

Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education

Volume 2
Number 6 *Electronic Journal for Inclusive
Education Vol. 2, No. 6 (Spring/Summer 2010)*

Article 3

Spring 2010

The Evolution of a New College Course in Behavior Management: A Case Study in Collaboration and Compromise

Richard L. Mehrenberg Ph.D.
Richard.Mehrenberg@millersville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/ejie>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Special Education Administration Commons](#), and the [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Mehrenberg, R. L. (2010). The Evolution of a New College Course in Behavior Management: A Case Study in Collaboration and Compromise, *Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education*, 2 (6).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CORE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education* by an authorized editor of CORE Scholar. For more information, please contact library-corescholar@wright.edu.

The Evolution of a New College Course in Behavior Management:
A Case Study in Collaboration and Compromise

Dr. Richard L. Mehrenberg
Assistant Professor of Special Education
Millersville University
PO Box 1002
Millersville, PA 17551-0302
(717) 872-5754

Abstract:

This article describes the development of a new behavior management course for both elementary and special education pre-service teachers at a Pennsylvania college. The evolution of the course is detailed through a four stage process: (a) identifying stakeholders, (b) defining priorities, (c) content collaboration, and (d) reaching a compromise. The study concludes with a discussion of what yet needs to be accomplished and strategies for implementation.

The federal legislation, *No Child Left Behind* (2001) sought to improve the education of American students in many ways. One such way was to increase the level of consistency and quality among public school teachers. Educators would now be required to be *highly qualified* in their subject matter. In order to earn this designation, an educator must have met or exceeded three criteria: (a) possess a bachelor's degree, (b) full state certification or licensure, and (c) prove that they knew each subject that they taught (New No Child Left Behind Flexibility: Highly Qualified Teachers, 2005). States immediately began to enact appropriate laws, programs, and policies in order to effectively meet this new mandate.

Chapter 49-2

One way in which the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania revamped their teacher education program is through the creation of Chapter 49-2, (Chapter 49 The Preparation of Professional Personnel,

n.d.). These changes to 22 Pa. Code § 49, enacted in 2007, sought to realign or revise the types of teacher certifications offered to better meet the criteria of the *highly qualified* mandate. This decision, in turn, led to an ongoing series of program changes regarding the preparation of pre-service teachers enrolled in Pennsylvania schools of higher education.

One of the most prominent updates to the teacher preparation and certification process dealt with the amount of knowledge and skills that all teachers needed to possess in regards to students with disabilities. In response to the *highly qualified* mandate requiring mastery of subject matter, future teachers would no longer be able to major solely in the field of special education. Instead, they were required to become dual majors in another area such as early childhood, elementary/middle, secondary, or reading specialist (PA Department of Education, 2007).

Students majoring solely in a general education field would be affected as well. These pre-service teachers would now be required to undertake an unprecedented amount of additional coursework and experiences regarding best practices for students with disabilities in inclusive settings.

Previously, it was common for general education majors to take, at most, one introductory special education course that provided a brief overview of various disabilities and their characteristics. However, with the enactment of Chapter 49-2, Pennsylvania teacher education programs had to provide these individuals with, “at least 9 credits or 270 hours or an equivalent combination, regarding accommodations and adaptations for students with disabilities in an inclusive setting” (FAQ about Chapter 49-2, 2006). Additional requirements were put into place to provide pre-services teachers with best practices to meet the educational needs of English language learners. Many colleges soon realized that their teacher preparation programs would need to be realigned, revised, or totally re-written.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to present a case study of the revision of a new special education behavior management course at a Pennsylvania University. By analyzing the creative process, the reader will gain a better understanding of how persistent collaboration and compromise led to the creation of a robust learning experience that embraced many complimentary perspectives.

Evolution of the Course

The new behavior management course was expected to be a mandatory element of the redesigned curriculum for all future dual special education majors, as well as those only pursuing the new early childhood certification. (Although, technically, the “elementary education” certification will soon be phased out under Chapter 49-2, the old term is used in conjunction some of the students and faculty members throughout this study for consistency purposes.)

The events described in this case study took place over the course of the 2008-09 and 2009-10 school years. The creative process has been divided into four sequential events (a) identifying stakeholders, (b) defining priorities, (c) content collaboration, and (d) reaching a compromise. A review of each event is discussed and analyzed. Since this course remains a work in progress, the case study concludes with what still needs to be accomplished and questions that are yet unresolved.

Identifying Stakeholders

When the affected faculty originally learned about the new requirements of the legislation, there was initial debate regarding whether individual departments could incorporate the content into previously established courses or if a brand new curriculum was needed. Through a series of discussions and negotiations, it was established that the new courses would be designed, and taught by members of the special education department. However, the consensus of the department was that a partnership must be established with the elementary education department, since they had a vested interest in the creation and implementation of the class.

Starting in the fall of 2008, five faculty members convened over a regularly scheduled series of formal meetings and informal brainstorming sessions to consult and collaborate regarding the new course. These stakeholders included the heads of the special education and elementary education departments, the current behavior management professor from the special education department, the current classroom management professor of elementary education department, and another special education professor whom specializes in behavior management.

It was perceived by the special education department that active collaboration with the elementary education department was highly valued. It was crucial that their perspective and priorities were ingrained in a mandatory course that would eventually be taken by hundreds of students from their department. In order to best serve the needs of all stakeholders, it was essential for everyone to first define their priorities as they related to the new course.

Defining Priorities

Previously, both the elementary and special education departments taught a course designed to help pre-service teachers better manage discipline in the classroom. Although there were some overlapping themes, the objectives, philosophies, and content of the two courses were quite dissimilar. Careful analysis of several sources including the university course catalog, recent course syllabi, and ongoing discussions with the instructors helped to clarify the priorities of each department. To better understand potential areas of conflict, what follows is an overview of each course.

Strategies for classroom management. The elementary education department offered an elective course titled, “Strategies for Classroom Management”. The university course description stated, “Covers contemporary classroom management in today’s elementary schools. There is an emphasis on prevention of management breakdown and developing a positive success-based environment” (*University catalog, 2009*).

An analysis of the syllabus, course objectives and assignments, the textbook used (Emmer & Evertson, 2008), and interviews with members of the department revealed several recurring themes.

They included

1. Creating rules and procedures;
2. Establishing classroom routines;
3. Designing the classroom environment to maximize learning;
4. Establishing high expectations for student learning and behavior.

Principles of behavior management. In comparison, the special education department taught a mandatory course for all special education and dual major students. The course was titled, “Principles of Behavior Management”. Its course description read:

This course provides the student with fundamental knowledge and skills in teaching exceptional children, using behavioral intervention strategies. This includes the analysis of student classroom behaviors, assessing strengths and weaknesses in these behaviors and determining behavioral objectives via the application of learning principles (*University catalog, 2009*).

Many of these behavioral intervention strategies were addressed through the use of the course textbook, *Behavior Management: Applications for Teachers* (Zirpoli, 2007). Themes were identified in a similar manner as those for the classroom management class. They included:

1. identifying and preventing maladaptive behaviors;
2. implementing positive reinforcement;
3. collecting, graphing, and sharing data;
4. promoting generalization and maintenance of desired behaviors;
5. implementing self-regulation strategies for students.

Fundamental differences. Stakeholders soon realized that there were a number of key differences between the two courses. “Principles of Behavior Management” was a required class, but

“Strategies for Classroom Management” was an elective. The objectives of the special education course focused mainly on individual behavior, whereas the elementary course dealt with management of the group. Perhaps the biggest difference was that the special education course was grounded in behaviorism (Skinner, 1976), while the elementary one largely pulled from fields such as group dynamics, leadership theory, and human development.

It was agreed that creation of the new course should focus on similarities of the programs, rather than differences. This process was accomplished through the ongoing collaboration of content.

Content Collaboration

At this point in the construction of the new course, it became awkward and burdensome for those involved to repeatedly refer to their efforts as “the new behavior management class”. Group members decided to mutual agree on a title for the new course. It was acknowledged that an appropriate and descriptive title could serve as a good starting point for future decisions.

Both departments wanted to ensure that their aforementioned priorities were reflected in the course title. After some initial suggestions and accompanying debate, members collaborated and agreed upon a title. The course would be named, “Positive Behavior Supports for All Students”.

Group members recognized two particularly cogent points as to why this course title was especially appropriate. The first half of the title “positive behavior supports” suggested that the philosophy of the class was to improve student behavior through praise, encouragement, recognition and other positive manners (Crone & Horner, 2003; Richey & Wheeler, 2009). Although this belief was well respected and established in both previous courses, it was never explicitly stated in the title. It was felt that this addition would give students an immediate understanding and appreciation regarding class priorities.

It was also felt that the second half of the course title “for all students”, sent an equally strong and effective message regarding the class priorities. Inclusive practices were a core tenet of not only this

course, but also the entire revised teacher preparation program. The college has sent the message that every one of its future teachers should be responsible for the education and development of *all* students assigned to them, regardless of perceived academic ability, physical limitations, and/or social and behavioral difficulties.

Once the title of the course was established, stakeholders collaborated on how to best make the course content reflective of both the fundamentals of classroom management (the needs of the group) and behavior management (the needs of the individual). This was accomplished through a “funnel” approach to the objectives.

Similar to the shape of a funnel or an upside down pyramid, topics in “Positive Behavior Supports for All Students” would be designed to initially examine the broad behavioral concerns applied to all, and then gradually narrow in scope, until the unique needs of the individual child were addressed. This was accomplished through the creation of four distinct course phases (a) ethics, (b) school-wide behavioral supports, (c) classroom behavioral supports, and (d) individual behavioral supports. An overview of each phase follows.

Ethics. A key component of the University’s school of education is its attention to professional dispositions. Pre-service teachers are expected to consistently exhibit prescribed attitudes and behaviors associated with professional educators. It was therefore critical that pre-service teachers understood the ethical and professional responsibilities associated with discipline. Examples of topics that would be covered under the ethics phase of the class included the responsibilities of being an authority figure for children, recognizing and reporting suspected abuse, and legal and ethical considerations when disciplining special education students.

School-wide behavioral supports. The second phase addressed topics concerning how to monitor or improve behavior supports for an entire school. Examples of topics covered in this phase would include school safety, crisis management, and response to intervention (RtI).

Classroom behavioral supports. During the penultimate phase, pre-service teachers would learn what it takes to smoothly run and organize their own classroom. Many of the concepts discussed at this level would originate from the “Strategies for Classroom Management” course. Creating effective classroom rules, procedures, and routines and how to arrange the classroom environment to maximize learning would be encountered in this phase.

Individual behavioral supports. The majority of the topics addressed in the final phase of the course stemmed from the previous special education course, “Principles of Behavior Management”. Material covered at this point would include the identification of maladaptive behaviors, the relationship among antecedents, behaviors, and consequences, and the effective use of positive reinforcement.

Stakeholders mentioned that the collaboration process greatly helped them to improve their understanding of, and appreciation for, the priorities of other team members. Much had been accomplished through the efforts of teamwork; however, one additional compromise would still need to be reached in order to satisfy the expectation of both departments.

Reaching a Compromise

Previously, the “Principles of Behavior Management” course had a cornerstone assignment, the functional behavioral assessment (FBA). The FBA assignment required students to identify a maladaptive behavior associated with a participant, determine an appropriate replacement behavior, and systematically reinforce the individual for exhibiting said behavior (Steege & Watson, 2009; Waller, 2008). The assignment required extensive narrative, data collection and a sophisticated understanding of the principles of applied behavior analysis.

Substantial time and effort were devoted to this project due to its perceived importance. The FBA was considered a critical culminating activity for several reasons. First, it provided tangible evidence that students had mastered many of the objectives of the course. Secondly, and more

importantly, the creation and implementation of FBAs were a regular part of the daily routine of many special educators in the field. This was especially true of teachers who taught students with intellectual disabilities, autism, and others with extensive academic or behavioral needs.

Stakeholders from the elementary education department both recognized and appreciated the importance of the FBA project. However, they questioned the necessity and relevancy of such an extensive assignment for pre-service teachers who were not dual majors. It was brought up that few general education teachers were ordinarily assigned this responsibility in the schools. In order to satisfy the interests and priorities of both groups, a compromise would need to be reached.

After some thought and deliberation, the current professor of the behavior management course introduced the “driver’s license analogy” to help reach a mutually satisfactory agreement. New automobile drivers are required to pass two tests before earning their license. First, they must pass a “book test”, in which they must demonstrate mastery of traffic rules, regulations, and procedures. Afterwards they must also pass a “road test”, in which they put this knowledge into practice by showing competency behind the wheel.

In the same vein, “Positive Behavior Supports for All Students” would serve as the “book test”, so that all students would learn about the fundamentals of a FBA through lecture, text reading, examples, and case studies. Stakeholders agreed that all students should be familiar with these concepts regardless of future placement.

Students who were dual majors would later go on to one of the advanced courses within the special education department to take their “road test”. This would filter out students who were not pursuing a career in special education, yet give an opportunity for the rest to put their knowledge into practice through the actual creation and implementation of a FBA.

With this final compromise in place, the new course took shape. Much work has been completed, but there was still more to do.

The Next Steps

Creating and running a new college course is a dynamic process. There is still much left to be accomplished in the approximate 18 month window before the inaugural registration process.

The course is currently under examination of receiving approval from various committees of both the college and the state. This may lead to required changes in the structure or content. Stakeholders have made it clear that they are willing and able to adapt their vision in accordance with committee feedback.

Furthermore, there are practical considerations that need to be addressed prior to course implementation. It is unclear how many sections will need to be created, or if there is sufficient staff coverage. Other questions include how to select appropriate instructional materials that meet such a diverse body of information, and how the school will ultimately measure the successfulness of the new course in meeting its objectives.

Five faculty members have devoted a great deal of time, thought, and energy towards creating a new course that will best meet the needs of future teachers. Through the three C's (consultation, collaboration, and compromise), the final product will reflect high levels of inclusiveness, complexity, and rigor. This, in turn, was the potential to fill Pennsylvania schools with highly engaged students and highly qualified teachers.

References

- Chapter 49 The Preparation of Professional Personnel. (n. d.). *The Pennsylvania code online*. Retrieved January 25, 2010, from <http://www.pacode.com/secure/data/022/chapter49/chap49toc.html>
- Crone, D. A., & Horner, R. H. (2003). *Building positive behavior support systems in schools: Functional behavioral assessment* (1st ed.). New York: The Guilford Press.

Emmer, E. T., & Evertson, C. (2008). *Classroom management for elementary teachers (8th Edition)*.

Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

FAQ about Chapter 49-2. (2006). *The Pennsylvania Association of Colleges and Teacher Educators*.

Retrieved January 11, 2010, from www.pac-te.org/Chapter49-2.pdf

New No Child Left Behind Flexibility: Highly Qualified Teachers. (2005). *U.S. Department of Education*

Home Page. Retrieved January 12, 2010, from

<http://www.ed.gov/nclb/methods/teachers/hqtflexibility.html>

PA Department of Education, Bureau of School Leadership and Teacher Quality. (2007). *Highlights of*

chapter 49-2 adopted by state board of education may, 2007. Harrisburg, PA

Richey, D. D., & Wheeler, J. J. (2009). *Behavior management: Principles and practices of positive*

behavior supports (2nd Edition) (2 ed.). Alexandria, VA: Prentice Hall.

Skinner, B. (1976). *About behaviorism*. New York: Vintage.

Steege, M. W., & Watson, T. S. (2009). *Conducting school-based functional behavioral*

assessments, second edition: A practitioner's guide (The Guilford Practical

Intervention in Schools Series) (Second Edition ed.). New York: The Guilford Press.

University catalog (2009)

U.S. Congress. (2001). No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: Conference

report to accompany H.R. 1, report 107-334. Washington,

DC: Government Printing Office.

Waller (2008). *The teacher's concise guide to functional behavioral assessment*.

Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Zirpoli, T. J. (2007). *Behavior management: Applications for teachers*

(5 ed.). Alexandria, VA: Prentice Hall.