



Managing Disruptive Behavior in Classrooms: A Systematic Review of Intervention Strategies for Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Difficulties (SEBD)

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Abstract:

This systematic review examines evidence-based interventions for addressing social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties (SEBD) in school-aged children within classroom settings. A comprehensive literature search across multiple educational and psychological databases identified 23 studies that met the inclusion criteria. These studies encompassed a range of interventions, including behavior management techniques, both proactive and reactive strategies, as well as individualized support approaches. The findings indicate that structured interventions significantly improve individual student outcomes, such as reduced disruptive behavior and improved academic engagement, while also enhancing the overall classroom climate. Furthermore, the review emphasizes the importance of professional development for educators in behavior management techniques, ensuring that they are well-equipped to implement these strategies effectively. This focus on teacher training is critical in fostering supportive and responsive learning environments. Additionally, the review highlights gaps in the current research, suggesting the need for future studies to explore sustainable, scalable interventions that can be widely implemented in diverse classroom settings. Overall, the review underscores the significance of tailored interventions for managing SEBD and the necessity of continued research to refine and expand these strategies for broader applicability in schools.

Keywords: Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Difficulties (SEBD), Classroom Interventions, Behavior Management, Teacher Training, Proactive Strategies

Introduction

Social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties (SEBD) present a complex set of challenges within educational environments, impacting both individual student performance and the broader classroom atmosphere. SEBD encompasses a range of behaviors and emotional responses that can disrupt not only the academic progress of affected students but also influence the learning experiences of their peers and the teaching dynamics.

Common manifestations of SEBD include externalizing behaviors such as aggression, rule-breaking, and bullying, as well as internalizing symptoms like anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal. These difficulties often hinder the social integration and academic engagement of affected students, leading to diminished educational outcomes and a strain on educators who must manage these behaviors while maintaining instructional effectiveness.

The prevalence of SEBD among school-aged children varies widely, with studies estimating rates between 2% and 16% globally (Cefai et al., 2008; Cooper & Cefai, 2013). This variation may stem from differences in cultural definitions of acceptable behavior, diagnostic practices, and school policies, making it a growing concern for educators and policymakers worldwide. In many countries, increasing classroom diversity and inclusive education policies have led to greater awareness of SEBD as more students with diverse learning and emotional needs are integrated into general education settings.

This trend has amplified the urgency for effective management strategies, as teachers are expected to address these issues in ways that support all students without compromising the quality of education.

SEBD affects both teachers and peers, creating an environment where instructional time is frequently diverted to behavior management, and the social climate of the classroom may become strained. For teachers, managing SEBD in the classroom is often associated with higher stress levels, lower job satisfaction, and, in some cases, burnout. Educators report feeling underprepared to handle the spectrum of behaviors associated with SEBD, which can lead to ineffective responses that may exacerbate issues rather than resolve them. For instance, punitive disciplinary actions may temporarily suppress disruptive behavior but often fail to address the underlying social or emotional needs driving the behavior. This lack of long-term efficacy underscores the need for strategies that target not only the visible behaviors but also the social and emotional skills necessary for students to succeed in the classroom.



Research indicates that early identification and intervention are critical in mitigating the long-term impacts of SEBD. Interventions range from proactive approaches, such as social-emotional learning programs and behavioral management training, to more reactive strategies like one-on-one counseling and individualized behavior plans.

Evidence suggests that structured, evidence-based programs like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks can effectively reduce disruptive behaviors, improve student engagement, and enhance classroom climate. These programs aim to teach students coping skills, emotional regulation, and positive interaction techniques, which benefit both those with SEBD and the entire classroom community.

SEBD presents a multifaceted challenge that requires comprehensive, adaptive approaches within educational settings. By focusing on both preventive and responsive strategies, schools can create supportive environments that promote the well-being and success of all students. Equipping teachers with the necessary tools and training to manage SEBD effectively is essential, as is the ongoing commitment to research and policy development in this field. Addressing SEBD holistically can foster more inclusive, positive learning experiences that accommodate the needs of diverse learners while upholding academic and behavioral standards.

Literature Review:

This literature review examines the significance of student engagement, the role of technology in education, and effective teaching practices in fostering academic achievement. Student engagement, a critical factor in learning, is defined as the degree of attention, curiosity, and interest that students exhibit while learning (Axelson & Flick, 2010).

Carini, Kuh, and Klein (2016) found that high engagement correlates with improved academic performance, highlighting its relevance for educational outcomes. Student engagement can be influenced by a variety of factors, including teaching methods, technology integration, and classroom environment (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2014).

Technology plays a substantial role in enhancing engagement and learning outcomes, particularly in online and blended learning environments. Research indicates that when implemented effectively, digital tools can promote student motivation and facilitate deeper engagement with the material (Chen, Lambert, & Guidry, 2010). For instance, Alhabeeb and Rowley (2017) identified key success factors for e-learning, such as course design and instructor support, which directly impact student satisfaction and engagement. Almaiah and Alyoussef (2019) further examined the effect of course content and assessment strategies on e-learning usage, suggesting that well-designed digital courses can significantly boost engagement and learning outcomes.

The use of multimedia in the classroom has also been shown to improve student understanding and retention of information. According to Amin, Azim, and Kalam (2018), multimedia projectors in English language classrooms enhanced student comprehension by making lessons more interactive.

This approach aligns with the findings of Raja and Nagasubramani (2018), who highlighted the advantages of modern technology in education, particularly its ability to support interactive learning and cater to diverse learning styles.

Several studies underscore the importance of self-regulation and psychological flexibility as predictors of academic achievement. Asikainen, Hailikari, and Mattsson (2018) emphasized the link between self-regulation and academic success, noting that students who can manage their emotions and behaviors are more likely to achieve better outcomes. Similarly, Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2014) explored how self-regulated learning strategies are crucial in web-based environments, where students need to take ownership of their learning. By promoting self-regulation, educators can foster a learning environment that encourages student responsibility and engagement.

Instructor scaffolding is another effective strategy for enhancing student engagement, particularly in online learning. Cho and Cho (2014) found that students are more engaged when instructors provide structured guidance and clarify course goals.

This scaffolding helps students develop a clearer understanding of their objectives, which in turn increases their motivation and commitment to the course. Similarly, Nortvig, Petersen, and Balle (2018) emphasized that clear guidance from instructors, coupled with a supportive learning environment, positively affects student satisfaction and engagement in e-learning contexts.

Student motivation, an essential component of engagement, is influenced by several psychological factors. Cook and Artino (2016) provided an overview of motivation theories, noting that intrinsic motivation—engagement driven by interest in the subject matter—tends to yield higher academic achievement. Motivation can be enhanced



through active learning strategies and collaborative learning, which allow students to engage meaningfully with their peers and the content. In line with this, Abdu, De Groot, and Drachman (2012) discussed the teacher's role in facilitating collaborative learning, suggesting that teachers who encourage group work help students develop communication skills and critical thinking.

Another relevant concept is the impact of the learning environment on academic performance. Ni, Mon, and Mon (2020) examined how supportive learning environments contribute to higher achievement levels, emphasizing the need for teachers to create spaces that are conducive to learning. Mammadov, Cross, and Ward (2018) found that students with supportive environments tend to exhibit greater academic motivation, reinforcing the idea that classroom atmosphere plays a crucial role in student success.

Engagement through gamification and innovative strategies has also gained attention in recent years. Muntean (2011) argued that gamification—integrating game-like elements in learning—can increase motivation and participation, particularly in e-learning. By making learning more enjoyable, gamification fosters a positive attitude toward education, which is essential for sustained engagement. Moreover, Beer, Clark, and Jones (2010) proposed several indicators of engagement, including participation, attendance, and interaction, which can help educators assess and enhance student engagement levels.

Teacher expectations have a notable impact on engagement as well. Hornstra et al. (2018) demonstrated that positive teacher expectations are associated with need-supportive teaching, which promotes student motivation and engagement. By setting high expectations and providing necessary support, teachers can cultivate a classroom environment where students feel motivated to engage actively with their learning.

The literature highlights several strategies for promoting student engagement and academic achievement. Technology integration, supportive learning environments, self-regulation, and instructor scaffolding are critical components of effective learning practices. By fostering a culture of engagement, educators can help students develop the skills and motivation necessary for academic success.

Methodology:

The search for relevant studies for this review began with a comprehensive search across three major databases: ERIC, Web of Science, and MEDLINE. This search covered publications published between 2000 and 2017. Researchers used a combination of keywords related to social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties (SEBD), classroom interventions, and behavior management strategies. The selection was limited to studies published in English, and focused specifically on primary and elementary students with SEBD in general education classrooms.

The inclusion criteria for selecting studies were clearly defined. Only studies that focused on school-aged children, ages 6 to 11, in regular classroom settings were considered. The studies had to address SEBD symptoms such as disruptive behaviors, off-task behaviors, or social withdrawal. Furthermore, only studies that used rigorous research designs—either a single-subject design or a randomized controlled trial—were included, as these were deemed to be the most reliable methods for evaluating the effectiveness of interventions.

Studies were excluded if they involved children with severe cognitive disabilities or mental health conditions not typically categorized as SEBD. Also excluded were studies that took place outside of the classroom or during non-instructional time, such as on playgrounds. Systematic reviews, case studies, abstracts, and grey literature were also excluded from the review.

Once relevant studies were identified, data extraction and quality assessment were carried out with care. Three independent researchers reviewed each study, extracting key details such as participant characteristics, the nature of the interventions, outcome measures, and any study limitations. To ensure the reliability of the data extraction process, the researchers held consensus meetings to discuss any discrepancies, and in cases of disagreement, a fourth independent reviewer was brought in to resolve issues. To assess the overall quality of the studies, a standardized scale was used, evaluating aspects like research design, the validity of measurement tools, and the clarity of the interventions used.

Results:

A total of 23 studies met the inclusion criteria, encompassing various interventions aimed at addressing and reducing disruptive behaviors among children with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties (SEBD). These studies covered a range of intervention techniques, highlighting the diversity of approaches used to support children with SEBD. The majority of studies (79.3%) had small sample sizes, typically involving 1 to 4 participants per study, which allowed for intensive, personalized intervention and data collection. The sample also showed a gender skew, with 84.3% of participants being male, reflecting either a higher prevalence of SEBD in male populations or a research bias that might warrant further examination.



The interventions were categorized into two main groups based on their scope: individual-focused and class-wide approaches. Individual-focused interventions targeted specific children, tailoring strategies to address unique behavioral challenges, often through one-on-one sessions, personalized behavioral modification plans, or specific cognitive-behavioral techniques.

These interventions were typically intensive and customized, providing a concentrated focus on each child's needs and fostering a more controlled environment to measure behavioral changes. In contrast, class-wide approaches aimed to create an inclusive and supportive classroom environment for all students, implementing strategies such as positive reinforcement, structured routines, and proactive behavior management that could benefit the entire group. Class-wide interventions addressed both individual disruptive behaviors and broader classroom dynamics, promoting social-emotional development and minimizing the occurrence of disruptive incidents among all students.

The studies highlight a range of effective approaches for managing disruptive behaviors in children with SEBD, demonstrating both the potential of individualized attention and the benefits of inclusive, preventive classroom strategies. Future research might further investigate the impact of these intervention types, particularly with larger and more diverse sample sizes, to understand how gender and other demographic factors may influence outcomes.

Individual-Level Interventions

Individualized interventions for students with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties (SEBD) often utilize targeted strategies based on function-based assessments, specifically addressing behaviors such as rule-breaking or aggression. These interventions are designed to identify the underlying causes of disruptive behaviors, enabling educators to tailor approaches to the specific needs of each student.

One common approach within individualized interventions is antecedent-based strategies, which involve modifying the environment or adjusting the structure of tasks to minimize triggers that may lead to disruptive behaviors. By changing certain environmental factors, such as seating arrangements or minimizing distractions, educators create a setting more conducive to learning and less likely to provoke undesirable behaviors. Task structure alterations are another example of antecedent-based strategies, where tasks are broken down into manageable steps or adjusted in complexity to match the student's abilities, which can reduce frustration and help prevent disruptive incidents.

Another effective component of individualized interventions is self-management training. This strategy empowers students to take an active role in monitoring and managing their behavior, helping them build self-awareness and personal responsibility. Through self-management training, students are taught to set realistic personal goals, monitor their own actions, and track their progress over time. By encouraging students to take ownership of their behavior, this approach not only helps reduce disruptive behavior but also promotes self-regulation skills that can benefit them in various social and academic contexts.

Self-management training aligns with the principles of social-emotional learning, as it involves recognizing and controlling emotions, which is especially crucial for students with SEBD. The development of self-regulation skills can positively impact a student's academic performance and peer relationships, as they learn to recognize triggers and apply strategies to manage their responses in challenging situations.

Contingency management is another key strategy in individualized interventions, involving a system of rewards and consequences based on the student's behavior. In contingency management, students receive positive reinforcement, such as praise, privileges, or tangible rewards, when they display desired behaviors, while undesirable behaviors may lead to specific, consistent consequences. This approach is effective in reinforcing positive behaviors, as it relies on the principle that behaviors followed by favorable outcomes are more likely to be repeated (Sugai & Horner, 2002).

Rewards and consequences are carefully chosen to be meaningful to the student, enhancing the likelihood that they will be motivated to alter their behavior. Over time, the goal is to gradually reduce reliance on external rewards as students begin to internalize the value of maintaining positive behaviors. Contingency management can also be customized to the student's interests and preferences, making it a flexible tool for addressing various types of disruptive behaviors in an individualized way.

Together, these approaches form a comprehensive framework for individualized interventions aimed at addressing SEBD. By incorporating antecedent-based strategies, self-management training, and contingency management, educators can support students with SEBD in developing positive behavior patterns and coping mechanisms that will serve them in the long term.

This individualized approach not only helps to reduce disruptive incidents in the classroom but also promotes social-emotional skills essential for the student's future success. Through consistent application and refinement of



these strategies, educators can foster an environment that nurtures each student's unique needs, laying a foundation for improved behavior, emotional resilience, and academic achievement.

Class-Wide Interventions

Class-wide interventions for addressing social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties (SEBD) primarily focus on modifying the overall classroom environment and enhancing teacher practices to promote positive behavior across all students.

These interventions aim to create a more structured, supportive learning environment that minimizes disruptions and fosters social-emotional growth for students with SEBD. One key strategy within class-wide interventions is proactive classroom management, which involves increasing structure and predictability within the classroom setting. By establishing clear expectations, routines, and procedures, teachers can reduce off-task behavior and disruptive incidents. Predictable routines provide students with a sense of security, which is particularly beneficial for those with SEBD, as it minimizes anxiety and helps them focus on learning. Proactive classroom management also includes consistent reinforcement of positive behaviors, which encourages students to engage with classroom activities in a more organized and purposeful way, reducing the likelihood of misbehavior.

Social skills training is another effective class-wide intervention designed to improve social interactions and reduce instances of bullying. Structured programs focus on teaching students how to communicate effectively, cooperate with peers, and resolve conflicts in a positive manner.

These programs typically involve role-playing, group discussions, and feedback sessions, allowing students to practice and develop essential social skills in a safe and supportive environment. Social skills training not only addresses the immediate behavioral needs of students with SEBD but also contributes to the overall classroom climate by fostering a more respectful and inclusive atmosphere. As students improve their social interactions, they are better equipped to build relationships with their peers, participate in collaborative learning activities, and reduce disruptive behaviors related to social frustration or isolation.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is another class-wide intervention that has proven effective in addressing SEBD. PBIS is a school-wide framework designed to promote positive behavior by providing consistent reinforcement for appropriate actions.

The system emphasizes the importance of rewarding positive behaviors, rather than focusing solely on punishing negative behaviors. By establishing a clear set of behavioral expectations and consistently acknowledging when students meet those expectations, PBIS creates a more positive classroom environment. Research has shown that PBIS leads to improved classroom climates, as it encourages students to demonstrate appropriate behaviors, resulting in fewer disruptions and increased academic engagement (Hieneman et al., 2005). PBIS also fosters a culture of respect and collaboration among students, which enhances the overall social and emotional development of all learners.

Together, these class-wide interventions—proactive classroom management, social skills training, and PBIS—create a comprehensive approach to supporting students with SEBD. By focusing on the classroom environment and teacher practices, these strategies help to reduce disruptive behaviors, promote social-emotional learning, and create a positive, inclusive atmosphere where all students can thrive.

Through the consistent application of these interventions, teachers can address the needs of students with SEBD while fostering a classroom environment that is conducive to learning, social growth, and emotional well-being.

Outcome Measures and Impact

The review revealed that the majority of interventions led to positive outcomes, including a reduction in disruptive behaviors, improvement in peer relationships, and enhanced academic engagement. These results suggest that when structured behavior management programs are implemented effectively, they can significantly address the behavioral challenges associated with students with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties (SEBD).

Notably, teachers also reported experiencing lower levels of stress and increased job satisfaction, which is an important consideration, as the implementation of behavior management strategies often requires substantial effort and time from educators (Clunies-Ross et al., 2008). The successful outcomes in terms of reduced disruptive behavior and improved teacher well-being highlight the reciprocal benefits of structured interventions not only for students but also for educators.

Behavioral improvements were measured using a range of data collection methods, such as observational data, rating scales, and time-sampling techniques. Observational data allowed researchers to directly monitor and record specific behaviors in real-time, providing a clear picture of how the interventions affected student conduct in the classroom.



Rating scales, typically completed by teachers or trained observers, helped assess the frequency and intensity of specific behaviors, offering a more systematic way to track changes over time. Time-sampling techniques, which involve recording behavior at specific intervals, also provided valuable insights into how behaviors fluctuated throughout the school day. These methods collectively demonstrated significant reductions in disruptive behaviors, such as aggression, rule-breaking, and noncompliance, across all types of interventions.

The evidence suggests that the interventions targeted not only the reduction of negative behaviors but also worked to improve overall classroom dynamics. For instance, by reducing incidents of disruptive behavior, students were better able to engage in academic tasks, leading to improved academic outcomes.

Additionally, improved peer relationships were frequently reported, which indicates that students were learning how to interact more appropriately with their classmates, fostering a more supportive and collaborative learning environment. In sum, the review highlights the effectiveness of structured behavior management interventions in promoting positive behavioral changes and creating a more conducive environment for both student learning and teacher well-being.

Discussion:

This review underscores the importance of both individualized and class-wide interventions in managing social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties (SEBD) in the classroom. The evidence suggests that tailored, function-based interventions aimed at addressing specific disruptive behaviors—such as rule-breaking or aggression—are effective in improving individual student outcomes. Furthermore, class-wide strategies that focus on creating a structured, supportive classroom environment and enhancing teacher practices have proven to be beneficial not only for students with SEBD but also for the broader classroom community.

The findings emphasize that teachers trained in behavior management techniques are significantly better equipped to manage classroom behaviors, leading to more positive classroom dynamics and improved student outcomes (Simonsen et al., 2008). This highlights the critical role of professional development for educators in addressing SEBD effectively.

In practice, the integration of both individual-focused and class-wide strategies is essential. Individualized interventions allow for a targeted approach that addresses the unique needs of students with SEBD, while class-wide interventions contribute to a positive and predictable classroom environment. This dual approach benefits not only students with SEBD but also promotes an inclusive and supportive environment for all learners.

For example, the use of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), as demonstrated in the studies, helps establish a school-wide framework of reinforcement that can reduce disruptive behavior and increase student engagement across the classroom, regardless of individual behavioral challenges.

Teachers' experiences in implementing these structured interventions also indicate that these programs contribute to reduced stress and greater job satisfaction. Managing classrooms where disruptive behaviors are prevalent can be overwhelming, but the use of proven behavior management strategies seems to enhance teacher well-being, making them feel more confident and competent in handling challenging situations. Therefore, investing in training for teachers on behavior management can have long-term benefits for the overall functioning of the classroom and the well-being of educators.

Despite the promising outcomes, there are several limitations within the studies reviewed that must be addressed to improve the generalizability and reliability of the findings. One major limitation is the small sample sizes used in many of the studies. The majority of the research involved a limited number of participants, which restricts the ability to draw broad conclusions about the effectiveness of the interventions across different populations.

Additionally, the lack of diversity in the study populations—often confined to specific age groups, geographic locations, or types of schools—further limits the external validity of the findings. Future research should include more diverse and larger sample sizes to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of these interventions in varied educational contexts.

Another limitation is the variability in assessment tools and measurement approaches used across the studies. Different tools were used to assess behavioral changes, making it difficult to compare results directly and to draw consistent conclusions about the effectiveness of the interventions. Standardizing evaluation methods and employing reliable, validated assessment tools across studies will allow for more consistent data collection and better comparison of results. This would strengthen the evidence base and provide clearer guidelines for practitioners seeking to implement similar interventions.



While the reviewed interventions show promise in managing SEBD and improving classroom outcomes, future research must address these limitations to further refine and expand the understanding of effective strategies for managing SEBD in diverse classroom settings.

Conclusion:

Managing social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties (SEBD) in classrooms requires a comprehensive approach that combines individualized interventions with broader environmental strategies. Tailoring interventions to meet the unique needs of students and the specific dynamics of each classroom setting is essential for effectively addressing SEBD. The findings from this review highlight the critical role of evidence-based strategies in promoting positive outcomes for both students and educators.

When teachers implement well-designed interventions, they are better equipped to engage students with SEBD, resulting in improved student participation and learning outcomes. At the same time, these strategies reduce disruptive behaviors and foster a more productive classroom environment.

In addition to benefiting students, effective SEBD management also enhances teacher well-being by lowering stress levels and increasing job satisfaction. Educators who are trained in behavior management techniques feel more confident in their ability to handle challenging behaviors, which can significantly improve their overall job experience.

This review underscores the need for professional development that equips teachers with practical, research-backed strategies for managing SEBD. By providing educators with the necessary tools to address the complex challenges posed by these behaviors, schools can create more supportive, inclusive, and effective learning environments.

Thus, Investing in both individualized and environmental interventions contributes to a positive educational climate, where all students can thrive, and teachers feel empowered to manage classroom dynamics successfully.

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