Improving a Universal Intervention for Reducing Exclusionary Discipline Practices using Student and Teacher Guidance

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Citation

Abstract

Exclusionary discipline practices have a direct negative impact on individual students, schools, and society at large. To improve equity and cultural responsivity, active efforts to assess the contextual fit of effective strategies are necessary. The following study describes the Inclusive Skill-building Learning Approach (ISLA), an intervention designed to support school staff in carrying out preventative strategies and outlines instructional responses for educators and office staff. Additionally, an iterative approach to inform changes was used as part of the development process of ISLA. This paper aims to capture and incorporate the voices of students and staff using multiple methods to seek feedback for refining the quality, feasibility, and contextual fit of the ISLA intervention in middle schools. A total of 53 school staff provided feedback on the ISLA intervention. Further, Design Team members ($n = 26$) participated in semi-structured interview meetings to inform changes to ISLA. Lastly, student participants ($n = 23$) engaged in focus groups that were transcribed and coded via an independent co-coding strategy. The findings provide support for preventative school-based interventions that use alternatives to exclusionary discipline, as well as strategies for improving the ISLA intervention.

Keywords: alternative to exclusion, mixed methods, prevention

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A major theme in educational reform today is identification of practices that are both documented to be effective, and implementable with the cultural responsivity needed for high-fidelity adoption and equitable outcomes (Cook & Odom, 2013; Green & Stormont, 2018; Horner & Sugai, 2015). This is especially true for practices targeting school discipline. Too often schools rely on exclusionary disciplinary practices such as suspension and expulsion that have been shown to be (a) ineffective at changing student unwanted behavior, (b) detrimental to student academic success, and (c) prone to racial disproportionality (Burris, 2012; Fabelo et al., 2011; Kim, 2009; Noguera, 2003; Pownall, 2013; Skiba, 2014;). One alternative to exclusionary discipline practices is the Inclusive Skill-building Learning Approach (ISLA). ISLA employs instructional and restorative discipline procedures within highly efficient systems (Nese et al., 2020). Schools implementing ISLA aim to increase equitable instructional practices and the opportunity for students to have access to caring adults trained to connect with students and support student agency. ISLA focuses on balancing delivery of effective behavioral supports while minimizing the loss of instructional time for students who are removed from class for their behavior. This is done by strengthening (a) student-teacher relationships, (b) teacher and administrator use of behavior support practices, and (c) student social and behavioral problem-solving (Nese et al., 2020).

This paper focuses on the voices of students and staff during the iterative process of shaping the quality, feasibility, and contextual fit of ISLA. We propose that equity in education will come from three integrated activities, (a) building and selecting research-validated practices, (b) continually adapting those practices to meet the cultural norms of each setting (e.g.,

contextual fit), and (c) monitoring the impact of the practices across all student groups,

especially those groups at risk for disproportionate impact. We emphasize the importance of

recruiting input from students, faculty, and administrators to ensure that any educational reform

is not just targeting a common goal, but perceived as employing procedures that are needed,

acceptable, efficient, implementable, and effective (Albin et al., 1996; Benazzi et al., 2006).

The Detrimental Effects of Exclusionary Discipline

Research has shown that exclusionary disciplinary practices, such as suspension and

expulsion, are ineffective and detrimental for students, schools, and society at large (Fabelo et

al., 2011; Noguera, 2003; Pownall, 2013; Skiba, 2014). Students who experience exclusion are

more likely to receive additional discipline (Mendez, 2003), have lower academic achievement

(Arcia, 2006), drop out of school (Burris, 2012; Kim, 2009; Marchbanks et al., 2014), and be

involved in the juvenile justice system (Darensbourg et al., 2010; Fabelo et al., 2011). Further,

research indicates that historically marginalized and underrepresented students are more likely to

receive exclusionary discipline (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018; Wald &

Losen, 2003), and experience loss of trust between students and adults (Gottfredson et al., 2005;

Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014) . The

over-riding message is that equity in discipline practices relates not just to the frequency of

events but the over-represented removal of marginalized students from valuable educational

opportunities (Skiba & Rausch, 2015).

The Benefits of Prevention

Positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) is a multi-tiered behavior support

framework that aims to improve school climate and support the development of prosocial

behaviors (Sugai & Horner, 2009). PBIS emphasizes explicit teaching of class-wide and school-

wide behavioral expectations for all students early each school year. Students who continue to engage in problem behavior receive additional support tailored to match the intensity and function of their problem behavior (Ingram et al., 2005; Loman et al., 2014). Together, these proactive and responsive behavior supports create a predictable school climate where students feel safe and can focus on learning (McIntosh et al., 2010).

Strong teacher-student relationships can improve classroom behavior and increase student engagement (Cook et al., 2017). Further, these relationships support the students' emotional connections with teachers, their sense of belonging and sense of safety (Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Verchueren & Koomon, 2012). Implementing PBIS strategies, prioritizing strong teacher relationships, and taking a functional approach to challenging behaviors are effective strategies that may help minimize exclusionary practices. This work requires intentional teaming and data-based decision-making to build up implementation of contextually adapted interventions, as well as support for implementers through professional development and ongoing coaching (Freeman et al., 2017; McLeod et al., 2021). An intervention that supports school staff in carrying out these preventative strategies may be able to reduce the use of traditional exclusionary practices that disproportionately affect marginalized and minoritized students. PBIS provides the underlying framework used to enact systematic change and feasible implementation of prevention and intervention efforts.

The Inclusive Skill-building Learning Approach (ISLA)

The Inclusive Skill-building Learning Approach (ISLA) is an alternative to exclusionary discipline practices built on systems to support implementation, and instructional practices to build student behavioral skills. ISLA incorporates three of the four specific strategies for school-based mental health professionals to implement under PBIS to decrease the presence of

disproportionate discipline within their schools (Darensbourg et al., 2010): data-based decision making, classroom management strategies, and fostering school belonging.

Research has documented that interventions are most successful when they are embedded within a preventive PBIS system (Baker et al., 2010). Therefore, ISLA has been designed as a Tier I universal intervention that all students and teachers can access that is highly efficient, requires no additional school personnel, and fits within existing commitments to improved social culture. Yet, even within the PBIS framework, schools that document overall reductions in office referrals struggle to manage the office referral process in a manner that is both effective in reducing the likelihood of recidivism, and efficient for minimizing loss of instructional time. ISLA expands on a school-wide foundation of positive behavior support, and offers a formal protocol that includes (1) organizational systems that reduce time away from instruction, (2) function-based supports to encourage desired student behavior and engagement, (3) reconnection and reentry instruction to improve the student-teacher relationship, transition the student back to class sooner, and increase the likelihood of the student remaining in class, and (5) implementation supports at the student, teacher, and administrator levels. By building upon a school's PBIS framework, ISLA provides training and support for all staff members to minimize exclusion, respond effectively to unwanted behaviors, and establish systematic processes to ensure that students are equitably supported through the discipline process (Nese et al., 2020). As part of ISLA, all staff participate in professional learning on classroom behavior management strategies and a process of graduated discipline to reduce the number of students sent out of class. When behavior incidents cannot be handled in the classroom, school staff use a structured process to refer the students to the office.

In ISLA, students not only receive proactive orientation to behavioral expectations, but immediate redirection, coaching and support when they exhibit unwanted behavior. When a student is sent to the office an educational support staff member follows a five-step ISLA protocol (Nese et al., 2020): (a) a student-guided functional behavior assessment, (b) the identification of an appropriate replacement behavior, (c) coaching on behavior skills with practice, (d) completion of a Reconnection Card, and (e) support in making amends with the classroom teacher through the Reconnection Conversation. Figure 2 provides an overview of the layered components in the ISLA Model.

Design Team members and ISLA interventionists were assembled to assist with ISLA materials development and implementation. ISLA staff provided administrators with a list of suggested Design Team participants based on their role (e.g., District Coach, Administrator, General education, sped teachers, EA, instructional coach), and administrators identified team members. Design Teams were developed to establish a consistent group of school professionals to provide feedback on intervention components and test out materials and staff Professional Development content. These teams met quarterly during Year 1 and assisted in the development of a contextually appropriate intervention. School administrators also determined existing school teams (i.e., possible roles include administrator, behavior support staff, counselor, or district PBIS coach) that would be available to support ISLA implementation.

To assess outcomes and staff perceptions, faculty and staff were asked to complete the Primary Intervention Rating Scale (PIRS) in Spring 2019 or at the end of Phase 1; this focused on formative development and usability. ISLA interventionists collected self-rated fidelity data over a one-month period to pilot the tracking completion of ISLA intervention components and materials before the end of the school year.

Stakeholder Feedback in Intervention Development

Preliminary empirical assessments indicate that ISLA is associated with improved student-teacher relationships, reductions in time removed from class, reduction in suspensions and reduction in expulsions (Nese et. al., 2020). Although these data are promising, it is important to further examine intervention development from the perspective of community stakeholders to ensure the acceptability, utility, and feasibility of ISLA. Thus, we obtained local input using qualitative research protocols during the iterative intervention development and adoption processes. Community-based participatory research emphasizes engagement and partnership with the target population for behavioral and social interventions (Ayala & Elder, 2011). Throughout the development of ISLA, we used interviews and focus groups to help build trust among stakeholders (Nastasi & Schensul, 2005). Integration of these strategies in the development and adoption processes can help to close the research to practice gap and ensure interventions are contextually appropriate, implemented with high fidelity, and more likely to produce equitable outcomes.

Purpose of the Present Study

The purpose of this study is to describe one approach for recruiting and incorporating student and staff voice in the adoption of a practice targeting improved equity. Specifically, we sought out to answer the follow three questions:

1. What type of school/classroom environment feels welcoming and supportive to students?

2. What components of ISLA can be enhanced to improve equity in school discipline within the existing cultural and structural school context?

3. What modifications to ISLA would make the approach more acceptable and valued by staff?

Method

Participants and Settings

Two public middle schools in the Pacific Northwest region of the United Stated were recruited for participation in this study, and all study activities took place at the school sites. Participating middle schools served students in 6th through 8th grade; the student body at each school was predominantly White with approximately 34% of student identifying as racial or ethnic minorities, and 62% of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch (see Table 1 for school demographics).

Study participants were in three groups. The first was a formal Design Team composed of 26 educators drawn equally from the two schools, that included 4 behavior and instructional coaches, 5 general education teachers, 3 special education teachers, 4 school administrators, 5 licensed support staff (e.g., school psychologists, counselors), and 5 classified support staff (e.g., educational assistants, paraprofessionals, behavior aides).

The second group of participants included 23 8th grade students (12 from school 1 and 11 from school 2) selected with parental consent and student assent who participated in focus group meetings. We included 8th grade students in each school from those who had and had not experienced exclusion from class: "Low Risk" (i.e., 0-1 major behavior referrals and above 80% attendance for their 8th grade year) ($n =11$), and "At Risk" (i.e., 4 or more major behavior referrals and below 80% attendance for their 8th grade year) ($n = 12$). All students had attended the participating middle schools since 6th grade, and school administrators assisted the researchers with ensuring diverse representation across race and ethnicity, gender, and IEP status.

The third participant group included faculty and staff in the two middle schools who were invited to complete the Primary Intervention Rating Scale (PIRS; Lane et al., 2002) in spring

2019. Of the 58 possible participants in this group, 53 returned the survey (22 were general

education teachers, 6 were special education teachers, 7 were related arts teachers [e.g., PE, art,

computers], 2 were school administrators, 6 were licensed support staff [e.g., school

psychologists, counselors], and 10 were classified support staff [e.g., educational assistants,

paraprofessionals, behavior aides]).

Procedures

During the 2018-2019 school year, the two participating middle schools engaged in a

series of activities as part of their school-wide ISLA implementation. Each activity built on the

prior, starting with foundational preventative school-wide supports, followed by targeted

supports for students sent out of class, then assessments of fidelity through multiple measures,

and finally feedback collected from students and staff through focus groups and PIRS

completion. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently during the spring

semester. Figure 1 shows the study timeline.

Field-test ISLA in design schools

Following development of the ISLA Curriculum through Design Team collaboration, we

field-tested the curriculum in both schools, observed implementation, and made adjustments to

ensure its usability. ISLA Support Team members (at least 3 individuals at each building: 1

instructional assistant, 1 behavior support specialist, and 1 administrator) received training from

researchers on the ISLA Process prior to initial implementation. The Design Team provided

monthly feedback on the effectiveness and efficiency of the ISLA Process, and this feedback was

used in an iterative revision process.

During the field-test, feedback from the school community was gathered in two ways.

First, the school staff at both schools provided feedback on the usability and relevance of the

ISLA via the PIRS. Second, focus groups were conducted with select groups of 8th grade

students. Research team members summarized the comments from both the PIRS responses and

the focus groups and then met with the Design Team to reach consensus on any revisions that

emerged from the feedback.

Study Design

This study follows an embedded mixed-method design. We included quantitative data to

refine efforts in addition to the predominant qualitative information capturing the experiences of

students and school staff members. Qualitative data representing student voice, the voice of

Design Team members, drove the refinements of ISLA, while all-staff survey data contributed to

a broader understanding of contextual fit and perceived effects of ISLA. Although students were

not asked explicitly to evaluate ISLA from an equity lens, students were asked about school and

classroom environments that felt welcoming to them, actions teacher took that influenced their

trust, and classroom practices that either helped or hindered the creation of equitable learning

spaces for all students to succeed in. Design Team members and staff were explicitly asked to

consider how ISLA could be modified to have a greater impact for students who need additional

support. This design allows for a deeper understanding of the ISLA intervention process and

related outcomes across stakeholders (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Measures

To follow mixed-method design which allows for addressing multiple questions that

require different sources of data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), qualitative and quantitative

data collection happened concurrently. Three sources of data were utilized to capture the

information needed to refine ISLA and improve its contextual fit: (a) qualitative feedback via

notes from the four Design Team meetings, (b) qualitative feedback via two focus group sessions

with 8th grade students, and (c) quantitative and qualitative feedback via the PIRS (Lane et al.,

2002) from all staff members in the spring.

Design Team feedback

Four Design Team meetings were held during the 2018-2019 school year (Oct, Dec, Feb,

Apr). Design Team members were asked to share feedback on the ISLA intervention, materials,

and professional development activities during each Design Team meeting. Meeting notes were

used to gather qualitative input of additional ideas and concerns. Design Team members were

informed that their feedback would help shape the intervention further and were thus asked for

specific recommendations.

Focus groups

Two focus group sessions occurred in April of 2019 school year, one at each participating

school. During the two sessions, a standard protocol was used to organize the focus group

process and ensure consistency. Semi-structured questions were used to gather information on

students' experiences, expectations, and needed skills related to school success, student-teacher

relationships, staying in class, understanding classroom expectations, and seeking support from

adults (see Appendix A for questions). In addition, the moderator of each focus group utilized

probes to elicit elaboration on statements made by students. The same protocol was used across

the two focus groups, although probes differed depending on the nature of the student responses.

The Primary Intervention Rating Scale (PIRS)

The PIRS is a measure of usability and feasibility designed to obtain "perceptions of the

social significance of intervention goals, social acceptability of intervention procedures, and

likelihood of socially important outcomes" for universal interventions (Lane et al., 2009, p. 138).

The measure contains 17 Likert-type scale items, has a reported internal consistency of $\alpha = .97$

(Cronbach, 1951), and strong predictive validity of fidelity of implementation (Lane et al., 2002).

Additionally, open-ended feedback questions allow for school staff to give specific information

about what works or what can be improved in terms of content, delivery, and supports for

students. All staff in both participating schools were invited to complete the PIRS in May 2019

to assess perceptions of the utility and usability of the ISLA intervention. The internal

consistency of the PIRS for ISLA was $\alpha = .87$ and $\omega = .91$ (McDonald, 1999; where ω reconciles

the problems with α, Raykov, 2004).

Intervention fidelity

Fidelity of ISLA implementation was measured by the ISLA interventionists, who used

the ISLA *Self-Rating Fidelity Tool* to document the extent to which they believed they delivered

the components of the ISLA Curriculum with students. Across both schools, fidelity data were

collected on 744 events from 296 students from May 10th through June 10th, 2019. Table 2

shows the self-reported fidelity of five ISLA components for the 744 total events (note that about

30% of the responses were unreported/missing). 62% of students were coached on the

appropriate behavior skill (of 536 reported events); 31% of students completed a re-connection

card (of 522 reported events); 15% of students completed the re-connection conversation with

their teacher (of 514 reported events); 54% of students completed the ISLA debrief (of 544

reported events); 34% of students practiced the re-connection conversation (of 514 reported

events).

Qualitative Analysis

To analyze qualitative data across sources (i.e., focus group, Design Team feedback,

PIRS open-ended questions), the Framework Method of analysis was used for management,

summary, and identification of a series of thematic patterns shared by stakeholders (Gale et al.,

2013). To inform iterative changes to the ISLA intervention for its second year of implementation, the research team focused on understanding the experiences shared by students, Design Team members, and school staff. Only segments of the data relevant to theory-driven ISLA components hypothesized to be mechanism of change were analyzed by the research team (Theory-driven intervention components of ISLA were selected based on empirical literature supporting the impact on student outcomes, see Figure 2 for each component). The first step to this analysis consisted of researchers familiarizing themselves with the data. This process began during the reviewing youth focus group transcriptions, facilitating, recording, reading design team feedback notes, and evaluating staff responses on the PIRS. A research member transcribed verbatim the focus group audio. To inspect for accuracy, another member of the team listened to the audio and added missing details. The authors then familiarized themselves with Design Team feedback notes and PIRS open-ended questions and generated initial impressions independently to develop a set of categories before meeting to discuss interrelated ideas that informed grouping of similar codes into clusters. Agreement on the set of codes was reached and the process was repeated to a second set of data sources before meeting to abstract of data and move into the identification of general themes. Data were then charted into the Framework Method matrix, which organized themes divided across all data sources and stakeholders. Themes were defined based upon recurrences of independent ideas and written up in such order. Finally, participant verbal or written quotes were selected from independent ideas shared by at least two participants across both school settings.

Quantitative Analysis

Although qualitative analyses were the primary analytic tool used in this study to gather a better understanding of stakeholders' feedback across multiple data sources, quantitative

analyses were also used to better understand teachers' acceptability and value of ISLA

intervention components and fidelity of implementation. Thus, the PIRS quantitative data and the

Self-Report Fidelity data were analyzed descriptively and are reported in Tables 2 and 3.

Positionality

Consumers of qualitative research should be informed of the researchers' experiences or

standpoints and how these possibly impress the research process conducted (Brantlinger et al.,

2005). This study presents staff and students impressions of different intervention components

designed by the same research team and trainers supporting the school Design Teams. Rooted in

social learning theory and behavioral theory, the authors have expertise in the subject matter

from these perspectives.

Results

Responses to PIRS items are presented in Table 3. Overall ratings of ISLA were

favorable. Staff were asked if ISLA was acceptable for middle schools using a 1-6 scale ranging

from "strongly disagree =1" to "strongly agree = 6." The mean score was 4.10 with 94% of staff

indicating "slightly agree," "agree," or "strongly agree." When asked if they were willing to use

ISLA in their school staff ratings had a mean of 4.7, with 86% indicating they "agree," "slightly

agree," or "strongly agree;" 80% agreeing that ISLA is effective reducing exclusionary discipline

practices; 80% agreeing that ISLA is appropriate for a variety of students; and 83% agreeing that

ISLA is beneficial for middle school students. However, staff also indicated concerns around

feasibility of such an intervention, with just 58% agreeing that the amount of time required to

implement ISLA is reasonable.

Qualitative guidance via Design Team feedback, student focus groups, and PIRS open-

ended responses brought to life the needs of middle school students and staff on how ISLA might

be adapted to address such needs. The following five themes were selected based upon

recurrences across the different measures (i.e., student focus groups, Design Team feedback,

PIRS): relationship building, classroom prevention, respectful corrections, ISLA materials, and

communication with staff. Students provided feedback on macro-level improvements to the

school culture that would strengthen these five themes, while staff members provided feedback

on specific ISLA systems and practices and how they might be improved in their school

contexts. Feedback from each group of stakeholders, as well as iterative changes made related to

each theme are further discussed below under their respective research question.

Research Question 1: What type of school/classroom environment feels welcoming and

supportive to students?

Opportunities for Relationship Building

Relationship building came up as a theme in the discussions held by Design Team

members and students in the focus groups. Members of the Design Team identified better

working relationships among school faculty as a result of engaging in ISLA. Design Team

members discussed: ways to support stronger relationships based on the premise that students

should receive teacher support regardless of circumstances; the uniqueness of building

relationships with middle school students; and the need for more secondary setting examples

(i.e., teachers modeling prosocial behaviors, teaching routines, and wrapping up class activities

with intention). Design Team members also believed that engaging in ISLA enhanced positivity

in student-teacher relationships. For example, they described ISLA as creating more

opportunities for students to *"feel like they've extended a hand to make things right"* with their

classroom teachers. They also identified a need for mutual respect: *"Teachers need to give*

respect to get respect back from their students."

In their reflection on the positive experiences in the classroom environment, students expressed more optimism for a class and their future academic outcomes when teachers engaged with them in a caring, kind, humorous, and/or calm way. One student shared, *"I like teachers that talk kids through it (an unwanted behavior) because I think it is better for them instead of keeping some kid out of class… trying to figure out a different solution for them to stop."* Students described more positive experiences when the class felt structured and engaging, preferring classrooms where teachers greeted them, and time was allowed for sharing personal experiences as a classroom community. One student said, *"I feel that when a class is welcoming it is easier to focus and not as stressful, unlike a class that isn't welcoming. A way that a class can be welcoming is when a teacher greets you every day and supports you and helps everyone out. It truly makes a difference."* In general, students discussed appreciating teachers who normalize making mistakes: "*When teachers admit they make mistakes that just calms you… you are not alone."*

Students also described a welcoming environment and reported feeling supported when teachers approached them privately to discuss a situation in class, and teachers did not put them on the spot. Students in this group who disclosed requiring additional support discussed their desire for more teachers to be understanding of learning accommodations. When teachers are perceived to be respectful of these, students felt understood. One student shared, *"I have this break card where I get to go out whenever and take a 10-minute break. When I was in this one class, they wouldn't let me do that so very often and so I had to switch classes. Now I get to do it a lot with my teachers. So, I feel like they are really nice teachers; they understand what you are going through*."

Based on the feedback provided by students and Design Team members, the research team developed an additional training module on universal relationship-building. This module consisted of presenting the rationale and procedural steps to (a) <u>W</u>elcoming students at the door, (b) <u>O</u>wning the classroom environment by establishing routines, and (c) <u>W</u>rapping-up class with intention (WOW strategies). Furthermore, additional examples were added to highlight ways in which teachers can make the content genuine and developmentally appropriate within their classes. Moreover, their input informed changes to the ISLA Implementation Checklist to capture school-wide systems that prioritize and allocate resources for professional development on teacher-student relationship-building opportunities.

Preventive Classrooms

In analyzing experiences shared by the Design Team and focus group students, the theme of classroom prevention came up in terms of professional development opportunities and everyday effective strategies. Suggestions included providing more training on function-based thinking and problem-solving in the classroom. They identified wanting additional fluency building activities to help scaffold the content for all teachers in their school, using examples from their experiences. They also expressed wanting to know more about what their peers implement preventatively prior to sending students out of class, particularly those teachers who successfully keep students in their room.

Students voiced personal experiences with preventive strategies. For example, many students spoke of movement breaks teachers give to individual students or the whole class. For example, *"One of my teachers will be doing a math thing on the computers, and we'll be doing that for 30 minutes. Then, (Teacher) gives us a break so we're not just sitting on chairs for an hour straight.*" Another example included the embedded break opportunities as part of individual

supports for self-regulation. Students also acknowledged the importance of not misusing

opportunities given to them. *"I think it's having a balance of kids being willing to say ok we get*

more breaks, I'll be good. ("Yeah." group members agree*). Instead, being like just give me*

breaks I'll be great but then acting like jerks and bouncing off the walls."

Based on this feedback, an additional training module – 'Responding to Behavior' was

developed which provides an overview of behavior theory, a behavioral framework for

understanding behavior (i.e., antecedent, behavior, consequences, common functions of

unwanted behavior), and opportunities to integrate content across different classroom scenarios.

Additionally, the ISLA Implementation Checklist was changed to include items that described

stronger school-wide systems that teach school-wide expectations explicitly, reinforce expected

behaviors, provide professional development opportunities, and documentation of school-wide

break system for de-escalation during instructional time.

Respectful Corrections

Respectful corrections came up as a theme in students' shared experiences with teachers.

Students spoke positively of experiences with teachers who tried various options before sending

them outside the classroom for unwanted behavior. For example, they shared anecdotes of

teachers switching students' seating placement as an additional step when students become

distracted before having them exit the room for a quick break. Students shared dislike for

sending students out of the classroom for the entirety of a class period and discussed struggling

with this level of correction in that it makes catching up with accumulated work difficult. *"Some*

teachers send them down for the rest of the class period – and I feel like when they do that, it just

makes it hard for the student because now they have to go back up and get all of the work that

they missed and might even have to do it for homework. Sending them out then bringing them back right away makes it 10 times better."

Students described teachers with better responses as those who stay calm or show a neutral affect; that is, teachers who *"talk to them in a calm voice to try to calm them down,"* or *"stayed the same"* despite a student *"giving them attitude,"* or who *"don't yell at them back,"* or don't *"give them all the attention that they want.*" In response to public corrections, various students reported wanting to act out more because *"it's embarrassing sometimes."* Students preferred teachers who talk to them discreetly about their behavior. Overall, students would like for teachers to spend more time listening when something in the classroom is not working for them. Students believe that *"if something is not working for them, then they (classroom teachers) need to stop trying to make something work because they think it's the best and saying, "I'm older I know what's better for you."* Students do believe teachers know best to an extent, but "*its other things*" as well. For example, "*if you are not the kid that can sit down and do your work for 30 minutes straight then, elaborate with the kid. They would like for teachers to ask for the student input and ask, "What can you do instead to help you do…?"*

In response to student feedback, a training module was developed to build knowledge of respectful corrections. It include communicating calmly, being discreet, considering why students engage in behavior, building student skills, and responding in a manner that matches the level of severity. Lastly, as part of supporting systems implementation, an item was added to the ISLA Implementation Checklist that prioritizes school-wide agreement on graduated discipline and ensuring implementation across settings.

Research Question 2: What components of ISLA can be enhanced to improve equity in school discipline within the existing cultural and structural school context?

Members of the Design Team, as well as other school staff, repeatedly addressed how components of ISLA worked throughout the school year. Design Team members agreed that making amends and having students come back with a clean slate is important, and should ideally happen the same day of an incident. They believed that this process is *"giving [students] a voice."* In discussing the benefits of having students debrief with another adult outside the classroom, the Design Team believes students get a *"richer"* experience. Others noted that students come back to the classroom ready to work and being cooperative. They agreed that *"shorter out of class time"* spent debriefing is more effective than longer out of class time that prevents reprocessing of the situation.

The Design Team also gave feedback on the questions from the student-guided functional behavioral assessment, also known as the ISLA debrief. For example, when having the student describe the situation and their actions, the group suggested framing the conversation to identify: *"What would you do differently next time? How could you make the situation better? Have you ever had a good response in a situation like this?"* A beneficial aspect of the ISLA debrief process, as identified by multiple staff members, is the opportunity for students to calm down and talk to another adult for skill-building teaching. *"That skill-building and problem-solving is so valuable and needed."*

In discussing the ISLA reconnection conversations, most suggestions by Design Team members reported focused on making the language used for reconnection prompts more genuine. The staff discussed *"avoiding the word sorry"* and suggested using words such as *"apologizing"* instead. Further, they suggested rewording the language to help students connect behaviors and consequences and taking part in the reparation process as well. For example, one staff member suggested, *"When I did this…. I was sent out."* Another staff added, *"We are just tired of the*

fake sorry." They want the reconnection prompts to help students understand *"here is how I can*

repair the situation and try to prevent the problem from happening again." This group believed

students struggle most with *"saying what support they need."* As part of the reconnection

conversation discussion, the group voiced wanting the reparation to include *"taking ownership"*

by understanding behaviors, their influence on relationships, and the interruption in the

classroom.

Staff members also voiced benefits of reconnection conversations, such as giving

students the opportunity to "*own what the problem is and how they can improve in the future*."

They reported that reconnection conversations place behavior at the center of the problem rather

than the student. Many valued the shift in the exchange between students and school adults.

"This process takes into account student voice and helps them be heard by school staff. This then

allows for staff and students to communicate and understand each other." Nonetheless, time-

related constraints came up repeatedly as a common challenge identified by teachers. *"Stepping*

away from teaching is not always possible." The challenge of finding time became more evident

when student behaviors increase in intensity. A staff member wrote, *"It is difficult to finding*

time with teachers to do reconnection conversations amidst the myriad of other things that

teachers must do, especially when some students are manifesting much more extreme

behaviors." Additionally, some teachers voiced needing more than a class period to process the

situation experienced in the classroom. One teacher mentioned, *"Staff and students need the time*

to calm down and take a break from the situation." The Design Team brainstormed ideas to

teach classroom re-entry and make the process explicit for everyone in the school, such as: using

visual imagery establishing expectations for the re-entry process, "*make eye contact with the*

teacher," "look at the board for work," "get notes or the planner from a peer," and *"find time*

to ask teachers." The group reported that making expectations explicit creates a structure for the conversation later that day. Another suggestion for supporting a systematic approach to reconnections include, *"posting reconnection conversation prompts outside each classroom."*

In considering feedback provided by Design Team members and the school staff, modifications were made to the language used in the reconnection cards and the debrief process. The language changes to the reconnection conversation starters allow for student accountability and their plan to test possible alternatives in the future. For example, conversation starters were changed from *"I'm sorry for…"* to *"I learned that…";* from *"Here is how I can repair the situation"* to *"Here is how I'm going to try and prevent this from happening again. Next time I will…"* Additionally, two optional prompts were included to allow students to share personal information that might not be evident otherwise: something that is hard for them to deal with at the moment, and any personal beliefs from a cultural perspective.

In terms of the student debrief process, the supporting document was reformatted to explicitly communicate empathy and understanding for the context, as well as the generation of ideas of what to do differently next time. The document sequences the conversation, so the context of the situation is considered first, actions-taken are then described, the narrative is reframed to understand the student needs in the situation, the impact of actions are considered, alternative responses are developed, and lastly, the needed support from adults is identified. The changes in phrasing intended to facilitate the flow of the conversation in a genuine manner. For example, *"Tell me what happened. Start from the beginning. What was going on in class?"* replaced *"What was the situation and what happened?"* And *"What did you want or need in that situation (provide examples for the student if needed, i.e. I needed help with the assignment)?"* replaced *"Why did you do what you did? What did you want to accomplish?"* The research team

also worded questions to validate the student while also considering the impact on others. For

example, *"If that's what you needed, what's another way we can get what you need in this*

class?" or *"How did that work for you? How do you think it worked for the other people in the*

class?"

Lastly, the ISLA Implementation Checklist and ISLA Observation Tool were modified to

capture fidelity of the reconnection conversation and the debrief process. As a way to facilitate

implementation, schools are asked to rate the extent to which their discipline systems include

documents and teaching of re-entry routines. The ISLA Observation Tool was modified to

capture all components of the debrief process and the extent to which students received these

supports. This direct observation tool was built to supplement the evaluation of the ISLA Self-

Rating Fidelity Tool.

Research Question 3: What modifications to ISLA would make the approach more

acceptable and valued by staff?

Members of the Design Team, as well as school staff, discussed their experiences

communicating within the school systems. Some staff brought attention to the lack of

information shared in their school regarding ISLA implementation. Missing communication on

ISLA efforts often gave teachers the impression that consistent implementation could be lacking.

Teachers added that *"more consistency," "more communication," "discussions," and "follow-*

up" are needed across their school. The vast majority voiced wanting more training on how to

engage in ISLA practices and for their school to clearly state expectations across all settings.

Design Team members identified sharing discipline data with staff as a priority in

achieving better communication. Additionally, they identified that more time should be spent

developing effective communication of available behavioral supports and opportunities for

teachers to receive ongoing implementation coaching within a continuum of services. Despite

systematic communication challenges, team members noted improvement in the communication

between students and staff as a result of ISLA implementation.

Based on this feedback, the research team presented to Design Team members the

developed training content to gather feedback on ways to maximize learning opportunities during

training provided at the beginning of the next school year. Further changes involved embedding

monthly data sharing opportunities during staff meetings and revisiting the consistent use of

reconnections between students and teachers. Additionally, the research team created an

implementation roadmap with monthly suggestions for on-going staff professional development

activities, data-sharing, and regular conversations to celebrate successes and problem-solve areas

of need.

Discussion

Staff and student voices were crucial in refining the quality, feasibility, and contextual fit

of the ISLA intervention. Descriptive analysis of staff acceptability and value of the ISLA

intervention suggest modest acceptability as it was presented to school staff during the field-test.

Further, stakeholder feedback was used to inform improvements made to ISLA with the intent of

addressing staff feasibility concerns and increasing the efficiency of the implementation process.

Further, the experience shared by students supported embedding preventive classroom supports

into ISLA. Stakeholder feedback illuminated five themes: relationship building, classroom

prevention, respectful corrections, ISLA materials, and communication with staff. In response to

this feedback, training modules and materials were expanded.

Student feedback emphasized the positive power of strong teacher-student relationships.

This finding aligns well with research on the impact of positive relationships (e.g., effectiveness

of greeting students at the door, behavior specific praise statements; Cook et al., 2018; Cook et

al., 2017; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). The experience of students in the classroom informed

embedding training for educators on strategies supportive of an authoritative approach to

discipline (Bear et al., 2015). We provided additional training materials to staff on relationship

building and explicit ideas for the WOW strategies; these foundational elements are critical for

classroom management and establishing a sense of safety and belonging in the learning

environment. Specifically, the implementation of WOW strategies support the development of

clear classroom procedures and embedding intentional opportunities to nourish support with

daily caring interactions with adults. In training teachers on an authoritative approach to

classroom management, ISLA pulls from the most effective discipline approach to reduce

discipline disparities (Bear et al., 2015). Trainings were also expanded in the areas of proactive

function-based thinking, behavior management, respectful corrections, and the escalation cycle.

In doing so, ISLA provides educators with the tools to understand behavior as communication

and provide teachers additional strategies to effectively prevent and de-escalate unwanted

behavior. In essence, these changes have the potential to enhance connectedness and trust

students of color feel towards teachers, (Anyon, et al., 2016), as well as reduce student defiance

(Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). Further examples and practice opportunities were embedded in

training modules. To create a more genuine debrief and reconnection conversation, the materials

for these processes were reworded to feel more conversational. Additionally, ISLA was modified

to enhance equitable discipline outcomes reviewing materials to support student perspective

taking and teaching culturally and contextually relevant expectations, in conjunction with

additional training developed to support teachers enhance the social-emotional and behavioral

support students receive. Finally, to promote ongoing staff communication and reduce discipline

disproportionality (Tobin & Vincent, 2011), we developed regular opportunities for data sharing,

professional development, success sharing, and problem-solving check-ins. With the active

integration of stakeholder feedback, we believe we have improved ISLA implementation

practices and materials to better support students and staff to reduce lost instructional time for

minor disciplinary concerns.

Limitation and Future Research

Given the nature of this mixed methods study and the iterative phase of the ISLA

development process for which it was a part, several limitations must be considered. The first

consideration is that the findings discussed in this study were gathered across two middle schools

in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, both with limited racial and ethnic diversity. These

findings may not generalize to other school settings or locales and thus need to be replicated with

other populations of students in different regions of the country. Furthermore, because research

has demonstrated that students of color, students with disabilities, and students living in poverty

receive exclusionary discipline at a disproportionate rate in comparison to their peers, future

research examining the impact of ISLA on reducing the discipline gap is needed (U.S.

Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Although one of the primary goals of

ISLA implementation is the reduction in exclusionary discipline practices, including office

referrals, in-school and out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions, the current study did not

measure changes in these important student outcomes. Given that this study spans the first year

of ISLA implementation in two Design schools, it was the intention of the researchers to gather

buy-in for the intervention as well as feedback on important components from key stakeholders

before examining the impact of ISLA on student outcomes. Future research in subsequent phases

of the ISLA development project will examine the impact of ISLA on the amount of instructional

time students receive when they are sent out of class, as well as behavioral and academic

outcomes. Future studies will also include rigorous analyses of the data resulting in examinations

of the finalized ISLA intervention after the iterative development process is complete.

Additionally, staff fidelity to ISLA core components was relatively low which helped to

inform important adjustments that may make ISLA more feasible to implement for school staff.

Future ISLA research should seek to understand whether changes made through the iterative

process resulted in higher staff fidelity to ISLA components. It must also be noted that while

student and staff voice on the ISLA intervention and school-based preventative practices were

gathered during this phase of the project, the research team did not gather input from families.

Families are a key group of stakeholders that are directly impacted when their students are

excluded from school. Future studies examining the perspective of families in the development

and utilization of alternatives to exclusionary discipline will be vital to ensuring that the supports

created for students meet their holistic needs.

Implications for Embedding Equity into School Mental Health

This study provides important implications for supporting student and educator mental

health. The ISLA Process prioritizes relationship building and de-escalation, two critical

elements for improving school climate and preventative mental health supports (Moore et al.,

2018). Furthermore, providing guidance for students and teachers to make amends through the

Reconnection Conversation is instrumental for the maintenance of positive relationships. The

structured process for skill building, reconnection, and classroom reentry reduces opportunities

for students to feel ostracized from class, an all-too-common experience amongst students who

report feeling disconnected from school (Frey & Fisher, 2008).

This study describes an iterative method used to inform changes to the ISLA intervention, a multi-component school-wide approach designed to reduce instructional time missed for minor disciplinary concerns. Findings from this study informed technical (e.g., tools, strategies) and adaptive changes (e.g., values, approaches to work) needed for real systematic change in schools (Heifetz et al., 2009). This process helped researchers and the Design Team alike identify ways to inform staff needs across all aspects of implementation. Researchers supported Design Team members in gathering students voice when re-evaluating their current approach to building relationship and prosocial skills as alternatives to exclusionary practices. This is a process that school leaders may apply for successful design and implementation of schoolwide initiatives. Lastly, it was encouraging to hear from students the positive impact low-cost prevention strategies have on their relationships with teachers and their overall experiences in school. These efforts may help researchers and program designers to develop training materials that embed opportunities for gathering culturally and contextually relevant information from the viewpoint of students. These results suggest an approach focused on doable and effective strategies for the greatest impact on student outcomes.

Conclusion

Exclusionary discipline practices are associated with short and long-term negative outcomes for students, ranging from lost instructional time to juvenile justice involvement (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009). The Inclusive Skill-building Learning Approach (ISLA) aims to decrease exclusionary practices in middle schools by providing training and support for all staff members to improve their practices to better support the needs of students both inside and outside of the classroom. Interventions such as ISLA have a much greater likelihood of being implemented when key stakeholders have a voice in intervention development. By engaging in a

dynamic and iterative process, we incorporated feedback from students and staff members to guide modifications for key intervention processes and features. The commitment to design ISLA with a strong equity lens was fulfilled not by researcher fiat, but by active collaboration with a wide range of the student body and faculty. The perspective and input of those who will experience or implement an intervention are vital to the creation of contextually relevant practices as well as their long-term sustainability in schools.

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Figure 1
Study Activity Timeline
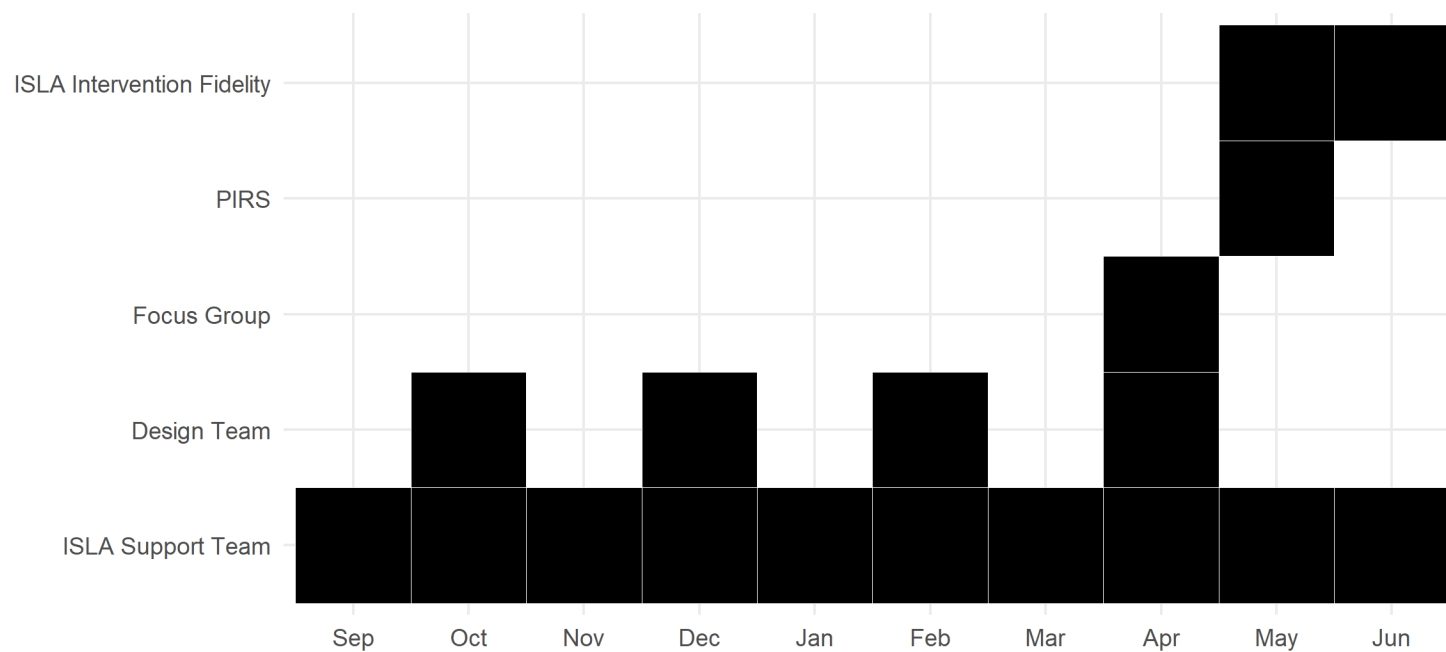
Figure 2

Inclusive Skill-building Learning Approach (ISLA) Model

Classroom Component	• Focus on building relationships • Strong classroom management and routines • Effective responses to behavior • School-wide break system • Instructional time is held sacred school-wide • Engage in reconnection conversations
Restorative and Instructional Component	• Triage process • Empathy and listening • Skill building and behavior instruction • Help students own their piece • Reconnection conversations • All settings (classroom, office, tier 3)
Team Component	• Data used for decision making • Fidelity of implementation • Action plan guides efforts • Team guides efforts with input from staff

Table 1

School Demographic Information

Variable	School 1 Frequency (%)	School 2 Frequency (%)
Level		
6th grade	183 (37%)	192 (33%)
7th grade	160 (32%)	205 (35%)
8th grade	154 (31%)	190 (32%)
Race/Ethnicity		
African American/Black	8 (2%)	4 (1%)
American Indian/Alaskan Native	7 (1%)	6 (1%)
Asian/Pacific Islander	4 (1%)	6 (1%)
Hispanic/Latino	99 (20%)	158 (27%)
White	351 (70%)	362 (61%)
Two or more Races	28 (6%)	51 (9%)
Gender		
Female	272 (55%)	274 (47%)
Male	225 (45%)	313 (53%)
Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch	278 (56%)	391 (67%)
Total Enrollment	497 (100%)	587 (100%)

Table 2

Self-Reported ISLA Implementation Fidelity Data

Items	Yes	(%)	No	(%)	Missing	(%)
Coached student on appropriate behavior skill?	332	45%	204	27%	208	28%
Did the student complete a re-connection card?	163	22%	359	48%	222	30%
Did the student do the re connection conversation with their teacher?	79	11%	435	58%	230	31%
ISLA debrief completed?	295	40%	249	33%	200	27%
Practiced re connection conversation?	173	23%	341	46%	230	31%

Table 3

Responses to Relevant PIRS Items

PIRS Items	Strongly Disagree		Slightly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Slightly Agree		Strongly Agree		Not Applicable or Missing	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
ISLA is an acceptable intervention for middle schools	0	0%	0	0%	2	4%	28	55%	12	24%	8	16%	1	2%
I am willing to use ISLA in the school setting	0	0%	1	2%	1	2%	21	41%	8	16%	13	25%	7	14%
ISLA is effective in meeting the goal of reducing exclusionary discipline practices	1	2%	5	10%	2	4%	16	31%	22	43%	2	4%	3	6%
ISLA is appropriate for a variety of students	1	2%	3	6%	3	6%	24	47%	7	14%	8	16%	5	10%
The amount of time required to implement ISLA is reasonable	3	6%	12	24%	2	4%	15	29%	11	22%	2	4%	6	12%
Overall ISLA is beneficial for middle school students	1	2%	1	2%	3	6%	19	37%	15	29%	5	10%	7	14%

Appendix A

Semi-structured Focus Group Questions

(1) What does your school do well to make sure that students feel welcomed and supported?

(2) What do you think is missing at your school, in terms of making this a welcoming and supportive environment for all students?

(3) What are some things your teachers do to help make the classroom a welcoming place for all students?

(4) What are some things your teachers do that make the classroom less welcoming for students?

(5) What are some things that you do to deescalate yourself and refocus in general?

(6) What classroom supports have made the difference for you, in terms of keeping you in class and engaged in the work?

    a) Follow up: Tell us about your experience with distractions in the classroom. For example, some teachers tolerate more side talking than others. How does that impact you?

    b) Follow up: If a student does act out, what does that teacher do that is helpful?

(7) For students who are sent out of class, what are some of the things that make it difficult for them to either come back to class or want to come back to class?

(8) What would make the transition back to class easier?

(9) What strategies would be helpful in repairing the relationships between students and their teachers?