Inclusion

Expert Perspectives on the Inclusion of Students with Significant Disabilities in SWPBIS

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Abstract:	School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) is a framework intended to benefit all students in a school. However, recent research suggests that students with significant disabilities may not fully participate in SWPBIS efforts at their school. Given the complex reasons for varied involvement in SWPBIS, such as student educational placement, the purpose of this study was to investigate expert perspectives on the extent to which students with significant disabilities should be included in SWPBIS initiatives. Overall, experts agreed students with significant disabilities should be included in all tiers of SWPBIS, they should receive instruction in school-wide rules and expectations, and they should have the opportunity to participate in school-wide reward systems. Experts shared differing perspectives on the ways behavior violations of students with significant disabilities should be managed and documented. Implications and directions for future research and practice are presented, including the need to explore effective strategies for supporting practitioners to implement SWPBIS for all students, including students with significant disabilities.

Abstract

School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) is a framework intended to benefit all students in a school. However, recent research suggests that students with significant disabilities may not fully participate in SWPBIS efforts at their school. Given the complex reasons for varied involvement in SWPBIS, such as student educational placement, the purpose of this study was to investigate expert perspectives on the extent to which students with significant disabilities should be included in SWPBIS initiatives. Overall, experts agreed students with significant disabilities should be included in all tiers of SWPBIS, they should receive instruction in school-wide rules and expectations, and they should have the opportunity to participate in school-wide reward systems. Experts shared differing perspectives on the ways behavior violations of students with significant disabilities should be managed and documented. Implications and directions for future research and practice are presented, including the need to explore effective strategies for supporting practitioners to implement SWPBIS for all students, including students with significant disabilities.

Keywords: significant disabilities, school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports, SWPBIS, inclusion

Expert Perspectives on the Inclusion of Students with Significant Disabilities in SWPBIS

School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) offers a continuum of supports and interventions that increase in intensity to promote positive outcomes in academic, social, and behavior skills (Horner et al., 2010; Kincaid et al., 2016; Sugai & Horner, 2002). At the universal level (Tier 1), all students are taught school-wide behavior expectations and acknowledged for engaging in these behaviors across settings (Lewis et al., 2016). Tier 1 practices are implemented for all students across the entire school and include data collection and planning to prevent the development of challenging behaviors (Horner et al., 2010). For example, essential Tier 1 components include clear expectations for student behavior that are publicly posted, explicitly taught, and consistently reinforced for all students in all school settings (Horner et al., 2010). SWPBIS Tier 1 practices also include universal screening and data collection (Sugai et al., 2001), and these data are used by teams to make decisions about school-wide supports and practices. An essential component of SWPBIS is the use of data-based decision-making to identify students who may need more intensive supports beyond those offered at the school-wide (Tier 1) level (https://www.pbis.org/topics/data-based-decision-making).

The process of data-based decision-making should result in an iterative process in which data and student progress are continually monitored to ensure students receive supports responsive to their needs for the necessary amount of time. For students who need more intensive supports, secondary (Tier 2) and tertiary (Tier 3) interventions and supports are available. Approximately 10-15% of students receive targeted Tier 2 interventions (e.g., Check-in/Check-out; Maggin et al., 2015) and approximately 1-5% of students require more intensive, individualized interventions as part of Tier 3 supports (Goh & Bambara, 2012). Tier 3 SWPBIS

components typically include functional behavior assessment and development of an individualized, multi-component behavior support plan. SWPBIS began with these individualized strategies and expanded to a school-wide, cumulative framework over time (Dunlap & Lee, 2018). Within SWPBIS, students who require individualized supports as part of Tier 3 should also receive Tier 1 and Tier 2 supports first (Horner et al., 2010).

Over 27,000 schools are now implementing SWPBIS (www.pbis.org), and it is evident that schools are continuing to adopt and embrace SWPBIS as a framework to guide the provision of behavioral interventions and supports. In addition to the increasing trend in SWPBIS implementation, there is compelling evidence supporting the effectiveness of SWPBIS. In particular, SWPBIS has been associated with improved student outcomes across behavior, academic, and social-emotional domains (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2012; Freeman et al., 2016; Gage et al., 2018; Gage et al., 2017; Waasdorp et al., 2012). For example, Bradshaw and colleagues (2012) found that elementary students in SWPBIS schools had significantly lower levels of aggressive and disruptive behaviors and higher levels of prosocial behavior and better emotional regulation compared to students who were not participating in SWPBIS schools. SWPBIS integrates principles of applied behavior analysis, prevention principles from public health, data-based decision-making, and the use of academic and behavior support practices designed to support positive student outcomes (Horner et al., 2010).

Despite the mounting evidence supporting the effectiveness of SWPBIS, there are growing concerns regarding the involvement of students with significant disabilities in all tiers of SWPBIS (Author, 2016). Students with significant disabilities include the 1% of students who are eligible to take their state's alternate assessment due to their cognitive skills and support needs. These students have support needs across domains, including the need for supports in

communication, adaptive behavior, and learning. Additionally, students with significant disabilities may also need grade level content modifications due to cognitive skills, and may also qualify for special education services under the categories of intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, and multiple disabilities (Taub et al., 2017). Students with significant disabilities continue to experience the most restrictive and segregated educational placements compared to all other students with disabilities, and they are often placed in special classrooms or special, separate schools (Kleinert et al., 2015; Author, 2014). In some cases, students with significant disabilities might be excluded from general education placements due to their challenging behavior (Author, 2018).

The literature clearly conveys that SWPBIS is a framework intended to benefit *all* students (Sugai & Horner, 2010). However, it is unclear whether the intent of SWPBIS is to involve students with significant disabilities across *all* aspects of SWPBIS. For example, the language in some evaluation tools for SWPBIS implementation suggests the possibility that SWPBIS is not expected to encompass all students in a school (Author, 2017). Authors (2017) found that some of the language in SWPBIS evaluation tools rationalized the exclusion of some students from SWPBIS initiatives. The use of phrases such as “most students” suggests that there is room for interpretation of who is included, and leaves a possibility for some students to be left out of the SWPBIS practices that are designed to support positive outcomes. In the past 15 years, researchers have questioned whether students with significant disabilities are currently fully participating in SWPBIS. This is a critically important issue to consider because students with significant disabilities are likely to benefit from the preventative supports implemented as part of Tier 1 and Tier 2, given the focus on direct instruction of expectations and careful data collection and progress monitoring which occur within these tiers.

Concerns regarding the participation of students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS were described in a special issue of *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities* in 2006 (Bambara & Lohrmann, 2006; Brown & Michaels, 2006; Crimmins & Farrell, 2006; Freeman et al., 2006; Hawken & O'Neill, 2006; Sailor et al., 2006; Snell, 2006) and 10 years later in a follow-up call to action paper by Author (2016). These researchers called attention to the importance of conducting research in this area to determine (a) whether and how students with significant disabilities are included across the spectrum of SWPBIS activities, (b) whether SWPBIS can be an effective framework to support the needs of students with significant disabilities, and (c) whether SWPBIS can promote an inclusive school culture for all students. In these call to action papers, the researchers speculated that accessibility and involvement in SWPBIS is likely hindered by factors related to (a) logistics involved in teaching school-wide expectations in ways that may not be accessible (Hawken & O'Neill, 2006); (b) the assumption that students with disabilities should only receive Tier 3 supports (e.g., Hawken & O'Neill, 2006; Snell, 2006); and (c) educational placement and programmatic separation (Hawken & O'Neill, 2006; Sailor et al., 2006), as students with significant disabilities typically spend a majority of the school day in self-contained settings (Author, 2014). Additionally, Sailor and colleagues (2006) speculated that the bifurcation of special education and general education can create a barrier to including students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS.

Results of recent exploratory research has supported the potential role that educational placement may have in the involvement of students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS. Authors (2018) conducted a survey across multiple states to explore the perceptions of school personnel in relation to the involvement of students with significant disabilities in various SWPBIS activities and the importance of such involvement. Results suggested that student

involvement varied, and school personnel generally found it important to include students with significant disabilities in a range of SWPBIS activities. They also found that involvement and importance ratings often were significantly higher for school personnel from schools that included students with significant disabilities in general education settings for a majority of the school day.

In response to the decade-long call to action for research on this topic, several research teams have conducted additional preliminary work to understand the extent to which students with significant disabilities and their special education teachers have been involved in various aspects of SWPBIS, and their findings suggest students with significant disabilities and their teachers may not be included in essential aspects of SWPBIS (Authors, 2018; Shuster et al., 2016; Authors, 2018). Shuster and colleagues (2016) surveyed 849 special education teachers to gather information about their involvement and that of their students in SWPBIS. Special education teacher involvement and implementation of various SWPBIS activities varied (Shuster et al., 2016). Special education teachers of students with low incidence disabilities (e.g., significant disabilities) were less likely to participate in the SWPBIS planning team as compared to teachers of students with high incidence disabilities (e.g., specific learning disability, emotional behavioral disorder). In addition, special education teachers reported significantly lower involvement of students with low incidence disabilities in Tier 1 components of SWPBIS (e.g., school-wide expectations, school-wide incentives, management of behavior violations) compared to students with high incidence disabilities.

Authors (2018) conducted a state-wide survey of SWPBIS coaches regarding the involvement of students with significant disabilities in Tier 1 initiatives. The school-based coaches who responded to this survey worked with administrators and teachers at the school to

implement Tier1 school-wide practices and were instrumental in the implementation of data-based decision-making and collaboration across the school to ensure effective implementation of SWPBIS (https://www.pbis.org/topics/coaching). The results of this study revealed differences in the involvement of students with significant disabilities, which suggests the need to further investigate the involvement of students with significant disabilities in all aspects of SWPBIS, especially Tier 1. In this study, the respondents reported limited involvement of students with significant disabilities in Tier 1 SWPBIS. For example, slightly more than half of the general education teachers who responded to the survey indicated that students with significant disabilities were involved in specific aspects of Tier 1 SWPBIS such as systems for documenting and managing behavior violations. Overall, the results of this survey revealed differences among school personnel in the reported participation of students with significant disabilities in Tier 1 components of SWPBIS (Authors, 2018).

Finally, a recent intervention study documented the successful implementation of adapted SWPBIS Tier 1 materials and lesson plans as a way to reduce challenging behavior of students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings (Author, 2018). The results of this particular study offer important preliminary evidence that, when special education teachers make minor adaptations to Tier 1 lesson plans for use in inclusive school-wide settings (i.e., cafeteria, hallway during a transition from recess, bus loading/departure area) using the principles of Universal Design for Learning (Meyer et al., 2014) and evidence-based instructional practices for learners with significant disabilities, students can meaningfully access Tier 1 supports to learn school-wide expectations and demonstrate improvement in behavior.

Although researchers have explored this topic with different SWPBIS stakeholders (e.g., special education teachers, PBIS coordinators) over the past 15 years, the perspectives of

researchers in SWPBIS have not yet been obtained. Given the potential discrepancies in participation of students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS and the complexities of factors that may contribute to these discrepancies (e.g., educational placement, different perceptions of SWPBIS tiers), there is a need to understand the intent of SWPBIS from the perspective of those who were involved in the establishment and expansion of the SWPBIS framework through research. In particular, there is a need to understand the extent to which students with significant disabilities should be involved in the various aspects of SWPBIS. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore SWPBIS experts' perspectives on the extent to which students with significant disabilities should be included in SWPBIS initiatives. The following research question guided the focus of this study: To what extent do SWPBIS experts agree that students with significant disabilities should be involved in each aspect of SWPBIS?

Method

Expert Participants

We recruited editorial board members of the *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions* (*JPBI*) during 2018 and 2019 to participate in the study (n = 92). We sought the perspectives of the editorial board members of *JPBI* due to their expertise with SWPBIS and the recent trend toward articles focused on SWPBIS being published in *JPBI* (Dunlap & Lee, 2018). Additionally, we were interested in gathering the perspectives of these individuals because of their influential role in coordinating and conducting research in SWPBIS as they have contributed to the initial and continued development of SWPBIS. A total of 24 experts (26%) ultimately completed the survey (Table 1). At the end of the survey, we asked the participants to nominate additional experts in the field of SWPBIS. The experts nominated five potential respondents, though none chose to participate.

Expert respondents were on average 54.26 years of age (range = 35–77), and they reported working in the field of SWPBIS for an average of 20.53 years (range = 8–45). Most respondents (*n* = 17) were employed as tenure track faculty, and three reported their current position as a non-tenure track researcher at an institute of higher education.

The experts indicated their main area of research, expertise, and/ or focus was SWPBIS Tiers 1, 2, and 3, as well as students with significant disabilities (Table 1). Seven respondents indicated "other" areas of research focus or expertise that included specific populations (e.g., autism, emotional behavioral disorders, students with behavior support needs), specific age groups (early childhood, transition), multi-tiered systems of support, or specific interventions (autism peer interventions, applied behavior analysis). Experts were prompted to select all that apply for this question, so an expert may have selected more than one Tier as their main area of focus.

The expert respondents reported a range of prior experiences in their own work with SWPBIS and courses they have taught or professional development they have implemented. Half (*n* =12) of the respondents reported that they have taught university courses, provided professional development or workshops that focus on PreK-12 students with significant disabilities. In contrast, most (*n* = 23) respondents reported that they have taught university courses, provided professional development or workshops on SWPBIS. Almost half (*n* = 11) of the respondents reported that they have taught university courses or provided professional development on SWPBIS that involved students with significant disabilities as a focus.

In terms of their own experiences working in applied settings, 17 respondents indicated that they have taught or provided direct support to PreK-12 students with significant disabilities. Interestingly, this is in contrast to a smaller number of respondents (*n* = 7) who have been

employed in a school setting that has implemented SWPBIS. Only four of the respondents reported that they have been employed in a school setting that has implemented SWPBIS that involved students with significant disabilities.

We asked the respondents to rate their expertise in research and applied areas pertaining to students with significant disabilities, SWPBIS, and SWPBIS for students with significant disabilities using a scale of 1 (*no expertise*) to 10 (*expert*). The respondents reported high levels of expertise in research on SWPBIS; the mean rating for expertise in Tier 1 research was 8.17 (*sd* = 2.16), and the mean rating for expertise in Tier 3 research on SWPBIS was 8.54 (*sd* =2.30). The expert respondent's ratings of their expertise in applying SWPBIS in school or community settings as a practitioner were slightly lower, with a mean rating of 7.29 (*sd* = 2.71) for Tier 1 expertise in applied settings as a practitioner, 7.5 (*sd* = 2.38) for Tier 2, and 7.71 (*sd* = 2.65) for Tier 3. The respondent's ratings of expertise in research on the involvement of students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS were nearly neutral, with mean scores equal to 5.33 (Tier 1), 5.13 (Tier 2), and 6.21 (Tier 3). Their ratings of expertise in applying SWPBIS with students with significant disabilities in school or community settings as a practitioner were similar, with mean scores equal to 5.63 (Tier 1), 5.67 (Tier 2), 6.75 (Tier 3).

Survey Development

We developed survey items based on the components of SWPBIS included in the School-wide Evaluation Tool (SET; Sugai et al., 2005). Items in the SET were reworded so that we could solicit the experts' perspectives about the intended involvement of students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS. For example, question A.2 in the SET is, "Are the agreed upon rules and expectations publicly posted in 8 of 10 locations?" (p. 4) This was reworded to, "School-wide rules and expectations that are posted in locations around the school should be

accessible to address the cognitive and sensory needs of students with significant disabilities (e.g., Braille, embedded pictures).” As part of this process, we combined or eliminated some of the items from the SET. Overall, the core components of SWPBIS represented in the SET were rephrased to understand the expert respondent’s perspectives on the extent to which students with significant disabilities should be included in each component.

Following this process, we completed two independent steps to ensure the validity of the survey. First, an expert in survey design reviewed the wording and format of survey questions. Following this feedback, the research team made minor changes to the wording of questions and response options to improve clarity. For example, we added selection options to the question that asked, “For how many years have you worked in the field of SWPBIS?” Next, cognitive interviews were completed with three individuals who have extensive experience in SWPBIS and would not participate in the final survey (Willis, 2015). Cognitive interviews require respondents to “think aloud” while completing a survey, and they are intended to be used to gain an understanding of the respondents’ thought processes. During the cognitive interviews, we asked respondents follow up questions to understand how the respondent interpreted the survey questions as well as to identify any areas of confusion or concern (Willis, 2015).

The research team made minor changes to the wording of some items and response options upon completion of the cognitive interviews. Specifically, we expanded the Likert-type rating scale from 5 to 10 points and included more opportunities for respondents to provide open-ended responses. A significant change following the cognitive interviews was inclusion of a definition of “significant disabilities” as a way to ensure consistency in responses and clarity in our definition of that term. Within the text of the survey, “students with significant disabilities” was defined as:

> the 1% of students who are eligible to take their state's alternate assessment due to cognitive functioning. These students have support needs across domains, including supports for communication, adaptive behavior, and learning. Students with significant disabilities include the subset of students with **intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, and multiple disabilities** who have the most support needs within these categories.

After the participants read the introduction and provided consent to participate, the definition of significant disabilities was included at the top of the next page, verbatim, and with bold text. This definition was included a second time, at the top of the third page of the survey.

Instrument

The final online survey was developed in Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com) and distributed anonymously, via email, to all *JPBI* editorial board members and nominated experts. The survey consisted of three parts. Parts one and two included basic demographic questions (eight questions), one question about the respondent's research, expertise, and/ or focus on students with significant disabilities (Table 1), and 14 questions designed to gather information about the respondent's expertise and experiences in SWPBIS, significant disabilities, and SWPBIS that includes students with significant disabilities. Respondents rated their expertise in research and applied settings using a 1 (*novice*) to 10 (*expert*) Likert-type scale. Within each section (SWPBIS, significant disabilities, and SWPBIS that includes students with significant disabilities), respondents were also asked questions about their experiences that they could answer using a "yes" or "no" response. We asked about the respondent's experiences teaching in PreK-12 settings for students with significant disabilities, employment in school settings where SWPBIS was implemented, and in school settings where students with significant disabilities were included in SWPBIS. We also designed the questions to gather information about the respondent's experience teaching university courses, implementing professional development, and implementing workshops in that area of focus (SWPBIS, significant disabilities, and

SWPBIS that includes students with significant disabilities). Finally, we asked respondents to provide any additional information that would be important to know about their background in that area.

Part three of the survey consisted of 21 items designed to answer our research question (Table 2). The first 19 questions were closely aligned with the SET (Sugai et al., 2005). We asked respondents to rate the extent to which students with significant disabilities should be included in the following components of SWPBIS: defining expectations, teaching behavioral expectations, participating in on-going systems for rewarding behavioral expectations, responding to behavioral violations, monitoring and decision-making, and management. We included two additional questions at the end of the survey. One of these questions asked respondents to rate the extent to which students with significant disabilities should be included in all tiers of SWPBIS. The next question asked respondents to rate the importance of providing assistive technology, such as communication supports, to students across all tiers of SWPBIS. All questions in part three of the survey used a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 10 (*strongly agree*) Likert-type rating scale response. We provided a space for written comments for each question. A copy of the survey instrument is available from the first author upon request.

Data Collection

An email with a link to the anonymous Qualtrics survey was sent to the editorial board members of *JPBI* with publicly available email addresses (N= 92). Two emails were not deliverable. The initial email was sent during the first week of November 2018. A reminder was sent during the third week of November 2018 to non-respondents (n = 82). Two emails once again were not deliverable. Potential respondents were sent reminder emails to complete the survey in January, February, and March of 2019. Five emails were sent in total. Another five

individuals nominated from the expert pool were included in recruitment emails sent in January 2019. Nominated individuals received three emails in total. The research team sent a final recruitment email and final reminder email in September 2019.

Data Analysis

Once data collection was completed, partial survey responses were eliminated in order to ensure complete responses to both demographic questions as well as the questions relevant to the research question. Descriptive analyses (means and standard deviations) were calculated to address our research question. Questions requiring a "yes" or "no" response were summed, with frequency counts completed. For questions in which experts indicated a response using a Likert-type rating (e.g., degree of expertise, degree of agreement), means and standard deviations were calculated. Responses to open-ended comments were reviewed and considered explanatory; thus, no qualitative analyses of these comments were completed.

Results

A total of 92 experts in SWPBIS were sent links to the online survey. Ultimately, 24 experts agreed to participate and completed the entire survey.

Inclusion of Students with Significant Disabilities in SWPBIS

Using a scale that ranges from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (10), the experts agreed that it is appropriate to include students with significant disabilities in all tiers of SWPBIS (m = 9.63, sd = 1.17). Seven respondents added comments to this item. For example, one respondent said, "some schools see students with disabilities as defining who we are talking about in Tier 3. Equating Tier 3 with SWD [students with disabilities] is a myth we often have to dispel." Another respondent said:

> I would not EXCLUDE students with significant disabilities from any tier simply because they have one or more significant issues. However, I can envision that an IEP

> [Individualized Education Program] team might determine one or more supports... may not be relevant for or individualized enough that the student would reasonably benefit.

Another expert commented on the supports that might be needed: "I believe a tiered approach is relevant, but adaptations may be needed." Two other respondents emphasized the inclusion of students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS when "appropriate."

The importance of providing supports or adaptations for students with significant disabilities to participate in SWPBIS initiatives also was reflected in other responses. Participants' responses indicated that they agreed with the provision of supports such as assistive technology and speech generating devices to support the participation of students with significant disabilities in Tier 1 SWPBIS instruction (m = 9.58, sd = 1.18). Respondents added comments to this item that included "if effective," "another great point," and "Assistive technology may support some students with significant disability but may not be needed in all cases of significant disability."

Expectations Defined

The survey respondents indicated high levels of agreement regarding the extent to which students with significant disabilities should have access to the stated behavioral expectations in the school (Table 2). For example, respondents agreed that school-wide rules and expectations should be publicly posted in locations accessible to students with significant disabilities including in self-contained classrooms (m = 9.96; sd = 0.20). Comments from respondents reflected this agreement; one expert said, "I'd also add that it should be posted in a format that is easily comprehended (e.g., pictures included, not more than 12 words per line, etc...)." Respondents agreed school-wide rules and expectations should be accessible to the cognitive and sensory needs of students with significant disabilities (m = 9.88; sd = 0.34).

Behavioral Expectations Taught

Respondents agreed that students with significant disabilities should be included in instruction related to behavioral expectations (Table 2; Figure 1). Importantly, experts strongly agreed (m = 10.00; sd = 0.00) that practices to teach school-wide rules and behavioral expectations should address the range of support needs of students with significant disabilities (e.g., varying levels of cognitive ability, communication support needs, vision and hearing support needs). Respondents also agreed that a plan for teaching school-wide rules and expectations to all students should include teaching rules and expectations to students with significant disabilities (m = 10.00; sd = 0.00).

Within the section of the survey focused on behavioral expectations, the item with the most variability and the most comments from respondents was related to the extent to which students with significant disabilities should be able to demonstrate understanding of school-wide rules and behavioral expectations taught to all students (m = 8.96; sd = 1.80). The respondents added the following comments related to accessibility and adaptations: "with accommodations and modifications as needed," "individualization is key," and "to the extent that their ability allows and in ways that are accessible to them." Another respondent said, "teaching is a must but I'm not sure that demonstrating an understanding is within the capability of every student."

System for Rewarding Behavioral Expectations

The experts indicated a high level of agreement related to the extent to which students with significant disabilities should have the opportunity to participate in school-wide reward systems (m = 9.79, sd = 1.02), regardless of whether they have an established individualized reward system (m = 9.50, sd = 1.45). In this section of the survey, we asked SWPBIS experts to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement: "Students with significant disabilities should only receive individualized reward systems." The respondents disagreed with

this statement (*m* = 3.00); however, variability in their responses was evident (*sd* = 3.40, range = 1-10). Comments from the respondents included: "individualization and differentiation as appropriate," and another comment was "should be as inclusive as possible."

System for Responding to Behavioral Violations

Respondents agreed that a documented crisis plan for responding to extreme and dangerous situations should exist for all students, including students with significant disabilities (*m* = 9.88, *sd* = 0.34). Greater variability in responses and slightly lower levels of agreement were evident when SWPBIS experts responded to an item focused on the documentation of behavior violations of students with significant disabilities (*m* = 7.54, *sd* = 2.78, range = 1-10). On average, experts were nearly neutral in their response to the item, "When students with significant disabilities engage in challenging behavior, this should be managed the same way (e.g., in-office versus in-classroom) as students without significant disabilities" (*m* = 4.33, *sd* = 2.65, range = 1-10). Thirteen respondents added comments to this item, and most of them were focused on individualization. For example, respondents said, "depending on the BIP [Behavior Intervention Plan]," "No, should utilize BIP," "Should be managed according to what's detailed in the students IEP," "It depends on the student and his or her unique needs." One respondent's comment reflected multiple components of SWPBIS: "Should follow school reactive plan, emergency procedures, and individual plan."

Monitoring and Decision-Making

Overall, respondents agreed that students with significant disabilities should be included in monitoring and decision-making procedures in schools (Table 2). The greatest levels of agreement among the experts in this section of the survey were evident in items focused on the inclusion of students with significant disabilities in the school-wide behavior support team action

plan and the school improvement plan. The respondents agreed that teachers for students with significant disabilities should be active members of the school-wide behavior support team (*m* = 9.33, *sd* = 1.49). Respondents added explanatory comments that reflected their agreement with this statement: "Yes!," "absolutely," "they should have some representation," and "As a previous teacher of students with severe emotional disabilities, I was excluded from almost everything at the school. And thus, I feel strongly that all teachers should be part of all aspects of the school." One respondent added an alternative perspective: "many [special education] teachers of significant disabilities find SW[PBIS] unhelpful."

Survey items focused on office discipline referrals (ODRs) for students with significant disabilities reflected variability in responses. For example, respondents indicated a moderate level of agreement with the statement that students with significant disabilities who do not have individualized behavior support plans should be included in ODR data (*m* = 8.21, *sd* = 2.59). Seven respondents added comments to explain their ratings. One comment that may have indicated agreement was "Great point. At first I thought about choosing disagree, but if we aren't tracking, we don't see if problems are occurring and new methods could be used." Another respondent said:

> I believe for effective decision-making you need all the data, so we encourage schools to include all referrals in their database... The how, why and implication for including the data are important determiners of whether I think this [is] a good thing to do or not.

Two respondents added comments that may have indicated disagreement regarding the inclusion of students with significant disabilities in ODR data: "Don't think ODRs are the most useful way to assist students." and "Not sure how this would support the student. May need to conduct a FBA [Functional Behavior Assessment] to see why the [v]iolation occurred."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand experts' perspectives on the extent to which students with significant disabilities should be included in various components of all three tiers of SWPBIS. SWPBIS has been associated with improved student outcomes, and given the complexities of factors related to the inclusion of students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS (e.g., students with significant disabilities commonly experience separate, segregated placements; existing evaluation tools for SWPBIS suggest not "all" students are expected to be included in SWPBIS; Authors, 2017); this new understanding from experts is particularly important.

Overall, experts agreed students with significant disabilities should be included in all tiers of SWPBIS. Through surveying researchers who have decades of experience in SWPBIS, this study offers a contribution to the literature by confirming the intention of SWPBIS to support and benefit all students. Previous research found students with significant disabilities were routinely excluded from Tier 1 SWPBIS practices (e.g., Shuster et al., 2016; Authors, 2018), and our findings demonstrate that students *should* be included. This distinction between what is happening (exclusion) and what should happen (inclusion) offers an important contribution to the field, in that it is a continued call to action to realize the goals of the full SWPBIS framework (including Tier 1 SWPBIS) to benefit all students and all staff. As such, additional research is needed to ensure full participation of all students and staff in all tiers of SWPBIS. We offer two suggestions for future areas of research: first, investigation of the extent to which varied levels of involvement of students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS may be correlated with the educational placement of the students in the school. An additional topic for future research is the exploration of factors that may contribute to the participation of students with significant

disabilities in SWPBIS. Research in these areas is essential to move the fields of SWPBIS and inclusive education for students with significant disabilities forward.

Experts expressed varied perspectives for several SWPBIS aspects. In particular, experts varied in their perspectives regarding the documentation of behavior violations of students with significant disabilities, as well as whether students with significant disabilities should be included in ODR data. Authors (2018) discovered that if students with significant disabilities were included in office discipline referral data, such data may not be reviewed or considered after it is collected (Authors, 2018). The expert respondents of the present survey provided a range of responses related to ODR data, with some experts questioning the utility of ODR for supports planning for students with significant disabilities, suggesting the need for further investigation and consideration of this topic.

Survey respondents were largely employed as tenure track faculty, or they held research positions. Respondents also reported high levels of expertise in Tiers 1, 2, and 3 SWPBIS. The self-reported expertise and current positions of the respondents suggests a strong level of background and knowledge in this area, lending further value to their perspective that students with significant disabilities should indeed be included in all tiers of SWPBIS.

Limitations

Before we distributed the survey, we asked an expert in survey design to review the instrument, and we completed three cognitive interviews. Despite these steps to strengthen our study, there are limitations we must consider. First, we specified the population of students that the questions were referencing (students with significant disabilities) and included a detailed definition in the survey in two places, in addition to a brief description in the consent form. However, respondents may have interpreted this term differently. An additional limitation we

must consider is that experts may have been more inclined to respond if they had experience in implementing Tier 3 interventions; the respondents reported their expertise in SWPBIS as being highest in Tier 3. A final limitation that we must consider is the relatively small sample size. We were interested in surveying experts in SWPBIS, particularly those who may have been involved in the beginning development of SWPBIS. The demographic information from experts (Table 1) suggests this was accomplished, despite the small sample size.

Implications for Future Practice and Research

There is a need to explore effective strategies for supporting practitioners to implement SWPBIS for all students, including students with significant disabilities, given the agreement among experts that students with significant disabilities should be included in all tiers of SWPBIS. In particular, there is a need to focus this attention toward involving students with significant disabilities in Tier 1 and, if necessary, Tier 2 practices. The SWPBIS experts agreed that school-wide rules and expectations should be publicly posted in locations accessible to students with significant disabilities, and practices used to teach school-wide rules and expectations should address their support needs. Future research should investigate the adaptations that are effective in providing access to learning school-wide rules and expectations for students with significant disabilities. Authors (2018) found educators would teach school-wide behavioral expectations to students with significant disabilities if they had the materials needed to implement such instruction. Authors (2017) documented the successful implementation of adapted Tier 1 lesson plans using additional visual supports and evidence-based practices such as systematic instruction. Given the agreement of SWPBIS experts regarding the extent to which students with significant disabilities should be included in instruction on school-wide rules and expectations, it is important to ensure that educators have

the materials and knowledge needed to provide such instruction. Therefore, ongoing professional development in schools implementing SWPBIS should bring a focus to the participation of *all* students in Tier 1 SWPBIS practices, as well as in Tier 2 practices if necessary.

It would be important to ensure the perspectives of school personnel are sought in this effort to improve the implementation of SWPBIS initiatives for students with significant disabilities. Shuster and colleagues (2016) discovered favorable opinions from special educators regarding their interest in professional development; however, it would be important to investigate what topics would be most useful, how the professional development could be organized, as well as how to ensure fidelity of implementation and maintenance of SWPBIS after the professional development is completed.

Experts agreed students with significant disabilities should be taught behavioral expectations; however, the results of previous research have indicated that this might not be occurring in practice. Therefore, there is a need to conduct research that would explore the extent to which students with significant disabilities are indeed being taught expectations in schools across the country. If students with significant disabilities are not being taught behavioral expectations, then there is a need to understand why they might not be receiving this instruction so that interventions and supports can be implemented to ensure their access to this instruction. In their preliminary work, Authors (2018) identified barriers that may explain this lack of instruction; however, there is a need to further understand factors that may influence the implementation of these aspects of SWPBIS. Gaining an understanding of the barriers for implementing SWPBIS for students with significant disabilities would inform efforts for professional development and ensure educators and school personnel are well-supported to implement various aspects of SWPBIS for all students, including students with significant

disabilities. Simply providing professional development without the consideration of the unique needs of schools and educators on this topic may not be effective in ensuring the future inclusion of students with significant disabilities in this framework.

Conclusion

Experts agreed that students with significant disabilities should be included in all tiers of SWPBIS. Through inclusive SWPBIS (Sugai & Horner, 2009), each student should receive the instruction they need to be successful, regardless of factors related to their educational placement or support needs (Hawken & O'Neill, 2006). We urge researchers and practitioners to explore strategies to successfully include students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS and ensure educators and school personnel are supported to do the same, so that *all* students can experience the positive outcomes associated with this framework.

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Abstract

School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) is a framework intended to benefit all students in a school. However, recent research suggests that students with significant disabilities may not fully participate in SWPBIS efforts at their school. Given the complex reasons for varied involvement in SWPBIS, such as student educational placement, the purpose of this study was to investigate expert perspectives on the extent to which students with significant disabilities should be included in SWPBIS initiatives. Overall, experts agreed students with significant disabilities should be included in all tiers of SWPBIS, they should receive instruction in school-wide rules and expectations, and they should have the opportunity to participate in school-wide reward systems. Experts shared differing perspectives on the ways behavior violations of students with significant disabilities should be managed and documented. Implications and directions for future research and practice are presented, including the need to explore effective strategies for supporting practitioners to implement SWPBIS for all students, including students with significant disabilities.

Keywords: significant disabilities, school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports, SWPBIS, inclusion

Expert Perspectives on the Inclusion of Students with Significant Disabilities in SWPBIS

School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) offers a continuum of supports and interventions that increase in intensity to promote positive outcomes in academic, social, and behavior skills (Horner et al., 2010; Kincaid et al., 2016; Sugai & Horner, 2002). At the universal level (Tier 1), all students are taught school-wide behavior expectations and acknowledged for engaging in these behaviors across settings (Lewis et al., 2016). Tier 1 practices are implemented for all students across the entire school and include data collection and planning to prevent the development of challenging behaviors (Horner et al., 2010). For example, essential Tier 1 components include clear expectations for student behavior that are publicly posted, explicitly taught, and consistently reinforced for all students in all school settings (Horner et al., 2010). SWPBIS Tier 1 practices also include universal screening and data collection (Sugai et al., 2001), and these data are used by teams to make decisions about school-wide supports and practices. An essential component of SWPBIS is the use of data-based decision-making to identify students who may need more intensive supports beyond those offered at the school-wide (Tier 1) level (https://www.pbis.org/topics/data-based-decision-making).

The process of data-based decision-making should result in an iterative process in which data and student progress are continually monitored to ensure students receive supports responsive to their needs for the necessary amount of time. For students who need more intensive supports, secondary (Tier 2) and tertiary (Tier 3) interventions and supports are available. Approximately 10-15% of students receive targeted Tier 2 interventions (e.g., Check-in/Check-out; Maggin et al., 2015) and approximately 1-5% of students require more intensive, individualized interventions as part of Tier 3 supports (Goh & Bambara, 2012). Tier 3 SWPBIS

components typically include functional behavior assessment and development of an individualized, multi-component behavior support plan. SWPBIS began with these individualized strategies and expanded to a school-wide, cumulative framework over time (Dunlap & Lee, 2018). Within SWPBIS, students who require individualized supports as part of Tier 3 should also receive Tier 1 and Tier 2 supports first (Horner et al., 2010).

Over 27,000 schools are now implementing SWPBIS (www.pbis.org), and it is evident that schools are continuing to adopt and embrace SWPBIS as a framework to guide the provision of behavioral interventions and supports. In addition to the increasing trend in SWPBIS implementation, there is compelling evidence supporting the effectiveness of SWPBIS. In particular, SWPBIS has been associated with improved student outcomes across behavior, academic, and social-emotional domains (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2012; Freeman et al., 2016; Gage et al., 2018; Gage et al., 2017; Waasdorp et al., 2012). For example, Bradshaw and colleagues (2012) found that elementary students in SWPBIS schools had significantly lower levels of aggressive and disruptive behaviors and higher levels of prosocial behavior and better emotional regulation compared to students who were not participating in SWPBIS schools. SWPBIS integrates principles of applied behavior analysis, prevention principles from public health, data-based decision-making, and the use of academic and behavior support practices designed to support positive student outcomes (Horner et al., 2010).

Despite the mounting evidence supporting the effectiveness of SWPBIS, there are growing concerns regarding the involvement of students with significant disabilities in all tiers of SWPBIS (Author, 2016). Students with significant disabilities include the 1% of students who are eligible to take their state's alternate assessment due to their cognitive skills and support needs. These students have support needs across domains, including the need for supports in

communication, adaptive behavior, and learning. Additionally, students with significant disabilities may also need grade level content modifications due to cognitive skills, and may also qualify for special education services under the categories of intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, and multiple disabilities (Taub et al., 2017). Students with significant disabilities continue to experience the most restrictive and segregated educational placements compared to all other students with disabilities, and they are often placed in special classrooms or special, separate schools (Kleinert et al., 2015; Author, 2014). In some cases, students with significant disabilities might be excluded from general education placements due to their challenging behavior (Author, 2018).

The literature clearly conveys that SWPBIS is a framework intended to benefit *all* students (Sugai & Horner, 2010). However, it is unclear whether the intent of SWPBIS is to involve students with significant disabilities across *all* aspects of SWPBIS. For example, the language in some evaluation tools for SWPBIS implementation suggests the possibility that SWPBIS is not expected to encompass all students in a school (Author, 2017). Authors (2017) found that some of the language in SWPBIS evaluation tools rationalized the exclusion of some students from SWPBIS initiatives. The use of phrases such as “most students” suggests that there is room for interpretation of who is included, and leaves a possibility for some students to be left out of the SWPBIS practices that are designed to support positive outcomes. In the past 15 years, researchers have questioned whether students with significant disabilities are currently fully participating in SWPBIS. This is a critically important issue to consider because students with significant disabilities are likely to benefit from the preventative supports implemented as part of Tier 1 and Tier 2, given the focus on direct instruction of expectations and careful data collection and progress monitoring which occur within these tiers.

Concerns regarding the participation of students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS were described in a special issue of *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities* in 2006 (Bambara & Lohrmann, 2006; Brown & Michaels, 2006; Crimmins & Farrell, 2006; Freeman et al., 2006; Hawken & O'Neill, 2006; Sailor et al., 2006; Snell, 2006) and 10 years later in a follow-up call to action paper by Author (2016). These researchers called attention to the importance of conducting research in this area to determine (a) whether and how students with significant disabilities are included across the spectrum of SWPBIS activities, (b) whether SWPBIS can be an effective framework to support the needs of students with significant disabilities, and (c) whether SWPBIS can promote an inclusive school culture for all students. In these call to action papers, the researchers speculated that accessibility and involvement in SWPBIS is likely hindered by factors related to (a) logistics involved in teaching school-wide expectations in ways that may not be accessible (Hawken & O'Neill, 2006); (b) the assumption that students with disabilities should only receive Tier 3 supports (e.g., Hawken & O'Neill, 2006; Snell, 2006); and (c) educational placement and programmatic separation (Hawken & O'Neill, 2006; Sailor et al., 2006), as students with significant disabilities typically spend a majority of the school day in self-contained settings (Author, 2014). Additionally, Sailor and colleagues (2006) speculated that the bifurcation of special education and general education can create a barrier to including students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS.

Results of recent exploratory research has supported the potential role that educational placement may have in the involvement of students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS. Authors (2018) conducted a survey across multiple states to explore the perceptions of school personnel in relation to the involvement of students with significant disabilities in various SWPBIS activities and the importance of such involvement. Results suggested that student

involvement varied, and school personnel generally found it important to include students with significant disabilities in a range of SWPBIS activities. They also found that involvement and importance ratings often were significantly higher for school personnel from schools that included students with significant disabilities in general education settings for a majority of the school day.

In response to the decade-long call to action for research on this topic, several research teams have conducted additional preliminary work to understand the extent to which students with significant disabilities and their special education teachers have been involved in various aspects of SWPBIS, and their findings suggest students with significant disabilities and their teachers may not be included in essential aspects of SWPBIS (Authors, 2018; Shuster et al., 2016; Authors, 2018). Shuster and colleagues (2016) surveyed 849 special education teachers to gather information about their involvement and that of their students in SWPBIS. Special education teacher involvement and implementation of various SWPBIS activities varied (Shuster et al., 2016). Special education teachers of students with low incidence disabilities (e.g., significant disabilities) were less likely to participate in the SWPBIS planning team as compared to teachers of students with high incidence disabilities (e.g., specific learning disability, emotional behavioral disorder). In addition, special education teachers reported significantly lower involvement of students with low incidence disabilities in Tier 1 components of SWPBIS (e.g., school-wide expectations, school-wide incentives, management of behavior violations) compared to students with high incidence disabilities.

Authors (2018) conducted a state-wide survey of SWPBIS coaches regarding the involvement of students with significant disabilities in Tier 1 initiatives. The school-based coaches who responded to this survey worked with administrators and teachers at the school to

implement Tier1 school-wide practices and were instrumental in the implementation of data-based decision-making and collaboration across the school to ensure effective implementation of SWPBIS (https://www.pbis.org/topics/coaching). The results of this study revealed differences in the involvement of students with significant disabilities, which suggests the need to further investigate the involvement of students with significant disabilities in all aspects of SWPBIS, especially Tier 1. In this study, the respondents reported limited involvement of students with significant disabilities in Tier 1 SWPBIS. For example, slightly more than half of the general education teachers who responded to the survey indicated that students with significant disabilities were involved in specific aspects of Tier 1 SWPBIS such as systems for documenting and managing behavior violations. Overall, the results of this survey revealed differences among school personnel in the reported participation of students with significant disabilities in Tier 1 components of SWPBIS (Authors, 2018).

Finally, a recent intervention study documented the successful implementation of adapted SWPBIS Tier 1 materials and lesson plans as a way to reduce challenging behavior of students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings (Author, 2018). The results of this particular study offer important preliminary evidence that, when special education teachers make minor adaptations to Tier 1 lesson plans for use in inclusive school-wide settings (i.e., cafeteria, hallway during a transition from recess, bus loading/departure area) using the principles of Universal Design for Learning (Meyer et al., 2014) and evidence-based instructional practices for learners with significant disabilities, students can meaningfully access Tier 1 supports to learn school-wide expectations and demonstrate improvement in behavior.

Although researchers have explored this topic with different SWPBIS stakeholders (e.g., special education teachers, PBIS coordinators) over the past 15 years, the perspectives of

researchers in SWPBIS have not yet been obtained. Given the potential discrepancies in participation of students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS and the complexities of factors that may contribute to these discrepancies (e.g., educational placement, different perceptions of SWPBIS tiers), there is a need to understand the intent of SWPBIS from the perspective of those who were involved in the establishment and expansion of the SWPBIS framework through research. In particular, there is a need to understand the extent to which students with significant disabilities should be involved in the various aspects of SWPBIS. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore SWPBIS experts' perspectives on the extent to which students with significant disabilities should be included in SWPBIS initiatives. The following research question guided the focus of this study: To what extent do SWPBIS experts agree that students with significant disabilities should be involved in each aspect of SWPBIS?

Method

Expert Participants

We recruited editorial board members of the *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions* (*JPBI*) during 2018 and 2019 to participate in the study (n = 92). We sought the perspectives of the editorial board members of *JPBI* due to their expertise with SWPBIS and the recent trend toward articles focused on SWPBIS being published in *JPBI* (Dunlap & Lee, 2018). Additionally, we were interested in gathering the perspectives of these individuals because of their influential role in coordinating and conducting research in SWPBIS as they have contributed to the initial and continued development of SWPBIS. A total of 24 experts (26%) ultimately completed the survey (Table 1). At the end of the survey, we asked the participants to nominate additional experts in the field of SWPBIS. The experts nominated five potential respondents, though none chose to participate.

Expert respondents were on average 54.26 years of age (range = 35–77), and they reported working in the field of SWPBIS for an average of 20.53 years (range = 8–45). Most respondents (*n* = 17) were employed as tenure track faculty, and three reported their current position as a non-tenure track researcher at an institute of higher education.

The experts indicated their main area of research, expertise, and/ or focus was SWPBIS Tiers 1, 2, and 3, as well as students with significant disabilities (Table 1). Seven respondents indicated "other" areas of research focus or expertise that included specific populations (e.g., autism, emotional behavioral disorders, students with behavior support needs), specific age groups (early childhood, transition), multi-tiered systems of support, or specific interventions (autism peer interventions, applied behavior analysis). Experts were prompted to select all that apply for this question, so an expert may have selected more than one Tier as their main area of focus.

The expert respondents reported a range of prior experiences in their own work with SWPBIS and courses they have taught or professional development they have implemented. Half (*n* =12) of the respondents reported that they have taught university courses, provided professional development or workshops that focus on PreK-12 students with significant disabilities. In contrast, most (*n* = 23) respondents reported that they have taught university courses, provided professional development or workshops on SWPBIS. Almost half (*n* = 11) of the respondents reported that they have taught university courses or provided professional development on SWPBIS that involved students with significant disabilities as a focus.

In terms of their own experiences working in applied settings, 17 respondents indicated that they have taught or provided direct support to PreK-12 students with significant disabilities. Interestingly, this is in contrast to a smaller number of respondents (*n* = 7) who have been

employed in a school setting that has implemented SWPBIS. Only four of the respondents reported that they have been employed in a school setting that has implemented SWPBIS that involved students with significant disabilities.

We asked the respondents to rate their expertise in research and applied areas pertaining to students with significant disabilities, SWPBIS, and SWPBIS for students with significant disabilities using a scale of 1 (*no expertise*) to 10 (*expert*). The respondents reported high levels of expertise in research on SWPBIS; the mean rating for expertise in Tier 1 research was 8.17 (*sd* = 2.16), and the mean rating for expertise in Tier 3 research on SWPBIS was 8.54 (*sd* =2.30). The expert respondent's ratings of their expertise in applying SWPBIS in school or community settings as a practitioner were slightly lower, with a mean rating of 7.29 (*sd* = 2.71) for Tier 1 expertise in applied settings as a practitioner, 7.5 (*sd* = 2.38) for Tier 2, and 7.71 (*sd* = 2.65) for Tier 3. The respondent's ratings of expertise in research on the involvement of students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS were nearly neutral, with mean scores equal to 5.33 (Tier 1), 5.13 (Tier 2), and 6.21 (Tier 3). Their ratings of expertise in applying SWPBIS with students with significant disabilities in school or community settings as a practitioner were similar, with mean scores equal to 5.63 (Tier 1), 5.67 (Tier 2), 6.75 (Tier 3).

Survey Development

We developed survey items based on the components of SWPBIS included in the School-wide Evaluation Tool (SET; Sugai et al., 2005). Items in the SET were reworded so that we could solicit the experts' perspectives about the intended involvement of students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS. For example, question A.2 in the SET is, "Are the agreed upon rules and expectations publicly posted in 8 of 10 locations?" (p. 4) This was reworded to, "School-wide rules and expectations that are posted in locations around the school should be

accessible to address the cognitive and sensory needs of students with significant disabilities (e.g., Braille, embedded pictures).” As part of this process, we combined or eliminated some of the items from the SET. Overall, the core components of SWPBIS represented in the SET were rephrased to understand the expert respondent’s perspectives on the extent to which students with significant disabilities should be included in each component.

Following this process, we completed two independent steps to ensure the validity of the survey. First, an expert in survey design reviewed the wording and format of survey questions. Following this feedback, the research team made minor changes to the wording of questions and response options to improve clarity. For example, we added selection options to the question that asked, “For how many years have you worked in the field of SWPBIS?” Next, cognitive interviews were completed with three individuals who have extensive experience in SWPBIS and would not participate in the final survey (Willis, 2015). Cognitive interviews require respondents to “think aloud” while completing a survey, and they are intended to be used to gain an understanding of the respondents’ thought processes. During the cognitive interviews, we asked respondents follow up questions to understand how the respondent interpreted the survey questions as well as to identify any areas of confusion or concern (Willis, 2015).

The research team made minor changes to the wording of some items and response options upon completion of the cognitive interviews. Specifically, we expanded the Likert-type rating scale from 5 to 10 points and included more opportunities for respondents to provide open-ended responses. A significant change following the cognitive interviews was inclusion of a definition of “significant disabilities” as a way to ensure consistency in responses and clarity in our definition of that term. Within the text of the survey, “students with significant disabilities” was defined as:

> the 1% of students who are eligible to take their state's alternate assessment due to cognitive functioning. These students have support needs across domains, including supports for communication, adaptive behavior, and learning. Students with significant disabilities include the subset of students with **intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, and multiple disabilities** who have the most support needs within these categories.

After the participants read the introduction and provided consent to participate, the definition of significant disabilities was included at the top of the next page, verbatim, and with bold text. This definition was included a second time, at the top of the third page of the survey.

Instrument

The final online survey was developed in Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com) and distributed anonymously, via email, to all *JPBI* editorial board members and nominated experts. The survey consisted of three parts. Parts one and two included basic demographic questions (eight questions), one question about the respondent's research, expertise, and/ or focus on students with significant disabilities (Table 1), and 14 questions designed to gather information about the respondent's expertise and experiences in SWPBIS, significant disabilities, and SWPBIS that includes students with significant disabilities. Respondents rated their expertise in research and applied settings using a 1 (*novice*) to 10 (*expert*) Likert-type scale. Within each section (SWPBIS, significant disabilities, and SWPBIS that includes students with significant disabilities), respondents were also asked questions about their experiences that they could answer using a "yes" or "no" response. We asked about the respondent's experiences teaching in PreK-12 settings for students with significant disabilities, employment in school settings where SWPBIS was implemented, and in school settings where students with significant disabilities were included in SWPBIS. We also designed the questions to gather information about the respondent's experience teaching university courses, implementing professional development, and implementing workshops in that area of focus (SWPBIS, significant disabilities, and

SWPBIS that includes students with significant disabilities). Finally, we asked respondents to provide any additional information that would be important to know about their background in that area.

Part three of the survey consisted of 21 items designed to answer our research question (Table 2). The first 19 questions were closely aligned with the SET (Sugai et al., 2005). We asked respondents to rate the extent to which students with significant disabilities should be included in the following components of SWPBIS: defining expectations, teaching behavioral expectations, participating in on-going systems for rewarding behavioral expectations, responding to behavioral violations, monitoring and decision-making, and management. We included two additional questions at the end of the survey. One of these questions asked respondents to rate the extent to which students with significant disabilities should be included in all tiers of SWPBIS. The next question asked respondents to rate the importance of providing assistive technology, such as communication supports, to students across all tiers of SWPBIS. All questions in part three of the survey used a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 10 (*strongly agree*) Likert-type rating scale response. We provided a space for written comments for each question. A copy of the survey instrument is available from the first author upon request.

Data Collection

An email with a link to the anonymous Qualtrics survey was sent to the editorial board members of *JPBI* with publicly available email addresses (N= 92). Two emails were not deliverable. The initial email was sent during the first week of November 2018. A reminder was sent during the third week of November 2018 to non-respondents (n = 82). Two emails once again were not deliverable. Potential respondents were sent reminder emails to complete the survey in January, February, and March of 2019. Five emails were sent in total. Another five

individuals nominated from the expert pool were included in recruitment emails sent in January 2019. Nominated individuals received three emails in total. The research team sent a final recruitment email and final reminder email in September 2019.

Data Analysis

Once data collection was completed, partial survey responses were eliminated in order to ensure complete responses to both demographic questions as well as the questions relevant to the research question. Descriptive analyses (means and standard deviations) were calculated to address our research question. Questions requiring a "yes" or "no" response were summed, with frequency counts completed. For questions in which experts indicated a response using a Likert-type rating (e.g., degree of expertise, degree of agreement), means and standard deviations were calculated. Responses to open-ended comments were reviewed and considered explanatory; thus, no qualitative analyses of these comments were completed.

Results

A total of 92 experts in SWPBIS were sent links to the online survey. Ultimately, 24 experts agreed to participate and completed the entire survey.

Inclusion of Students with Significant Disabilities in SWPBIS

Using a scale that ranges from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (10), the experts agreed that it is appropriate to include students with significant disabilities in all tiers of SWPBIS (m = 9.63, sd = 1.17). Seven respondents added comments to this item. For example, one respondent said, "some schools see students with disabilities as defining who we are talking about in Tier 3. Equating Tier 3 with SWD [students with disabilities] is a myth we often have to dispel." Another respondent said:

> I would not EXCLUDE students with significant disabilities from any tier simply because they have one or more significant issues. However, I can envision that an IEP

> [Individualized Education Program] team might determine one or more supports... may not be relevant for or individualized enough that the student would reasonably benefit.

Another expert commented on the supports that might be needed: "I believe a tiered approach is relevant, but adaptations may be needed." Two other respondents emphasized the inclusion of students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS when "appropriate."

The importance of providing supports or adaptations for students with significant disabilities to participate in SWPBIS initiatives also was reflected in other responses. Participants' responses indicated that they agreed with the provision of supports such as assistive technology and speech generating devices to support the participation of students with significant disabilities in Tier 1 SWPBIS instruction (m = 9.58, sd = 1.18). Respondents added comments to this item that included "if effective," "another great point," and "Assistive technology may support some students with significant disability but may not be needed in all cases of significant disability."

Expectations Defined

The survey respondents indicated high levels of agreement regarding the extent to which students with significant disabilities should have access to the stated behavioral expectations in the school (Table 2). For example, respondents agreed that school-wide rules and expectations should be publicly posted in locations accessible to students with significant disabilities including in self-contained classrooms (m = 9.96; sd = 0.20). Comments from respondents reflected this agreement; one expert said, "I'd also add that it should be posted in a format that is easily comprehended (e.g., pictures included, not more than 12 words per line, etc...)." Respondents agreed school-wide rules and expectations should be accessible to the cognitive and sensory needs of students with significant disabilities (m = 9.88; sd = 0.34).

Behavioral Expectations Taught

Respondents agreed that students with significant disabilities should be included in instruction related to behavioral expectations (Table 2; Figure 1). Importantly, experts strongly agreed (m = 10.00; sd = 0.00) that practices to teach school-wide rules and behavioral expectations should address the range of support needs of students with significant disabilities (e.g., varying levels of cognitive ability, communication support needs, vision and hearing support needs). Respondents also agreed that a plan for teaching school-wide rules and expectations to all students should include teaching rules and expectations to students with significant disabilities (m = 10.00; sd = 0.00).

Within the section of the survey focused on behavioral expectations, the item with the most variability and the most comments from respondents was related to the extent to which students with significant disabilities should be able to demonstrate understanding of school-wide rules and behavioral expectations taught to all students (m = 8.96; sd = 1.80). The respondents added the following comments related to accessibility and adaptations: "with accommodations and modifications as needed," "individualization is key," and "to the extent that their ability allows and in ways that are accessible to them." Another respondent said, "teaching is a must but I'm not sure that demonstrating an understanding is within the capability of every student."

System for Rewarding Behavioral Expectations

The experts indicated a high level of agreement related to the extent to which students with significant disabilities should have the opportunity to participate in school-wide reward systems (m = 9.79, sd = 1.02), regardless of whether they have an established individualized reward system (m = 9.50, sd = 1.45). In this section of the survey, we asked SWPBIS experts to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement: "Students with significant disabilities should only receive individualized reward systems." The respondents disagreed with

this statement (*m* = 3.00); however, variability in their responses was evident (*sd* = 3.40, range = 1-10). Comments from the respondents included: "individualization and differentiation as appropriate," and another comment was "should be as inclusive as possible."

System for Responding to Behavioral Violations

Respondents agreed that a documented crisis plan for responding to extreme and dangerous situations should exist for all students, including students with significant disabilities (*m* = 9.88, *sd* = 0.34). Greater variability in responses and slightly lower levels of agreement were evident when SWPBIS experts responded to an item focused on the documentation of behavior violations of students with significant disabilities (*m* = 7.54, *sd* = 2.78, range = 1-10). On average, experts were nearly neutral in their response to the item, "When students with significant disabilities engage in challenging behavior, this should be managed the same way (e.g., in-office versus in-classroom) as students without significant disabilities" (*m* = 4.33, *sd* = 2.65, range = 1-10). Thirteen respondents added comments to this item, and most of them were focused on individualization. For example, respondents said, "depending on the BIP [Behavior Intervention Plan]," "No, should utilize BIP," "Should be managed according to what's detailed in the students IEP," "It depends on the student and his or her unique needs." One respondent's comment reflected multiple components of SWPBIS: "Should follow school reactive plan, emergency procedures, and individual plan."

Monitoring and Decision-Making

Overall, respondents agreed that students with significant disabilities should be included in monitoring and decision-making procedures in schools (Table 2). The greatest levels of agreement among the experts in this section of the survey were evident in items focused on the inclusion of students with significant disabilities in the school-wide behavior support team action

plan and the school improvement plan. The respondents agreed that teachers for students with significant disabilities should be active members of the school-wide behavior support team (*m* = 9.33, *sd* = 1.49). Respondents added explanatory comments that reflected their agreement with this statement: "Yes!," "absolutely," "they should have some representation," and "As a previous teacher of students with severe emotional disabilities, I was excluded from almost everything at the school. And thus, I feel strongly that all teachers should be part of all aspects of the school." One respondent added an alternative perspective: "many [special education] teachers of significant disabilities find SW[PBIS] unhelpful."

Survey items focused on office discipline referrals (ODRs) for students with significant disabilities reflected variability in responses. For example, respondents indicated a moderate level of agreement with the statement that students with significant disabilities who do not have individualized behavior support plans should be included in ODR data (*m* = 8.21, *sd* = 2.59). Seven respondents added comments to explain their ratings. One comment that may have indicated agreement was "Great point. At first I thought about choosing disagree, but if we aren't tracking, we don't see if problems are occurring and new methods could be used." Another respondent said:

> I believe for effective decision-making you need all the data, so we encourage schools to include all referrals in their database... The how, why and implication for including the data are important determiners of whether I think this [is] a good thing to do or not.

Two respondents added comments that may have indicated disagreement regarding the inclusion of students with significant disabilities in ODR data: "Don't think ODRs are the most useful way to assist students." and "Not sure how this would support the student. May need to conduct a FBA [Functional Behavior Assessment] to see why the [v]iolation occurred."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand experts' perspectives on the extent to which students with significant disabilities should be included in various components of all three tiers of SWPBIS. SWPBIS has been associated with improved student outcomes, and given the complexities of factors related to the inclusion of students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS (e.g., students with significant disabilities commonly experience separate, segregated placements; existing evaluation tools for SWPBIS suggest not "all" students are expected to be included in SWPBIS; Authors, 2017); this new understanding from experts is particularly important.

Overall, experts agreed students with significant disabilities should be included in all tiers of SWPBIS. Through surveying researchers who have decades of experience in SWPBIS, this study offers a contribution to the literature by confirming the intention of SWPBIS to support and benefit all students. Previous research found students with significant disabilities were routinely excluded from Tier 1 SWPBIS practices (e.g., Shuster et al., 2016; Authors, 2018), and our findings demonstrate that students *should* be included. This distinction between what is happening (exclusion) and what should happen (inclusion) offers an important contribution to the field, in that it is a continued call to action to realize the goals of the full SWPBIS framework (including Tier 1 SWPBIS) to benefit all students and all staff. As such, additional research is needed to ensure full participation of all students and staff in all tiers of SWPBIS. We offer two suggestions for future areas of research: first, investigation of the extent to which varied levels of involvement of students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS may be correlated with the educational placement of the students in the school. An additional topic for future research is the exploration of factors that may contribute to the participation of students with significant

disabilities in SWPBIS. Research in these areas is essential to move the fields of SWPBIS and inclusive education for students with significant disabilities forward.

Experts expressed varied perspectives for several SWPBIS aspects. In particular, experts varied in their perspectives regarding the documentation of behavior violations of students with significant disabilities, as well as whether students with significant disabilities should be included in ODR data. Authors (2018) discovered that if students with significant disabilities were included in office discipline referral data, such data may not be reviewed or considered after it is collected (Authors, 2018). The expert respondents of the present survey provided a range of responses related to ODR data, with some experts questioning the utility of ODR for supports planning for students with significant disabilities, suggesting the need for further investigation and consideration of this topic.

Survey respondents were largely employed as tenure track faculty, or they held research positions. Respondents also reported high levels of expertise in Tiers 1, 2, and 3 SWPBIS. The self-reported expertise and current positions of the respondents suggests a strong level of background and knowledge in this area, lending further value to their perspective that students with significant disabilities should indeed be included in all tiers of SWPBIS.

Limitations

Before we distributed the survey, we asked an expert in survey design to review the instrument, and we completed three cognitive interviews. Despite these steps to strengthen our study, there are limitations we must consider. First, we specified the population of students that the questions were referencing (students with significant disabilities) and included a detailed definition in the survey in two places, in addition to a brief description in the consent form. However, respondents may have interpreted this term differently. An additional limitation we

must consider is that experts may have been more inclined to respond if they had experience in implementing Tier 3 interventions; the respondents reported their expertise in SWPBIS as being highest in Tier 3. A final limitation that we must consider is the relatively small sample size. We were interested in surveying experts in SWPBIS, particularly those who may have been involved in the beginning development of SWPBIS. The demographic information from experts (Table 1) suggests this was accomplished, despite the small sample size.

Implications for Future Practice and Research

There is a need to explore effective strategies for supporting practitioners to implement SWPBIS for all students, including students with significant disabilities, given the agreement among experts that students with significant disabilities should be included in all tiers of SWPBIS. In particular, there is a need to focus this attention toward involving students with significant disabilities in Tier 1 and, if necessary, Tier 2 practices. The SWPBIS experts agreed that school-wide rules and expectations should be publicly posted in locations accessible to students with significant disabilities, and practices used to teach school-wide rules and expectations should address their support needs. Future research should investigate the adaptations that are effective in providing access to learning school-wide rules and expectations for students with significant disabilities. Authors (2018) found educators would teach school-wide behavioral expectations to students with significant disabilities if they had the materials needed to implement such instruction. Authors (2017) documented the successful implementation of adapted Tier 1 lesson plans using additional visual supports and evidence-based practices such as systematic instruction. Given the agreement of SWPBIS experts regarding the extent to which students with significant disabilities should be included in instruction on school-wide rules and expectations, it is important to ensure that educators have

the materials and knowledge needed to provide such instruction. Therefore, ongoing professional development in schools implementing SWPBIS should bring a focus to the participation of *all* students in Tier 1 SWPBIS practices, as well as in Tier 2 practices if necessary.

It would be important to ensure the perspectives of school personnel are sought in this effort to improve the implementation of SWPBIS initiatives for students with significant disabilities. Shuster and colleagues (2016) discovered favorable opinions from special educators regarding their interest in professional development; however, it would be important to investigate what topics would be most useful, how the professional development could be organized, as well as how to ensure fidelity of implementation and maintenance of SWPBIS after the professional development is completed.

Experts agreed students with significant disabilities should be taught behavioral expectations; however, the results of previous research have indicated that this might not be occurring in practice. Therefore, there is a need to conduct research that would explore the extent to which students with significant disabilities are indeed being taught expectations in schools across the country. If students with significant disabilities are not being taught behavioral expectations, then there is a need to understand why they might not be receiving this instruction so that interventions and supports can be implemented to ensure their access to this instruction. In their preliminary work, Authors (2018) identified barriers that may explain this lack of instruction; however, there is a need to further understand factors that may influence the implementation of these aspects of SWPBIS. Gaining an understanding of the barriers for implementing SWPBIS for students with significant disabilities would inform efforts for professional development and ensure educators and school personnel are well-supported to implement various aspects of SWPBIS for all students, including students with significant

disabilities. Simply providing professional development without the consideration of the unique needs of schools and educators on this topic may not be effective in ensuring the future inclusion of students with significant disabilities in this framework.

Conclusion

Experts agreed that students with significant disabilities should be included in all tiers of SWPBIS. Through inclusive SWPBIS (Sugai & Horner, 2009), each student should receive the instruction they need to be successful, regardless of factors related to their educational placement or support needs (Hawken & O'Neill, 2006). We urge researchers and practitioners to explore strategies to successfully include students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS and ensure educators and school personnel are supported to do the same, so that *all* students can experience the positive outcomes associated with this framework.

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Table 1

Summary of Demographic Information across SWPBIS Experts (n = 24)

Demographic item	Frequency	%
Gender		
Female	15	62.5
Male	9	37.5
Ethnicity		
Not Latinx	22	95.7
Not disclosed	2	4.3
Latinx	0	0.0
Race		
White	23	95.8
Other	1	4.2
Highest degree earned		
Doctoral	23	95.8
Masters	1	4.2
Major area		
Special education	21	87.5
Psychology	1	4.2
Speech language pathology	1	4.2
School psychology	1	4.2
Current position		
Tenure track faculty at institute of higher education	17	70.8
Other	4	16.7
Non-tenure track researcher at institute of higher education	3	12.5
Primary area of research, expertise, and/or focus		
SWPBIS Tier 3	19	79.2
SWPBIS Tier 2	17	70.8
SWPBIS Tier 1	14	58.3
Other	7	29.2
Students with significant disabilities	7	29.2

Note. SWPBIS = School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

Table 2

Extent to Which Students with Significant Disabilities Should be Included in Various Components of SWPBIS

	m	*sd*
Expectations Defined		
School-wide rules and expectations should be publicly posted in locations accessible to students with significant disabilities, including settings outside of general education settings (e.g., self-contained classrooms).	9.96	.20
School-wide rules and expectations that are posted in locations around the school should be accessible to address the cognitive and sensory needs of students with significant disabilities (e.g., Braille, embedded pictures).	9.88	.34
Behavioral Expectations Taught		
A plan for teaching school-wide rules and behavioral expectations to all students should also include teaching rules and behavioral expectations to students with significant disabilities.	10	.00
Practices to teach school-wide rules and behavioral expectations should address the range of support needs of students with significant disabilities (e.g., varying levels of cognitive ability, communication support needs, vision and hearing support needs).	10	.00
Students with significant disabilities should be taught the school-wide rules and expectations, regardless of their educational placement.	9.79	1.02
Students with significant disabilities should be able to demonstrate understanding of school-wide rules and behavioral expectations taught to all students.	8.96	1.80
All staff supporting students with significant disabilities, including those providing supports in settings outside of general education classrooms, should be able to identify the school-wide rules and behavioral expectations taught to all students.	10	.00
Rewarding Behavioral Expectations		
Students with significant disabilities should have the opportunity to participate in school-wide reward systems.	9.79	1.02
Students with significant disabilities should only receive individualized reward systems.	3.00	3.4
Students who have established individualized reward systems should also participate in school-wide reward systems.	9.5	1.45

Note. SWPBIS= Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports; 1= *strongly disagree*, 5= *neutral*, 10= *strongly agree*.

Table 2, Continued

Extent to Which Students with Significant Disabilities Should be Included in Various Components of SWPBIS

	m	*sd*
System for Responding to Behavioral Violations		
Specific behavioral violations of students with significant disabilities should be documented in the same way as their same-aged peers (e.g., tracking data on student behavioral violations should occur in the same way for all students).	7.54	2.78
When students with significant disabilities engage in challenging behavior, this should be managed the same way (e.g., in-office versus in-classroom) as students without significant disabilities.	4.33	2.65
A documented crisis plan for responding to extreme, dangerous situations should exist for all students, including those with significant disabilities, and it should be readily available to all teachers who support students with significant disabilities.	9.88	.34
Monitoring and Decision Making		
Students with significant disabilities should be included in office discipline referral data.	8.21	2.59
The data on office discipline referrals for students with significant disabilities should be considered in making decisions in designing, implementing, and revising school-wide behavior support efforts.	8.83	2.2
The school improvement plan should list improving behavior support systems for all students, including students with significant disabilities, as a goal.	9.79	.51
Teachers of students with significant disabilities should be active members of the school-wide behavior support team.	9.33	1.49
The goals included in the school-wide behavior support team action plan should include all students, including students with significant disabilities.	9.96	.20
The SWPBIS team at each school should regularly discuss how to include students with significant disabilities in SWPBIS.	9.50	1.18
Miscellaneous		
It is appropriate to include students with significant disabilities in all tiers of school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports.	9.63	1.17
It is important to provide assistive technology, such as speech generating devices, to support the participation of students with significant disabilities in Tier 1 SWPBIS instruction.	9.58	1.18

Note. SWPBIS= Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports; 1= *strongly disagree*, 5= *neutral*, 10= *strongly agree*.