

# Redesigning a University Class in Classroom Behavior Support: Social Emotional Learning and Positive Behavior Support Strategies Taught Through Service-Learning

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## Overview

Service-learning has been defined as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (Seifer & Connors, 2007). Benefits of this approach include allowing students to connect their coursework to their roles as citizens, as well as to apply what they are learning to the world outside of the classroom; these benefits have the potential to better equip students to become active, valued members of their community and workforce.

One area where service-learning could be especially valuable for both students and the community is in classroom behavior support. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, for the 2015-2016 school year, 43 percent of public-school teachers agreed or strongly agreed that student misbehavior interfered with their teaching.

At Fitchburg State University, all undergraduate Education majors are required to take a course in Classroom Behavior Support, which is primarily focused on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Traditionally, this course has been taught in a traditional format, including lecture, discussion, and small group work. Evaluation of student progress was conducted by measuring performance on a variety of analogue assignments, created to mimic situations students might be expected to encounter in the classroom environment as teachers. However, in the Summer of 2017, Fitchburg State University’s Center for Teaching and Learning and the Crocker Center for Civic Engagement co-sponsored a Civic Engagement Faculty Institute. This was an opportunity for faculty to gain a deeper understanding of civic engagement, contextualize civic engagement within Fitchburg State University, and redesign an existing course to contain a civic engagement element. Through participation in this institute, the Classroom Behavior Support class was completely redesigned, to be primarily focused on service-learning.

## Abstract

Service-learning provides an opportunity for students to gain hands-on experience while simultaneously benefiting their local communities, thus gaining insight into their context in society. This paper details the process of redesigning an existing didactic university-level course in classroom behavior support designed for teacher candidates to instead be taught in a primarily service-learning based manner. In this process, teacher candidates interacted directly with public school students and teachers, collaborating to design a system of positive behavior support. Outcomes for the public-school teachers and students, as well as the university teacher candidates, are explored.

## Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

According to Horner & Sugai (2015), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is “a framework for delivering both the whole-school culture and additional tiers of behavior support intensity needed to improve educational and social outcomes for all students.” It is focused on providing supports in three different tiers. Tier 1, which all students experience, is proactive and focuses on teaching clear behavioral expectations, having explicit outcomes for students meeting or failing to meet expectations, providing consistent supervision, monitoring, and data collection, and organizing the school environment/culture to allow for success; these interventions tend to be effective for approximately 80% of students. For those students who do not experience success with Tier 1 interventions alone, more intensive interventions focused on providing additional structure, more prompting, more frequent encouragement, or more training (Tier 2 interventions) or individualized assessment and a comprehensive behavior support plan (Tier 3 interventions) can be implemented.

## Social Emotional Learning

According to Jones et al. (2017), Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is “the process through which individuals learn and apply a set of social, emotional, behavioral, and character skills required to succeed in schooling, the workplace, relationships, and citizenship.” Largely, they organize SEL into the domains of cognitive regulation (such as attention control), emotional processes (such as perspective taking), and social/interpersonal skills (such as conflict resolution). In classrooms that are infused with a SEL component, these skills are often taught as part of formal curricula, with those skills then being practiced, modeled, and reinforced throughout the school day. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, using evidence based SEL programs has been shown to lead to a variety of positive student outcomes, including increased academic achievement and improved behavior.

## Classroom Behavior Support at Fitchburg State University

At the university where this course redesign took place, Classroom Behavior Supports was a course typically taken by third-year Education majors. One major assignment in this class was to create a sample version of a Tier 1 system of Positive Behavior Support. Students were expected to engage in the following activities as part of completing this assignment:

- Develop a list of 3-5 ‘big picture’ expectations for students to adhere to
- Operationally define what meeting each of these expectations look like in each setting students will encounter during the school day
- Create sample posters that outline ‘big picture’ and setting-specific expectations
- Create a lesson plan for teaching students about these expectations
- Develop a system of reinforcement/incentives for students who meet expectations
- Develop a comprehensive, differentiated response grid for when students are not meeting expectations
- Design a system of data collection to track student progress and evaluate success or need for remediation at the individual and class-wide level

The goal of this assignment was to help students gain the skill set necessary to develop and implement a Tier 1 system of positive behavior support, that they might be able to use as classroom teachers following graduation.

### Classroom Behavior Support Redesign

In an effort to infuse this course with a service-learning component, the instructor met with the administrative personnel of a local elementary/middle school prior to the beginning of a school year. This group discussed service-learning and the needs of the Classroom Behavior Support class, as well as the needs of the elementary/middle school. This group identified one specific team (3 classrooms) that would most benefit from a service-learning project centered on developing and implementing a Tier 1 system of positive behavior support. This team was identified based on the behavioral presentation of the grade as a whole as measured from the previous year (a general classroom culture that was negatively impacting learning), as well as teachers who could both benefit from consultation/support around classroom behavior support, and who were likely to be receptive to this consultation/support. Once this was identified, the instructor met with the teachers to discuss the project, and to strategize and resolve any concerns prior to the start of the semester.

As this course was scheduled once per week for 2 hours and 45 minutes, this class time was divided into three roughly equal parts. The first part was directly interacting with/observing the students in the classroom; the second part was meeting with the team teachers to strategize and analyze data; and the third part was traditional classroom-based instruction.

|                   | First Part                   | Second Part                            | Third Part                               |
|-------------------|------------------------------|--|--|
| Early Semester    | Student Observation          | System Development                     | Overview of PBIS Strategies              |
| Mid/Late Semester | Student Interaction/Teaching | Data Analysis/Critical Decision Making | Preparation for Next Student Interaction |

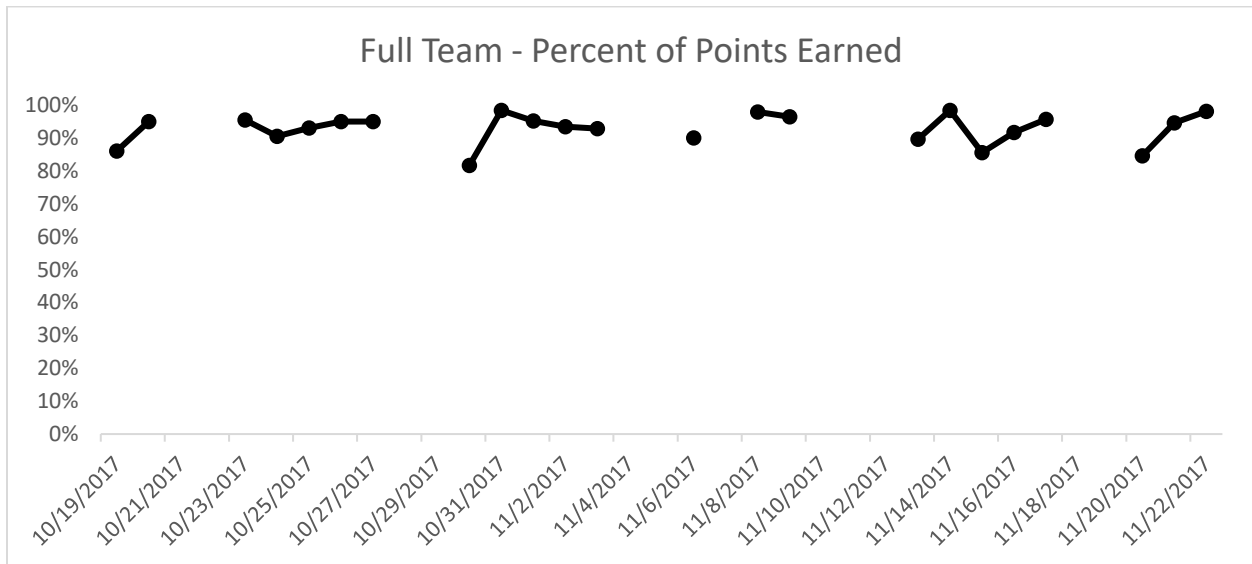
*Table 1. Outline of student activities throughout the semester.*

As can be seen in Table 1, during the early part of the semester, teacher candidates spent the first part of class simply observing the classroom, learning about the current culture and getting to know the students. During the second part of class, teacher candidates met with the teachers and the instructor, and together this group designed a system of Positive Behavior Support. During the third part of class, traditional classroom instruction focused on Positive Behavior Support in general, ensuring that teacher candidates had a thorough understanding of the principles and techniques they would be employing. As the semester progressed, teacher candidates were able to take a much more active role in the first part of class, interacting with the students and teaching specific lessons around specific classroom expectations as well as various Social Emotional Learning lessons following a formal, evidence-based SEL curriculum. Likewise, the second part of class shifted to analyzing the data of specific students as well as the classes and team as a whole and making decisions about revisions to the system or the need for additional supports on a student-specific basis.

The third part of class shifted from an overview of PBIS to preparing teacher candidates for their next student interaction, either by preparing specific lesson plans or developing more intensive student supports for those students who needed this.

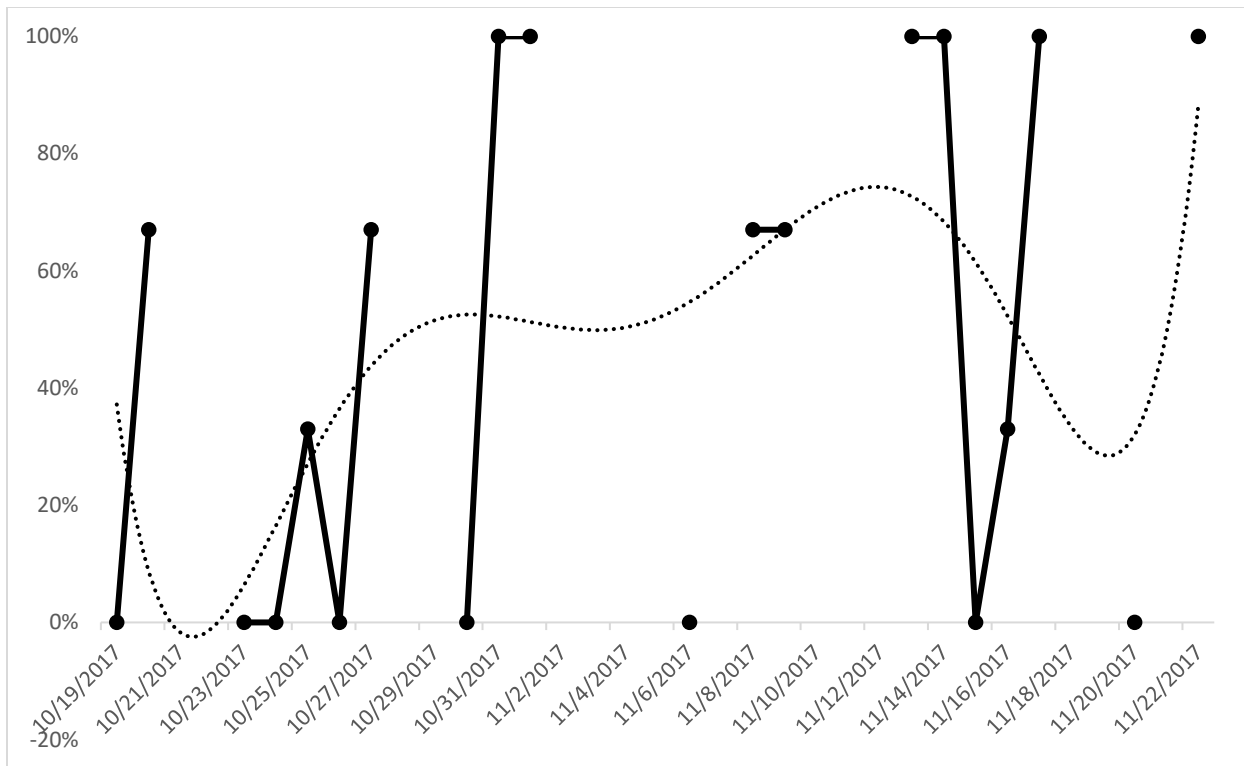
### Results – Student Outcomes

Over the course of the semester, the overall percentage of student points (reflecting meeting classroom behavioral expectations) averaged over 90%, and these gains maintained across the semester. While it is not possible to evaluate to what degree the implementation of our system of positive behavior support impacted this positive outcome, it is important to remember that this group of students was specifically selected due to pervasive difficulty with meeting behavioral expectations the previous school year. See figure 1 student outcomes, graphed by day.



*Figure 1. Teamwide response to system of Positive Behavior Support. Percent of points earned teamwide is graphed on the Y axis, and dates across the semester are graphed on the X axis.*

Likewise, individual student data tended to improve over the course of the semester, coinciding with the intensification of supports and the implementation of Tier 2 interventions targeting those students. Graphs depicting the progress of two such students are included as figures 2 and 3. Student 2 initially had multiple days in which there were no points earned (indicating this student was not meeting any of the behavioral expectations), and by the end of the experience was consistently meeting most or all of the expectations. Student 3 showed similar improvement; while there were few days initially with no points earned, typically only one out of three standards were met per day, while at the end of the experience two or more standards were met per day.



*Figure 2. Student 1 response to system of Positive Behavior Support. Percent of points earned teamwide is graphed on the Y axis, and dates across the semester are graphed on the X axis. Dotted line is a polynomial trend line showing improvement over the course of the semester.*

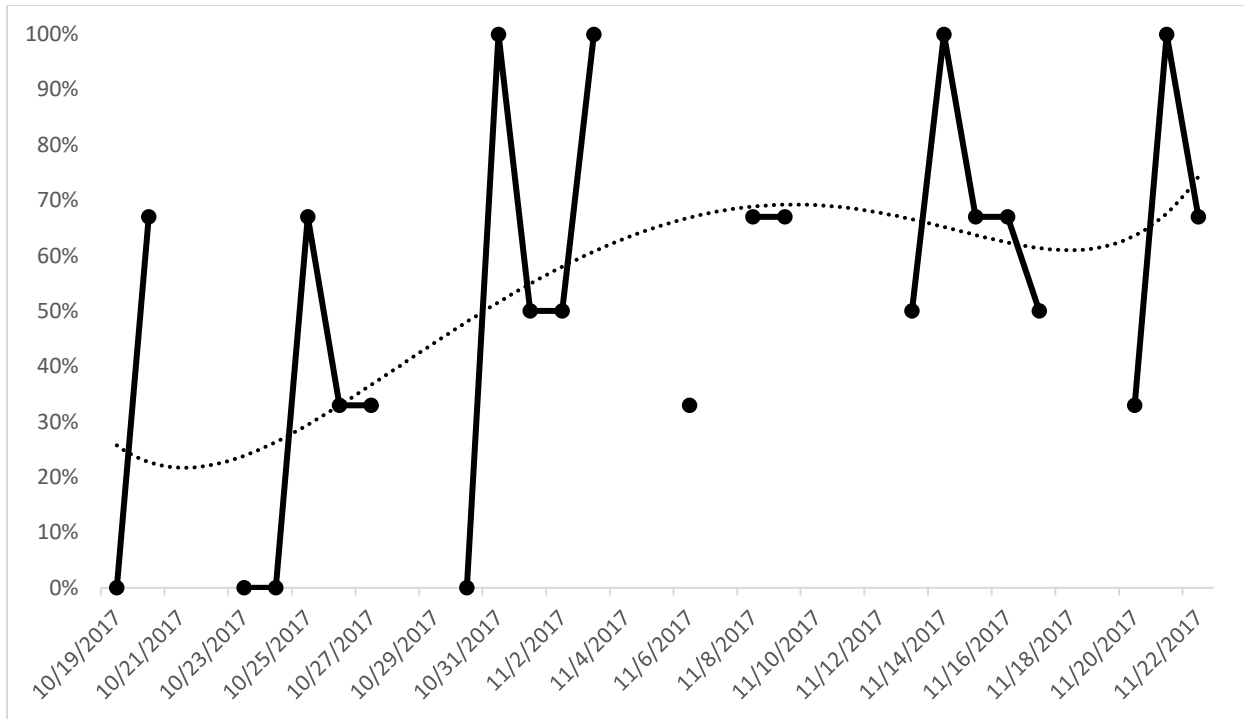


Figure 3. Student 2 response to system of Positive Behavior Support. Percent of points earned teamwise is graphed on the Y axis, and dates across the semester are graphed on the X axis. Dotted line is a polynomial trend line showing improvement over the course of the semester.

Subjectively, the students were provided with a survey at the end of the semester, to evaluate their satisfaction and feedback regarding the experience. Their feedback, on a scale of 1-3 (1 lowest, 3 highest) is included in table 2.

|   |      |
|---|------|
| I enjoyed having the college students as part of our classroom            | 2.82 |
| I did my best to follow the classroom rules                               | 2.54 |
| I think my classmates behaved better because of the system                | 1.89 |
| I understood what was expected of me                                      | 2.75 |
| I knew whether I was meeting expectations even before my teachers told me | 2.10 |

Table 2. End-of-semester student survey responses.

### Results – Teacher Candidate Outcomes

Teacher candidates were also given a survey at the end of the semester, to evaluate the degree to which they found the experience valuable. They provided several comments, such as, “learned so much and we got to actually see ourselves helping others,” “loved the interaction, it was great to feel like we were supporting the community,” “I liked the opportunity to learn in a classroom rather than from just books and work,” and “I felt like my learning increased more than in other classes.” There

were also critical comments, including “I wish I could have been in a classroom with students the age that I want to teach,” and “I wish we had more of a traditional classroom setting. Like maybe more lectures.” Their feedback, on a scale of 0-100 (0 lowest, 100 highest) is included in table 3. Additionally, the students participated in a pre-practicum survey administered at the department level specifically related to this course, and their feedback is included in table 4.

|   |    |
|---|----|
| I learned about classroom behavior support from this class  | 82 |
| It was valuable getting to interact with the students and teachers  | 79 |
| It was enjoyable getting to interact with the students and teachers   | 78 |
| I feel more confident in my ability to manage a classroom based on what I learned in this course                | 76 |
| I would have preferred this class to be in a more traditional format, without the interaction with the students | 21 |
| What we did this semester was important   | 90 |

*Table 3. End-of-semester teacher candidate survey responses.*

|  | Agree/<br>Strongly<br>Agree | Agree | Strongly<br>Agree |
|--|-----------------------------|-------|-------------------|
| The experience made connections to what was covered by my professor during class   | 100%                        | 18%   | 82%               |
| I received high quality feedback that improved my practice                         | 82%                         | 36%   | 45%               |
| The experience helped me improve my teaching                                       | 100%                        | 9%    | 91%               |
| The experience helped build my readiness to teach on my own                        | 100%                        | 9%    | 91%               |
| I benefited from the relationship that my professor had with the classroom teacher | 100%                        | 18%   | 82%               |

*Table 4. End-of-semester teacher candidate department-level survey responses.*

## Results – Teacher Outcomes

The teachers involved in this process reported positive outcomes; overall they reported a high degree of satisfaction with the process and were able to continue implementation of the system following the semester. They spoke positively enough about the process with their colleagues that the instructor began getting requests from other teachers in the school who wanted the process implemented with their classrooms as well.

## Discussion

Honnet and Poulsen (1989) outline several principles of good practice for combining service and learning. With regards to this experience, each of these principles is addressed in turn:

1. An effective program engages people in responsible and challenging actions for the common good:
  - In this experience, the team took on the challenge of improving the classroom culture and learning outcomes in a school in our local community; doing so benefited our teacher candidates, as well as the local community.
2. An effective program provides structured opportunities for people to reflect critically on their service experience:
  - In this experience, teacher candidates completed reflection papers every week. Initially, these reflection papers were general and less structured, but following feedback they have been revised to reflect the implications of the service being provided as well as to specifically relate to assigned readings.
3. An effective program articulates clear service and learning goals for everyone involved:
  - In this experience, the service goal was to improve the classroom culture and behavior of students, while both teaching and learning from the existing classroom teachers. The learning goal was to gain practical experience in the implementation of a system of positive behavior support and a social emotional learning curriculum.
4. An effective program allows for those with needs to identify those needs:
  - In this experience, teacher candidates worked directly with a team within a school that had identified needs and worked with those teams to define and respond to what those needs were. This specifically led to the infusion of the social emotional curriculum, which had not previously been a component of this course but was a needed component for the team.
5. An effective program clarifies the responsibilities of each person and organization involved:
  - When starting this process, the responsibilities of the classroom teachers, teacher candidates, and the instructor were clearly defined; however, as the process developed it was clear that the roles of the administrators and other school personnel likewise need to be defined to ensure resource management and effective implementation.
6. An effective program matches service providers and service needs through a process that recognizes changing circumstances:
  - Throughout the course of this experience, the teacher candidates and teachers worked together to modify and redesign our system of classroom behavior support, providing resources when necessary. Future iterations of this process will focus on different teams as the need arises.
7. An effective program expects genuine, active, and sustained organizational commitment:



- Throughout this process, there was a high level of buy-in from the university (in terms of training and allowing the course redesign) as well as the partner school. This must continue for continued success.
8. An effective program includes training, supervision, monitoring, support, recognition, and evaluation to meet service and learning goals:
    - Throughout this process, the instructor was present at all times when teacher candidates were present in the classroom, provided guidance during the team process, and specifically trained all teacher candidates in positive behavior supports and social emotional learning; this ensured that the teacher candidates were prepared, and that the process unfolded in a productive manner.
  9. An effective program ensures that the time commitment for service and learning is flexible, appropriate, and in the best interests of all involved:
    - The ultimate goal of this process was to improve student and teacher outcomes, while providing practical experience and learning for our teacher candidates; the time commitment was molded to meet the needs of our partner school. Future iterations of this experience might benefit from multiple course sections, to be able to place teacher candidates with partner classrooms that closely mirror the student population those candidates envision themselves working with as professionals.
  10. An effective program is committed to program participation by and with diverse populations:
    - This service-learning experience took place in a school district supporting a highly diverse population; the majority of the students in our partner school are non-white, 35 percent have a first language other than English, 10 percent are English Language Learners, 21 percent have an identified disability, and 57 percent are classified as economically disadvantaged. These figures are presented in table 5. Ultimately, this service-learning experience provided needed resources to a population that is often underserved and marginalized.

|                            | Percent of School | Percent of District |
|----------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| African American           | 8.4               | 5.9                 |
| Asian                      | 5.4               | 4.9                 |
| Hispanic                   | 47.4              | 50.5                |
| White, non-Hispanic        | 31.5              | 31.4                |
| First Language Not English | 35.2              | 32.7                |
| English Language Learner   | 10.0              | 13.8                |
| Students with Disabilities | 21.2              | 23.9                |
| Economically Disadvantaged | 57.2              | 61.9                |

*Table 5. Demographic information of partner school and district.*

## Next Steps

The infusion of a service-learning component into a course in classroom behavior supports has been successful, improving outcomes for both the school that was partnered with and the teacher candidates who provided the service-learning. Moving forward, the plan is for this partnership to continue. Areas to target for potential improvement/enhancement include moving to other teams, based on the needs of the partner school; continued revision of the reflection papers (and course requirements in general) to enhance student learning; adding a hybrid/flipped classroom component, so that students can have access to more traditional learning strategies without sacrificing the service-learning component; and dividing the class into multiple sections, which would allow us to work with a greater number of teams/grade levels, while also allowing teacher candidates to interact with students who are at the grade level they are planning on teaching as professionals.

While resource-intensive in the early going, the feedback on this process was quite positive, and providing this kind of experiential learning to teacher candidates will help prepare them to be effective teachers with a solid set of classroom management and culture building skills.

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## About the Author

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