment from teachers is essential for the success of school-wide practices such as SWPBIS (Simonesen, Sugai, & Negron, 2008). Developing practices that fit their own unique circumstances can help teachers commit to programs and practices (Clark, Hong, & Schoepf, 1996).

While SWPBIS is intended to be a school-wide effort, these teachers were pioneers for the school in implementing SWPBIS just for their grade block. More recently, because of the efforts of these teachers, SWPBIS and classroom community practices have been embraced and adopted school-wide. The teachers who started the movement are serving as mentors and are part of the leadership team. Evaluation of school-wide efforts is in progress.

**Involve Students, Family, and Community.** As with teachers, when the community, families, and students have input into classroom practices, their commitment to seeing them work are increased (Comer & Haynes, 1992). In this case, community elders identified the values of truthfulness, respectfulness, responsibility, and caring. Students knew what the elders in their community expected from them, and they were engaged in identifying solutions to issues that affected the classroom community. There was a commitment to making those solutions work and a greater connection between school and community. In fact, as these initiatives were accepted throughout the school, posters depicting the medicine wheel were placed in the community and these values were adopted school-wide.

**Integrate Culture.** When incorporating SWPBIS and enhancing community, include aspects of students' culture. The success of the practices incorporated by the third grade teachers was due in part to the strong connection to the culture of the students. Using Native American symbols, referencing the tribal government in class meetings, addressing the Circle of Courage (Brendtro et al., 2002), and involving community elders made the connections to culture clear and the practices meaningful to students, families, faculty, and staff.

**Solicit Peer Support.** Solicit peer assistance in supporting students with EBD. The change in Steven's behavior when he experienced positive attention from his peers was profound. By giving Steven an opportunity to feel accepted, his aggressive behavior decreased, and he became more socially successful.

## Conclusion

This action research case study suggests the power of classroom community and SWPBIS to diminish disruptive behavior of a student with EBD, improve overall classroom climate, and reduce office discipline referrals. The teachers in the third-grade block took the initiative to work together and be reflective and creative with their

classroom management practices. They began by asking themselves what was missing from their classrooms and what they could do differently to promote learning. By incorporating SWPBIS practices and those that addressed their culture and community in the classroom, they were able to affect changes in the behavior Steven and his classmates.

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