

*This study assessed the utility of a pilot program in rational behavior therapy (RBT) in the disciplinary processes at a large, urban junior high school. Treatment and control students were contrasted on recidivism rate and teacher behavior assessments after they participated in a condensed RBT treatment program. For two behavior ratings and recidivism rate, students who participated in the intervention differed significantly from those in the control group. Such empirical support demonstrates the potential of cognitive-behavioral interventions in school disciplinary procedures and merits further implementation and research.*

KAREN ZELIE  
CHRISTOPHER I. STONE  
ELLEN LEHR

# *Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention in School Discipline: A Preliminary Study*

Discipline is universally viewed as an issue of central importance in schools at every level of education (Ainsworth & Stapleton, 1976; Moyer, 1978). Although there seems to be general agreement that more discipline is needed, there is little agreement about how this can be achieved most effectively. Suspension, a mainstay of public school discipline for many years, has been attacked by many as ineffective and counterproductive (Davis & Thomson, 1976; McClung, 1975; Patterson, 1976; Piersma, 1972; Severno, Grignano, & Bell, 1976). Other active punishment procedures have fared little better when evaluated (Ainsworth & Stapleton, 1976; Davis & Thomson, 1976; Moyer, 1978). The assessments of the pitfalls of punishment are reminiscent of the classic studies that aptly demonstrate the significant and lasting—however unintended—deleterious effects of punishment (see Sulzer-Azaroff & Mayer, 1977 pp. 317–321). These negative effects include withdrawal, reactive and modeled aggression, failure to discriminate between contexts in which the punished behavior is appropriate and inappropriate, teaching the punished act to others in the environment by drawing attention to it, and fostering counterproductive peer responses (e.g., ridicule and avoidance).

Several alternative approaches have emerged out of the criticism and concern for current disciplinary policies (Clarizio, 1976; Jessup & Kiley, 1971; Larson, 1972; McClung, 1975). One point of agreement in the alternative methods is that self-control or self-discipline is the long-range goal of any disciplinary process. McClung (1975) enumerates four criteria for the evaluation of alternative programs:

- 1 Is there real evidence over a period of time that the number of suspensions are actually reduced by the use of the alternative program or technique?
- 2 Does the alternative program or technique truly help to meet the needs of the students who would have been suspended? Does it help solve the problem that led to the disciplinary action?
- 3 Is the student making genuine academic progress at a level which is appropriate for him/her if participating in an alternative program?
- 4 As a result of the use of the alternative program or technique does the student begin to develop greater self-discipline? (p. 65)

Clearly, counseling programs have occupied a central role among activities that have been implemented as alternative programs in school discipline. The National Education Association includes crisis intervention, consultation, and counseling among its short-term, intermediate, and long-term goals for developing such alternatives (McClung, 1975). In the selection of an actual counseling model for an intervention program, many of the factors already mentioned must be considered. The model must involve the student in the decision-making process (Severno et al., 1976). It should help foster human relations and interpersonal communication skills (Schillinger & Erickson, 1974). It should reduce the number of suspensions and similar disciplinary problems. It should meet those needs of the student that led to the disciplinary action. Finally, as a result of the use of the counseling model, the student should begin to develop greater self-discipline (McClung, 1975).

The counseling model selected in our study seems to meet these requirements. The model has a psychological basis rather than a disciplinary basis, emphasizing internal self-control rather than external school control. Theoretically, the approach is based on the cognitive-behavioral model of rational behavior therapy (RBT) formulated by Maultsby and his associates (Maultsby, 1971; Maultsby & Ellis, 1974). The

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KAREN ZELIE is a psychologist with the Jefferson County Public Schools, Colorado. At the time this research was conducted she was a master's degree candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. ELLEN LEHR was a lecturer at the same institution and is now a psychologist at Georgetown University Hospital. CHRISTOPHER I. STONE is assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

therapy is implemented in a disciplinary setting on the occasion of the student's disciplinary referral. We viewed this as an opportune time to develop and practice new skills rather than perpetuate ineffective responses. Presumably, students would benefit from the therapeutic effects of the successful handling of crisis situations. Furthermore, the use of a cognitive orientation like RBT is consistent with the focus of schools.

The conceptual underpinnings of RBT are virtually the same as those of Ellis's rational-emotive therapy (1962). Both therapists use techniques of the other, and both acknowledge the similarities of their approaches in counseling and psychotherapy (Ellis, 1975; Maultsby & Ellis, 1974). Although RBT does not embed itself wholly into learning theory principles, it does seem to espouse a particular allegiance to a recent trend in social learning literature, the inclusion of cognitive factors to behavior therapies. These cognitive-behavioral approaches (cf. Beck, 1970; Mahoney, 1974; Meichenbaum, 1977; Mischel, 1973) have shown great clinical promise in a host of applications. Ellis (1977) provides a comprehensive review of these.

Maultsby distinguishes between rational and irrational behavior on the basis of five criteria. A behavior is rational if

- 1 It is based on objective reality.
- 2 It is most likely to preserve your life.
- 3 It enables you to achieve your immediate and long range goals most quickly.
- 4 It helps you avoid significant personal conflict.
- 5 It helps you to avoid significant environmental conflict. (Maultsby, 1971, pp. 6-7)

RBT emphasizes that the responsibility for learning rational thinking and behavior rests squarely with the client/student. As such, RBT can be viewed as a particularly appropriate strategy because of the independence needs of adolescents. By putting students in control and teaching them problem-solving skills, they can put into perspective and better deal with the stresses that accompany loss of dependence.

According to Ellis (1962) and Maultsby (1971), the goals of counseling are self-understanding and self-mastery. Self-understanding has three components: First, individuals are responsible for their own behavior; they are not, however, equal to their behavior. For example, although individuals' behavior may be atrocious in some particular instances, it does not follow that they are bad. Second, individuals are fallible and will make mistakes. Third, the more individuals know how learned attitudes and beliefs have influenced their behavior, the more consistently they can base their attitudes and beliefs on objective reality.

Self-mastery, the basis of the intervention program described in this study, also has three components. In developing self-mastery, persons

- 1 perceive themselves and the world about them objectively;
- 2 think thoughts which will lead one's emotions in a direction of one's own choice and physical actions in the way in which one chooses to act; and
- 3 get what they want for themselves out of life in the most efficient manner without significant personal or

significant environmental conflict. (Maultsby, 1971, p. 30)

Considered as a pilot, the present study fits into the evolving RBT literature. The use of RBT in a school setting is consistent with a major emphasis of RBT enthusiasts (Maultsby, Knipping, & Carpenter, 1974; Ross, 1978). It lends itself to classroom applications and can be integrated into the curriculum without substantial redesign. As far as we can determine, however, this study breaks new ground in the use of RBT as an alternative to traditional disciplinary procedures. We evaluated a modular, short-term RBT intervention package designed by Persons (1979). The strategy is straightforward, easily implemented, and relatively nondisruptive of school routines.

## METHOD

### SETTING

The setting for the study was an integrated junior high school in a substantially white neighborhood of a large midwestern city. September 1978 school records indicated that the racial composition of the school was approximately one-half black and one-half white. Many of the students were bused to school. About a third of the students came from families with incomes low enough to qualify them for a federal lunch program. Students apply to attend this school, and each year there are more applicants than available pupil slots.

### PARTICIPANTS

The students selected for the study were 60 seventh, eighth, and ninth graders referred to the vice-principal's office for disciplinary action at the school. The 30 students in the treatment group were those referred during the hours that a counselor was assigned. The hourly assignments were made at random. The 30 students in the control group were randomly selected from the pool of untreated students for whom complete data could be obtained. Thus, the treatment and control participants were assigned to their respective groups as randomly as possible in this applied setting.

### MEASURES

*Recidivism rate.* After the initial referral for discipline was made, the number of additional referrals for disciplinary action was recorded for all participating students. School disciplinary records were used to gather these data.

*Rating scale.* A Teacher's Disciplinary Follow-up Report<sup>1</sup> was given to the referring teacher two days after the student was sent to the vice-principal's office. The rating scale was used to obtain a view of the students' behavior after their experiences with the disciplinary system and, for treatment students, the

<sup>1</sup>The Teacher's Disciplinary Follow-up Report and the RBT counseling interview format can be obtained from Christopher Stone, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Department of Educational Psychology, P.O. Box 413, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53201.

TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Significance Values on Teacher's Disciplinary Follow-up Report Scores for Experimental and Control Groups

Item	Treatment Group		Control Group		t value
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	
1. Current assessment of the problem behavior for which the child was referred for disciplinary action	0.82	0.99	0.17	1.02	2.39*
2. Child's general classroom behavior following disciplinary behavior	0.35	1.23	-1.57	1.41	2.17
3. Child's relationship with me (teacher) since the disciplinary referral	0.38	0.70	0.00	0.59	2.18
4. Child's attention to classwork and homework since the disciplinary referral	0.44	0.83	-1.73	1.08	2.73*

\* $p < .05$ .

counseling procedure. The scale consisted of four Likert-type items, each yielding a potential score range from -3 to +3. Table 1 shows the items and the scores.

#### PROCEDURE

Five students of school psychology were assigned to the junior high school for five half days per week during six weeks in the fall semester of the 1978-79 school year. These graduate students, already acquainted with the general principles of RBT approaches and counseling techniques through their classroom course work, were given six additional hours of training in the intervention strategy. Each helper spent one half day a week at the school intercepting students who were referred to the vice-principal's office for disciplinary action (the treatment group). The counseling was given to these students before their actual meeting with the vice-principal. The control group comprised the students sent to the office on the remaining half days. The control group received no intervention before seeing the vice-principal.

The format (see Footnote 1) of the counseling given to the treated students was of a typical RBT interview structure and emphasized the following:

- 1 Students have behavioral alternatives at all times.
- 2 Some of these alternatives are in their best interests.
- 3 Students have the power to choose alternatives and are responsible to do so in their best interests.

Individual freedom to choose and the concordant responsibility for decisions were heavily underscored, as was the importance of rational (i.e., empirically supportable) thought processes.

The recidivism rate for all students was tabulated from school disciplinary records. To avoid any experimental bias in the teacher ratings, teachers were not told of the nature of the study, the research hypotheses, or the students' treatment assignments.

#### RESULTS

The dependent variables in this study consisted of (a) the recidivism rate (i.e., the number of additional disciplinary referrals after the initial referral made during the data collection period), and (b) the rated behavior of the student on the teacher's follow-up report.

Using a chi-square frequency test, the recidivism rate was found to be significantly lower in the treatment group ( $\chi^2 [1df] = 19.25; p < .001$ ). The uncounseled control students were referred nearly three times as frequently for disciplinary action as the treatment group after intervention (59 vs. 20 referrals, respectively).

Because each of the four questions on the teacher's rating scale represented a discrete behavioral measure, each was analyzed using a separate two-tailed *t* test for independent samples. For each item, a teacher could assign a range of scores from -3 to +3. Table 1 presents group means and standard deviations. Students in the treatment group received significantly higher ratings on question 1, which rated the specific problem behavior for which the student was referred. The treatment group also received significantly higher marks on question 4, which rated the child's attention to classwork and homework since the disciplinary incident. Group differences for questions 2 and 3 were in the expected direction but did not reach statistical significance.

#### DISCUSSION

Results of this pilot study lend support to the effectiveness of this RBT disciplinary intervention model. Student classroom behavior was measured within two days after the disciplinary referral using the Teacher's Disciplinary Follow-up Report. Significantly better ratings were found for the treatment group over the untreated control students on two of the four behaviors rated by the referring teachers. The specific problem behavior that warranted referral to the vice-principal and the child's attention to classwork and homework were evaluated as significantly improved. Moreover, disciplinary recidivism, a more important naturally occurring variable, showed extraordinary differentiation between the groups: Untreated students presented a rate of recidivism nearly three times that of their peers who participated in the intervention program.

The remaining two teacher ratings of student behavior did not show statistically significant group differences. Thus, although the counseled students were able to improve substantially on the specific

behavior that resulted in disciplinary action in the first place, this improvement did not seem to generalize to the students' overall behavior after returning to class. Likewise, there were not significant reported gains in teacher/student relationship after intervention. For improvement here, the model might need to be supplemented by other intervention strategies (e.g., teacher-student-parent-counselor consultation). The generalization to other behaviors might have occurred with a more comprehensive program or in one that lasted longer, perhaps in an ongoing group guidance activity.

Our findings are encouraging but hardly unequivocal. There are, for example, at least two possible explanations as to why the recidivism rate was lower in the treatment group. First, the misbehaving student, especially first offenders, may have been counseled before a habitual disciplinary pattern developed. The incident may have been resolved and the consequences of future, similar incidents made clear to the student. Alternatively, counseled students may have found the counseling to be a negative experience. Unlike punishment procedures, which focus on the disciplinary outcome, the counseling intervention forced the student to focus directly on behavior. The students had to discuss and deal with their own behavior rather than simply take their punishment and leave. For some students, confronting their behavior may have made them uncomfortable enough to deter them from repeating the problem behavior, at least for the duration of the intervention program. Although the possible existence of such negative effects should be acknowledged, student feedback does not indicate their likelihood. Indeed, in two cases students admitted getting into trouble in order to have a subsequent counseling session, thereby actually inflating the treatment group's recidivism rate! Although these students were handled by allowing them to refer themselves for counseling without a disciplinary card, others could have done likewise without our knowing it.

Recommendations for improving the program would include designating a specific room as the disciplinary counseling center. Optimal staffing would consist of at least a part-time counselor experienced in the use of cognitive-behavioral techniques, such as RBT, with adolescents. The intervention should provide follow-up opportunities when the student and/or helper think it is necessary. In future evaluation research, a placebo or other treatment group should be included to determine the relative contributions of active treatments and other experimental demand characteristics.

The use of cognitive-behavioral approaches in counseling and psychotherapy has shown potential in previous studies in a diversity of settings. We now have some initial evidence that the educational poten-

tial of such approaches deserves future research and implementation.

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