# Providing Tertiary Level PBIS Within Inclusive High School Environments: Impact of Emotional and Behavioural Disorders on School Engagement

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## Introduction

Research in the field of education and psychology requires more sufficient attention to the perspective of youth who have significant emotional/behaviour challenges (Feuerborn, Wallace, & Tyre, 2013; Anderson, Turtura & Parry, 2013) and who may subsequently engage in school refusal (Wood, Langer, Clark, Lynne-Landsman, Wood, Eddy, & Ialongo, 2012). A valuable outcome of this perspective for educators and counsellors would be insight into how effective Positive Behaviour Intervention Support (PBIS), a systems-level approach to preventing social, behavioural, and emotional problems in schools (Feuerborn et al., 2013; Reinke, Stormont, Clare, Latimore & Herman, 2013; McIntosh, & Bennett, 2011) is in inclusive secondary schools with regard to the students struggling with learning appropriate conduct. Emotional and behavioural issues, arguably the roots of societal and academic issues (Perle, Levine, Odland, Ketterer, Cannon, & Marker, 2013), can be characterized as either externalization of behaviour or the internalization of symptoms, and these both tend to impede the fluidity of learning in school environments (Cheney et al., 2010; Lane, Kahlberg, Lambert, Crnobori, & Bruhn, 2010; Reinke et al., 2013; Lane, Oakes, Menzies, Oyer & Jenkins, 2013). Student engagement is considered by scholars to be an essential factor in circumventing adolescent issues, such as school avoidance and dropping out (Marvul, 2012; Barry & Reschly, 2012; Green et

al., 2012; Landis & Reschly, 2011; Larson & Meehan, 2011). The focus of this paper is to examine what the current literature has to say about internalizing and externalizing behaviours and the impact that they have on student engagement and overall school success.

## Internalization of Emotions in Secondary School Youth

Internalizing behaviour is defined as using excessive control as a response style (Lane, et al., 2010), is often exhibited by social withdrawal, and includes anxiety and depression as common responses (van der Voort, et al., 2013). Referred to as secretive in nature because emotions are directed inward (Lane et al., 2010), these behaviours are more difficult to identify when observing students who are not responsive to the universal, school-wide behaviour supports currently in place in Canadian schools (Allison, Nativo, Mitchell, Ren, & Yuhasz, 2013; Lane, Oakes, Menzies, Oyer, & Jenkins, 2013). The propensity to avoid social situations impedes the regular development of social skills and emotional recognition among this population of youth; instead they tend to regulate negative emotions inwardly through self-criticism, and thereby further exacerbate the impact of their internalization of negative emotions (Perle et al., 2013). Moreover, should these issues begin when students are children and continue throughout their development into adolescence without school and home involvement, extreme manifestations of internalized behaviour such as suicide may result (Lane et al., 2010). While several disorders are associated with the internalization of emotions, for the purposes of this study, only the most common, anxiety and depression (Allison et al., 2014), will be discussed.

Anxiety is associated with fearfulness and feelings of worry, which are principle characteristics of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), separation anxiety disorder (SAD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), social

anxiety disorder (SOD), and specific phobias (SP). Canadian scholars Miller et al. (2011) have identified four distinct types of anxiety symptoms: tenseness and restlessness (physical); striving for perfectionism (harm avoidance); fear of humiliation and public performance fears (social anxiety); and separation anxiety/panic. Anxiety is recognized in the literature as the most common mental health issue among children and adolescents (Allison et al., 2014; Halldorsdottir & Ollendick, 2014; Leone et al., 2013; Miller, et al., 2011).

Depression, on the other hand, involves feelings of hopelessness and sadness, and has a prevalence rate of 7.6% among Canadian adolescents (Leone, Ray, & Evans, 2013). Youth with depression may appear to lack energy and interest, may have little or no motivation, experience difficulty with concentration, and demonstrate an avoidance of school, which is also consequently linked to school absenteeism (Leone et al., 2013; Wood et al., 2012). Suicide, the second leading cause of adolescent deaths in the United States, is a greater risk among youth suffering with depression (Allison et al., 2014).

Depression and anxiety in students who project frustrations and stress inward are among the most significant symptoms to consider in assisting students with internalizing behaviours. Students who display excessive control of their emotional responses (Allison et al., 2013; Lane et al., 2013; Lane et al., 2010) require specific evidence-based interventions that have been empirically supported as effective for internalizing behaviour. It is for this reason that the research cautions against implementing interventions that are proven to work for students with externalizing behaviour, since these programs are not effective in managing internalizing issues (Simonsen et al., 2011), and therefore ought to be avoided in these situations.

## Externalizing Behaviour in Secondary School Youth

Externalizing behaviours are referred to as under-controlled conduct problems, often appearing in the form of aggression and the use of coercive means to manipulate and threaten others (Bornstein, Hahn, & Suwalsky, 2013; Lane et al., 2013; McMahon, et al., 2012; Owens, Holdaway, Zoromsky, Evans, Himawan, Girio-Herrera, & Murphy, 2012; Page & Smith, 2012; Williams, Noell, Jones & Gansle, 2012; Feindler & Engel, 2011; Cheney et al., 2010; Pokhrel, Sussman, Black & Sun, 2010; Reynolds & Repetti, 2010; Wyatt, 2010). Youth with these characteristics are easily identified in school settings because of the overt disruption to the learning environment and subsequent office disciplinary referrals (ODR) which are documented indicators of inappropriate conduct (Lane et al., 2010). Investigation of the characteristics of the various complex forms of aggression that materialize into misconduct may explain how students are afflicted with the propensity to direct frustration outwardly.

Physical, verbal, and relational aggression are three categories of externalizing symptoms that serve as either proactive means of achieving a variety of self-serving goals, or as reactive and defensive functions (Ojanen & Findley-Van Nostrand, 2014; McMahon et al., 2012; Feindler & Engel, 2011; Page & Smith, 2010; Imtiaz, Yasin & Yaseen, 2010; Reynolds & Repetti, 2010). Physical aggression includes the act of attacking another person with the intent to inflict serious injury, verbal aggression includes issuing threats, and relational aggression is manifested in the manipulation of relationships such as socially excluding individuals to inflict emotional harm. Aggression is not considered an emotional reaction but a "behavioural response to an internal state" (Imtiaz et al., 2010, p. 99).

Feindler and Engel (2011) concluded that individuals who use aggression as an acceptable form of management of adverse

situations tend to have poor social skills, low empathy, and, since they struggle with processing emotional arousal, misconstrue seemingly benign social cues as hostile. According to these authors, this constellation of deficits leads to poor problem-solving skills, as it justifies an aggressive reaction as a protection of ego, and refusal to lose a power struggle. Furthermore, Feindler and Engel (2011) asserted that there are social, emotional and cognitive components of aggression which are effectively managed through physiological, cognitive and behavioural factors within the experience of anger.

Whereas physical aggression overtly aims to establish dominance, relational aggression is a more furtive, indirect strategy to manipulate relationships using hostility to create intimacy and popularity among social units (Ojanen & Findley-Van-Nostrand, 2014; Pokhrel et al., 2010; Reynolds & Repetti, 2010). Bullying, or relational aggression, can be both confrontational and clandestine in nature (Allen, 2010; Pokhrel et al., 2010), referred to in school settings as ongoing acts that are "often insidious, with only egregious instances becoming apparent to students and adults in a school" (Allen, 2010, p.200).

Ojanen and Findley-Van Nostrand (2014) discovered, in their longitudinal analysis of aggression among adolescents, that desire for dominance and seeking intimacy in relationships were two goals that fueled their propensity for using either physical or relational aggression. These youths also learned over the course of their childhood that despite success establishing dominance in a group, alienation from peers resulted as they got older; however, this relational aggression continued to root their status, dominance and popularity within their social units. This research by Ojanen and Findley-Van Nostrand (2014) also substantiated existing evidence that a sense of belonging among peers was achieved by the aggressors in their role to protect the group from outside

threats (Page & Smith, 2012; Reynolds & Repetti, 2010; Wyatt, 2010).

Aggression is justified among youth in violent neighbourhoods as a reactive or protective factor in dealing with violence and threats to their safety (MacMahon et al., 2013; Reynolds & Repetti, 2010; Wyatt, 2010). McMahon and colleagues (2013) concurred that youth living in dangerous communities may resort to violence as a coping mechanism for protection from harm or because they see aggression as an acceptable behavioural strategy to ensure safety. Conversely, these scholars found that self-efficacy was a critical trait that, combined with low impulsivity, served as protective factors for youth in these neighbourhoods, and promoted pro-social behaviour among the individuals who displayed these two characteristics.

Externalizing behaviour can be summarized as including a repertoire of disruptively impulsive and under-controlled conduct, executed through either covert or overt means. Adolescents may have a variety of protective factors that justify resorting to managing any propensity for aggression and violence. There may be risk factors to consider that put youth in a position to require support in experiencing success socially, emotionally and academically. In both situations, educational implications for students with externalizing issues include consideration of the importance of student engagement and its effect as a lifeline for these students, not only for survival in the school system, but for their successful completion of secondary school.

## Positive Behaviour Intervention Support (PBIS) and Inclusive School Environments

Positive Behaviour Intervention Support (PBIS) is a data-driven, three-tiered framework of behaviour support designed to encourage and promote pro-social behaviour and facilitate positive,

meaningful behavior change for students who struggle with positive behaviour expectations (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013; Farkas, Simonsen, Migdole, Donovan, Clemens, & Cicchese, 2012; Simonsen, Myers, & Briere III, 2011). Tier one of PBIS reduces problem behaviour through prevention, effective for 71% of high school students; of the 29% of students who do not respond to primary prevention efforts or small group interventions through tier two supports, this population of students (10-15%) will need a more intensive, wraparound level of support (Simonsen et al, 2011). This tertiary level of behaviour support requires individualized programs based on student strengths and needs, built around a network of support agencies, home presence, and school, consistently collaborating to ensure that the interventions are implemented with fidelity so that the student may experience success (Reinke et al., 2013). When PBIS frameworks coalesce with inclusive school environments, educators are positioned to remove barriers for students, and allow a sense of community to be developed among students based on each individual's unique contribution to their environment (Howery, McClellan & Pedersen-Bayus, 2013; Katz & Sudgen, 2013; Morcom & MacCallum, 2012).

## Conclusions

Research suggests that internalizing and externalizing behaviours are not mutually exclusive, since individuals may present characteristics along a continuum between these two strands of behaviour issues (Perle et al., 2013). These issues compound any struggle that students with emotional and behavioural issues have with learning appropriate behaviours, grasping social interaction cues, and consequently achieving academic success. These students are thus inadequately prepared for graduation and as a result, will likely not be set up for post-

secondary success. There is evidence that internalizing behaviours may develop into externalizing behaviours if treatment and appropriate interventions have been omitted, and this necessitates that school interventions adequately identify these youths to provide them with the appropriate support (Perle et al., 2013). As inclusive school systems attempt to rectify the phenomenon of dropping out, which often results from a lack of support and success, they ought to approach the matter of student engagement in a manner that eliminates risk factors and nurtures protective factors such as a sense of belonging among all students (Barry & Reschly, 2012; Logan-Greene et al., 2011). In doing so, they may provide their students who struggle with emotional and behaviour challenges opportunities to become engaged, and consequently, resilient and active citizens of society.

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