



**PRELIMINARY OUTCOMES AND
CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTING SCHOOL-WIDE
POSITIVE BEHAVIOR INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS
IN 30 GREEK PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

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Abstract:

School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) is an evidence-based three-tier school-wide framework for preventing and treating challenging behavior in schools, improving overall school climate, and promoting teachers' teaming and collaboration. SWPBIS outcomes, such as the decrease of students' behavioral problems and improvement of teachers' cooperation, have been well established across

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various educational systems in many countries. The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate stakeholders' perceptions about the preliminary outcomes and challenges of the SWPBIS Tier 1 implementation in 30 Greek primary schools. A semi-structured focus group was conducted with stakeholders from Greek primary schools about their experiences from the implementation of SWPBIS Tier 1 during the 2019-2020 school year. Three key categories were identified: (a) perceptions about the initial SWPBIS outcomes, (b) implementation challenges, and (c) suggestions on additional supports. Practical implications and results are discussed in terms of how they can be used in sustaining SWPBIS in the Greek context.

Keywords: external coaches, teachers' teaming, Tier 1, stakeholders, student behavior, SWPBIS

1. Introduction

School climate - a multidimensional construct influenced by educational and social values - reflects the "*quality and character of school life*" and the quality of teacher-child interactions (Thapa et al., 2013). A positive school climate is widely linked with improved academic behavioral outcomes such as less absenteeism, school dropout, suspensions, disciplinary referrals, and bullying, and other violent school-based incidents (Reynolds et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2018). Research findings also show that school-wide approaches seem to provide support for students with socio-emotional and behavioral difficulties and to foster a positive learning environment (Thapa et al., 2013).

Based on such encouraging findings, an increasing number of school districts and administrators in the United States, Europe, and Australia are turning to school-wide prevention models to promote a positive school climate and reduce students' challenging behavior problems (Daily et al., 2020). Most modern educational programs and interventions that aim to improve school climate require an enhanced teacher involvement. Teacher teams are one approach to teacher involvement, which is designed to increase the member's responsibility for the group's performance and outcomes. Teacher teaming has been shown to enhance the professional growth of teachers who embrace team practices (Eaton & Carbone, 2008). According to Main (2012), effective team practices involve a group of people working together to achieve a goal with an outcome beyond the capabilities of individuals alone. Thus, effective team practices are more likely to achieve adequate fidelity of implementation with improved outcomes (Fixsen et al., 2010).

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a systems approach implemented on empirically validated practices to benefit school climate (Horner et al., 2009) and improve academic outcomes of diverse students (Lee et al., 2021). PBIS organizes interventions along a three-tiered prevention continuum (Sugai & Horner, 2008). Tier 1 or primary intervention strategy is proactive and designed to be

administered before error patterns develop. Because all students experience Tier 1 behavior support (Horner et al., 2009; Horner & Sugai, 2015), Tier 1 intervention of PBIS is known as School-Wide PBIS (SWPBIS) and is intended to prevent the development of antisocial behavior but also to promote positive behavior and the social skills by all students of a school (Horner & Sugai, 2015; Sugai et al., 2001). SWPBIS is implemented by a school team that assumes responsibility and authority to organize, integrate and coordinate the common effort. Hence, in each school, a leadership team will guide the entire school staff to Tier 1 procedures. Teaming for SWPBIS is the process of “*working as a cohesive, integrated, and representative collection of individuals who lead the systems change and implementation process*” (“School-Wide Positive Behavior Support: Implementers’ Blueprint and Self-Assessment,” 2004). To achieve these ends, PBIS requires open communication, collaboration, and coordinated effort among all teachers participating in the support process. Schools with effective teachers’ teams are most likely to sustain SWPBIS (McIntosh et al., 2013). Tier 1 implementation requires teachers’ positive feedback using a combination of verbal praise and material reinforcement (Sugai & Simonsen, 2020).

In the fall of 2020, SWPBIS Tier 1 procedures were introduced in 30 Greek primary schools taking part in the Erasmus+ KA3 project titled: “Building School-Wide Inclusive, Positive and Equitable Learning Environments Through A Systems-Change Approach” (Goutas et al., 2021). Although the effectiveness of Tier 1 implementation has been reported in an extensive body of research in many diverse educational contexts (Park et al., 2019), nothing is known about its impact on Greek schools. Furthermore, additional information is needed to guide further planning, training, and coaching efforts required to implement SWPBIS with fidelity within the Greek educational system. This qualitative study aims to examine the perceptions of three different types of SWPBIS stakeholders, i.e., teachers, principals, and external coaches, involved with the implementation of SWPBIS in Greek primary schools. The purpose of this study was to identify the potential challenges, initial outcomes, and needs regarding the implementation of Tier 1 in Greek primary schools. In other words, the current study attempts to enhance our understanding about the implementation of SWPBIS in the Greek educational context. The research questions of the study were:

- Which Tier 1 implementation outcomes did stakeholders in Greek primary schools identify?
- Which Tier 1 implementation barriers did stakeholders in Greek primary schools face?
- What, if any, do stakeholders to Tier 1 implementation in Greek primary schools suggest?

2. Method

2.1. Case study design

A case study research design was used to examine how SWPBIS is perceived and implemented by stakeholders in the Greek primary schools. According to Yin (2014), case study research focuses on answering questions that ask how or why and where the researcher has little control of events that are happening at present. A case study requires a logical design, pre-described data collection techniques, and pre-determined data-analysis methods. During this study, Tier 1 implementation was still in progress and researchers were not directly impacting it and the unit of analysis was four Greek primary schools participating in the experimental group. These schools were the first to implement Tier 1 PBIS procedures for approximately 5 months during the 2019 and 2020 school year. By the time of the study school staff had received training about the implementation of Tier 1 PBIS components by the external coaches and had implemented Tier 1 core features (Goutas et al., 2021).

2.2. Participants

A total of seven participants were considered for participation in a focus group using the purposive sampling technique. Participants were selected based on a single inclusionary criterion: varying stakeholders of a Greek primary school, including principals, class teachers, and Tier 1 external coaches implementing SWPBIS. Eight participants agreed to participate and were invited to engage in a focus group. The participants represented the diverse school roles within schools implementing Tier 1 procedures and included two principals, one teacher, three external coaches, and one school counselor. Their names have been replaced with participants' numbers for confidentiality. Table 1 presents participants' demographics.

Table 1: Participant's demographics

	Gender	Highest degree	Years of experience	Position
Participant 1	F	Bachelor's	20	Teacher
Participant 2	M	Master's	33	Principal
Participant 3	M	Master's	36	Principal
Participant 4	M	Master's	22	External coach
Participant 5	M	PhD	27	External coach
Participant 6	M	Master's	21	External coach
Participant 7	M	PhD	26	School counselor

2.3 Procedure

For the focus group discussion, the researchers developed nine questions in the following three categories: (a) outcomes, (b) challenges, and (c) additional support. The questions aimed to explore the participants' experience and perceptions of their roles as members of their school SWPBIS team. Furthermore, the questions addressed issues that were

identified by the researchers as of practical importance, like for example the provision of support in teams training after a period of Tier 1 implementation in the Greek primary schools. There were two questions related to the PBIS outcomes category, two in the category of PBIS challenges, and five questions regarding additional support in Tier 1 implementation. Table 2 shows the focus group questions by category.

Table 2: Focus group questions

Outcomes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What were at least two outcomes during the project implementation in your school? 2. What were at least two outcomes while coaching SWPBIS implementation in the schools you were assigned?
Challenges	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. What were at least two challenges you faced during SWPBIS implementation in your school (COVID-19 restrictions excluded)? 4. What were at least two challenges you faced while coaching SWPBIS implementation in the schools you were assigned?
Additional training support	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. What other aspects or issues should be covered during your training in the SWPBIS procedures? 6. What additional support do you need as a SWPBIS school team member? 7. What other aspects or issues do you believe you should train your assigned school team members? 8. What additional support do you believe that school teams need? 9. What additional support do you believe you need as an external coach?

The focus group discussion was scheduled at the convenience of the eight participants and was conducted virtually using teleconference software. The video recording began once the participants completed consent procedures and continued until the end of the discussion. Overall, the focus group was semi-structured (Drever, 1995). The researcher first asked the predetermined questions and then allowed participants to answer and discuss the topic. The interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. After the focus group, a research assistant transcribed the discussion. The focus group audio and transcriptions comprise the data for this case study.

3. Data analysis

Grounded theory techniques were used to analyze data inductively. Preliminary data analysis began during transcription and proceeded using open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The researchers used the investigator triangulation method (Denzin, 2018) and separately read, coded the transcript, and produced an initial list of emerging concepts for further analysis. The first researcher described three initial primary concepts: (a) outcomes, (b) challenges, and (c) additional support needed. The second researcher described five concepts: (a) perceptions of cooperation, (b) school climate, (c) classroom management, (d) influence of rewards systems, and (e) suggestions. Next, researchers used the constant comparison method of indicators and concepts (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) to compare data, consider the concepts and move toward broader categories. The following final categories were agreed upon: (a) SWPBIS outcomes, (b) SWPBIS

challenges, and (c) suggestions for additional support required. Researchers determined that the generated categories should be divided into subcategories representing the more nuanced distinctions within each broader category. For example, through categories' saturation and comparative process, school and classroom climate emerged as one subcategory of the broader SWPBIS outcomes category. Everything related to the outcomes derived from Tier 1 implementation was coded under the category and then identified into the following three subcategories: (a) students' outcomes, (b) teachers' outcomes, (c) school and classroom climate. Accordingly, everything related to the challenges from Tier 1 implementation was coded under this category and then identified into three subcategories: (a) principal's support, (b) teachers' buy-in, and (c) teachers' negative preconceptions about tokens. Finally, two subcategories were identified within the category of suggestions for improving SWPBIS implementation in Greek primary schools: (a) teachers' training and (b) modifications on tokens use. The researchers summarized findings for each category and identified quotations from the transcript that matched the resulting summaries using analytic processes.

4. Results

Data analysis resulted in a total of three primary categories each one of them containing emerging subcategories. Results included summaries of the comments made about each category along with supporting quotations from participants.

4.1 SWPBIS outcomes

In general, participants agreed that results from implementing SWPBIS in their schools had a significant impact on students' behavior. Students of first and second grades significantly improved both their behavior and relations with peers. Throughout the focus group discussion, the rewards system emerged as an important factor affecting students' behavior. Even more introverted and difficult children found a way to engage and contribute to the group's effort to get a reward from their teachers. Some students even acted as facilitators to their peers, something that teachers had never experienced before. Participant 1 said, *"We experience very impressive results and mature behaviors in the smaller grades... For example, children are applauding and cheering for their classmates when they display positive behaviors, and they get a positive reward"*.

All participants believe that clear stated school vision, teachers' verbal positive feedback, and tangible reinforcements, such as stars and stamps, motivate students to behave according to socially accepted rules and to adopt appropriate routines. Furthermore, it was noted that tokens proved to be a strategy with a great impact on students' self-regulation. As a result, students' positive behavior was identified by all participants as the major reason for a significant positive change in both the school's and classroom's climate.

In addition to students' positive outcomes, the group of participants discussed Tier 1's impact on teachers who participate in the project. For SWPBIS's effective implementation, school teams need to cooperate to state the school's vision and define a set of values and behaviors to be taught. Furthermore, teachers need to agree on a common rewards system and apply a common way of Tier 1 implementation for all students within school settings. Participants highlighted that one unexpected positive result from Tier 1 implementation was that they improved their cooperation. School teams exchanged teaching strategies to support their students' positive behavior and that helped them to set a common action plan. What constitutes the gradual change in students' behavior was the result of the school team's common efforts and hours of discussion. Thus, for the first time, teachers abandoned their practices and adopted a common framework based on the SWPBIS approach. Participant 4 said, *"I was impressed by teachers' interest and mood for cooperation to learn more about the project and its implementation. I didn't expect such a positive acceptance of the project"*.

In addition to teachers' cooperation, participants noted the great degree of freedom and autonomy they experienced to plan their school's action plan and teach the agreed social skills. That resulted not only in promoting students' positive behavior but in coping with their behavior problems as well. Furthermore, participants indicated that focusing on teaching social skills resulted in increased teaching time for their subjects. According to participants, teachers believed they helped students improve their behavior in the classrooms and that resulted in the overall school climate improvement.

4.2 SWPBIS challenges

Several challenges implementing SWPBIS in Greek primary schools were noted by participants throughout the focus group discussion. Within this category, the following were identified: (a) the principal's support, (b) teachers' buy-in, and (c) teachers' negative preconceptions about tokens. The principal's role in facilitating innovation is of vital importance. Supportive school administration and stability in leadership drastically affect teaching staff to try out new ideas and practices. One of the main issues discussed was the participants' experience with the principal's role. More specifically, the principal's support during SWPBIS initiation was considered as a key factor for both teaching staff buy-in and successful implementation. Participant 7 said,

"Principals' understanding and acceptance of the project worked as the initial spark for the persuasion of the rest of the teaching staff and the leadership teams. I think this is a critical point that facilitates the decrease of resistance from the teachers in the implementation of the project. In a way, the PBS approach creates a paradigm shift in the schools and the contribution of the school principals is significant towards this direction".

In one case discussed, when the principal retired, the teaching staff felt with no guidance in the project until the new principal who came in catch up with the project's

philosophy and requirements. Participant 1 said, *“Our school principal was the heart of the project’s implementation. (...) This change of school principal rocked our boat a little. We had to swim in deep waters in this transition”*.

Teachers’ buy-in was identified as an additional SWPBIS implementation challenge. Participants agreed that school-wide interventions require all teaching staff is in place when school starts. However, a lot of teachers of specializations were appointed to their posts by the Ministry even months after school commenced. As a result, teachers felt frustrated and overwhelmed that had to change teams and get new teachers on board. SWPBIS is a new approach for Greek schools and teachers need time to adapt to new practices and strategies. According to participants, teachers’ resistance to change and initial hesitation to adopt the PBIS approach was mainly because they were accustomed to a rather centralized structured education system in which changes usually derive from the Ministry of Education. For example, although everyone agreed that the use of tokens is an indispensable element of the positive approach of SWPBIS, it was obvious that teachers held a negative preconception about their systematic use. Participants discussed the difficulty that teachers faced in both deciding when to use tokens during teaching hours. Using tangible reinforcements in learning new behavior was a new practice for teachers who had to stay focused on positive behavior instead of challenging behavior.

4.3 Suggestions for effective SWPBIS implementation

After discussing SWPBIS implementation challenges, the group of participants suggested a few ideas for schools to effectively implement SWPBIS. Quality training, ongoing professional development and technical assistance provided to teachers affect SWPBIS implementation and were identified as important factors of the project’s sustainability. For example, everyone agreed that school teams need additional training to effectively manage their classroom and support students who need more intensive intervention efforts. Participant 1 said, *“We would like to receive additional training regarding the overall student behavior problem issues”*, referring to Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions and supports. Towards this direction, the participants highlighted the need for additional learning resources, such as lesson plans suitable to students’ needs. Participant 2 said, *“We would like to have access to a wider range of lesson plans differentiated according to the age of students so that teachers can choose what is more suitable to the needs and characteristics of their classrooms”*.

One last theme suggested for effectively implementing SWPBIS procedures is related to the use of tokens. Participants proposed the use of stamps instead of tokens and that teachers provide them to students at the end of the teaching hour. Participant 3 said, *“This way no teacher can claim that the tokens exchange is ‘stealing’ teaching time and adds more workload”*.

5. Discussion

The primary purpose of the current study was to identify preliminary outcomes, challenges, and suggestions by various stakeholders implementing SWPBIS procedures in the Greek primary schools. While several factors about SWPBIS implementation in diverse contexts have been investigated in previous research (Nelen et al., 2020; Nylén et al., 2021; Pinkelman et al., 2015), this study identifies important aspects regarding the implementation of core features of Tier 1 in the Greek educational system. The findings will rebound to stakeholders by taking into account preliminary outcomes, challenges, and suggestions when implementing SWPBIS in the future. Identifying enablers of and barriers to sustainability can help school teams in identifying strategies to use or avoid to both plan and implement effective school-wide practices (Pinkelman et al., 2015).

Stakeholders mentioned several initial outcomes of the SWPBIS implementation, such as improved students' behavior, increased teachers' teaming, more efficient classroom management, and a positive school climate. They also described various challenges regarding the same topic: the principal's support, teachers' buy-in, and teachers' negative preconceptions about tokens. Finally, participants highlighted the need for additional training and professional development in students' behavior management strategies for the three-tiered PBIS approach.

Overall, the findings of this study -based on the stakeholders' perceptions of SWPBIS outcomes- seem to agree with results reported in prior studies about its positive effects in diverse educational contexts (Borgen et al., 2020; Mcdaniel et al., 2015; Sørliie et al., 2015). More specifically, the results that SWPBIS implementation significantly improved students' behavior and their relationships with their peers, are in agreement with previous research findings (Bradshaw et al., 2012; Noltemeyer et al., 2019). The findings of this study also agree with those from previous research that showed a connection between SWPBIS implementation and improvement in both classroom management and school climate (McIntosh & Lane, 2019; Rudasill et al., 2018). Participants also believed that teachers increased their cooperation to be able to implement the universal intervention, which is also consistent with findings in the existing literature (Lohrmann et al., 2008; McIntosh et al., 2013).

Across participants, three challenges in SWPBIS implementation in Greek primary schools were identified. A challenge that relates to the implementation of SWPBIS is teachers' resistance to change after being accustomed to a centralized education system and their reluctance to accept new practices. Another challenge reported in this study that is in agreement with previous findings (Lohrmann et al., 2008; Mcdaniel et al., 2015) has to do with the importance of the principal's and the leadership team's support. Both of them were identified as critical in enhancing teachers' buy-in and commitment for effective implementation. Concerning the above-mentioned encountered resistance of some teachers, participants highlighted the principal's active involvement in school-wide team planning as an essential factor to the adoption and development of the SWPBIS

approach. Consistent with previous findings (Andreou et al., 2015; Mcdaniel et al., 2015) current findings also suggested the need for additional staff training that will allow them not only to effectively manage their classrooms but also to support students with more individualized interventions and supports. This finding reflects a genuine interest from teachers' behalf to expand their knowledge and effectiveness by implementing Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports of PBIS.

Finally, the findings of the present study revealed underlying cultural values and concepts within SWPBIS practices, which affect teachers' cultural standards of behavior and social norms. For example, participants suggested that token economy systems, which is a well-established and powerful SWPBIS practice in the U.S.A., should be adjusted to the context of the country's different national culture. Not considering such concerns may hinder staff buy-in and undermine school-wide interventions, as previous research indicates in diverse contexts (Jensen, 2020; Nelen et al., 2020). To overcome such issues, teachers may take advantage of the autonomy provided by the philosophy of the SWPBIS approach to adjust its core features and create socially acceptable procedures in a Greek context.

Although the results of this study provide valuable information regarding aspects of the SWPBIS implementation, some methodological limitations are recognized. First, only eight participants provided feedback in the focus group discussion. Hence, responses may not be generalizable to the larger population of stakeholders implementing SWPBIS. Furthermore, this study was conducted in the broader area of Thessaloniki and some issues discussed may be region-specific. Hence, future research should include perceptions from more participants across varying primary schools from regions that are nationally representative. Finally, this study is the first to explore the outcomes and challenges of SWPBIS but only after a short period of its implementation due to school closures because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, further research is needed after SWPBIS implementation is fully completed, identifying emerging outcomes, challenges, and suggestions from diverse stakeholders.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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