Examining the Social Validity of a Universal Intervention for Reducing Exclusionary Discipline through Stakeholder Voice

David Furjanic[1], Irin Mannan[1], Jillian C. Hamilton[1], Joseph F. T. Nese[1], Sean Austin[1], Sara Izzard[1], and Rhonda N. T. Nese[1]

[1]College of Education, University of Oregon

Author Note

Rhonda N. T. Nese https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3314-5073

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to David Furjanic, Department of Special Education and Clinical Sciences, University of Oregon, 1235 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-1235, USA; Phone: (717) 364-4764; Fax: (541) 346-5517; Email: dfurjan2@uoregon.edu

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Abstract

Exclusionary disciplinary practices are utilized in schools despite limited benefits and associated negative student outcomes. Alternative strategies, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, reduce exclusionary discipline practices, though research is limited in secondary settings. This study examines how student and school staff input was utilized throughout the iterative refinement of the Inclusive Skill-building Learning Approach (ISLA), an intervention to reduce exclusionary discipline practices in middle school through instructional and restorative practices. Intentional stakeholder involvement was hypothesized to impact acceptability and fidelity of implementation, critical for achieving intervention outcomes. Data across a two-year mixed methods approach indicate that engaging stakeholders throughout implementation enhanced fidelity. Quantitative findings demonstrate better understanding of stakeholder experiences. Implications for practice, limitations, and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: exclusion alternatives, mixed methods, prevention, social validity

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For years, school discipline systems have inequitably delivered ineffective exclusionary practices to some of our most vulnerable groups of students (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Despite exhibiting similar levels of unwanted behavior, students of color, students with disabilities, and students living in poverty disproportionately receive exclusionary consequences at higher rates than their peers (Skiba et al., 2014; Losen et al., 2015). Exclusion (i.e., in-school and out-of-school suspensions, expulsions) has been associated with a host of negative outcomes, including school failure, dropout, and juvenile delinquency (Skiba et al., 2014). Yet despite consistent documentation of the negative impacts on student growth and a lack of evidence to support the continued use of suspension and expulsion, harsh exclusionary practices persist (Skiba & Losen, 2016).

Research has explored strategies for reducing the use of exclusionary discipline practices in schools for several years, with promising results (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013; Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017). For example, the implementation of school-wide, positive, prevention-based approaches to discipline that focus on relationship building, social-emotional learning, and structural interventions, such as School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SW-PBIS; Bradshaw et al., 2012) and Restorative Practices (Kline, 2016), have shown to be effective in reducing the use of exclusionary discipline practices and promoting prosocial skill development and a positive school climate (Bradshaw et al., 2012; Skiba & Losen, 2016). Although approaches like SW-PBIS hold promise to improve discipline practices (Greflund et al., 2014), the bulk of this research has been conducted in elementary school settings (Freeman et al., 2019) and has not been shown to eliminate discipline disproportionality entirely (McIntosh et

al., 2018). Additionally, there is limited research on SW-PBIS providing alternative strategies to replace exclusion (Gage et al., 2018). Of the research exploring universal intervention implementation at the secondary levels, middle and high schools are associated with a higher risk of abandoning interventions than elementary schools (McIntosh et al., 2016) and often take longer than elementary schools to reach adequate PBIS implementation and fidelity levels (Nese et al., 2019; Swain-Bradway et al., 2015). Explicit systems are essential to support staff in SW-PBIS secondary implementation (Swain-Bradway et al., 2015). Furthermore, students at the secondary level are more likely than their elementary counterparts to experience exclusionary discipline, highlighting the importance of interventions that consider the specific needs and contextual factors of middle school settings (Losen et al., 2015).

Implementation at the Middle School Level

Universal PBIS implementation at the middle school level is characterized by unique challenges. For example, elementary schools often feed into middle schools, leading to more students and staff in a building (Burns & Gibbons, 2012). Each individual in the school interacts with significantly more students and staff throughout their day, which can impede communication, consistency, and connection among students, teachers, and parents (Johnson & Smith, 2008; Stormshak et al., 2005). Additionally, because middle school teachers specialize in specific content areas, communication between staff regarding expectations and student progress can be hard to convey across subjects. Staff may be unable to consistently coordinate responses to unwanted student behavior that occurred between classes or in a colleague's classroom (Spaulding et al., 2010).

For students, the transition to middle school is accompanied with novel academic and behavior expectations, some of which may seem stark compared elementary school experiences.

Though students arrive with a range of skills, middle school staff often expect students to have learned and regularly demonstrate appropriate behavior across all settings (Flannery et al., 2014). These perceptions may reduce staff willingness to engage in proactive practices, such as explicitly teaching behavior expectations. Considering office referrals for subjective behaviors (e.g., defiance, disrespect, disruption) occur frequently for middle school students (Girvan et al., 2017; Spaulding et al., 2010), the communication of expectations is crucial. However, students encounter staff with varying tolerance for unwanted subjective behaviors (Närhi et al., 2017) and thus receive inconsistent messages. What is considered appropriate behavior in one class may be grounds for exclusionary discipline in another. Beyond teaching behavior expectations for students, schoolwide expectations prompt staff to agree upon and explicitly outline reasonable responses to students' unwanted behavior to promote a predictable and equitable environment. Visual guides, such as behavior flowcharts, help staff collaboratively determine the severity of common unwanted behaviors and develop consistent guidelines for which behaviors should be handled in the classroom versus the office. Factors such as limited coordination and consistency among teachers, varying staff perspectives on student behavior, and the wide range of student abilities impede the use of effective, positive behavioral interventions in middle schools.

Leveraging Findings from Implementation Science

The unique characteristics of middle school environments necessitate interventions designed with contextual fit in mind. With the goal of translating empirical outcomes to practitioners, implementation science offers insights into conceptualizing interventions as tools that are responsive to stakeholders' needs. Results from a review of implementation research by Fixsen and colleagues (2005) highlight the importance of acceptability, feasibility, and fidelity of implementation as critical components for demonstrating outcomes in realistic contexts.

The acceptability of an intervention describes the extent stakeholders perceive the intervention to be relevant and effective for their population. Though stakeholders may refer to community members, families, policy makers and more, in this study we focus on students and school staff as the stakeholders of interest. Acceptability may moderate an intervention's effectiveness through the actions of the stakeholders in the intervention context. Regardless of empirical evidence, school staff who perceive an intervention as relevant for their students and aligning with their goals will be more likely to implement the intervention faithfully (Lohrmann et al., 2008; Witt et al., 1984). Similarly, school leaders who believe an intervention will be effective are more likely to invest resources and personnel to support its implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005; McIntosh et al., 2018; Stockard, 2020).

Fidelity is the extent that critical intervention components are implemented as prescribed. Whereas acceptability describes perceptions, fidelity describes the reality of a school staff's actions. Because the evidence for any particular intervention is specific to the procedures and dosage that participants received, fidelity is essential for translating observed empirical results from controlled settings into realistic contexts (Mathews et al., 2014; Smolkowski et al., 2019). School staff who implement an intervention with high fidelity ensure they remain as close as possible to the intended delivery. Conversely, staff who inconsistently implement the intervention or drift from the way they were trained weaken the dosage that students receive and should, in turn, expect weaker results (Gottfredson et al., 2015; Moir, 2018).

Obstacles Encountered by School Psychologists in Systems Implementation

School psychologists at all levels engage in systems-level services (outlined by the National Association of School Psychologists [NASP]), such as school-wide practices to promote learning and preventive and responsive services (Skalski et al., 2015). School

psychologists experience no dearth of effective evidence-based practices to draw upon but often struggle in promoting successful implementation of these practices in their settings (Castillo & Curtis, 2014). Perceived factors important to success in implementation of universal interventions include administrator support, staff buy-in, and consistency in approach (Pinkelman et al., 2015). System coaches and leaders often refer to the inverse of this success (e.g. lack of administrator support, staff perception that intervention is not worth the effort) as implementation barriers (Lohrmann et al., 2013; McIntosh et al., 2016; Nese et al., 2016). These findings indicate that a school psychologist's ability to foster intervention acceptability among one's colleagues is likely pivotal to initiating and sustaining an innovation (Lohrmann et al., 2008). One method for school psychologists to maintain or improve acceptability is through solicitation and incorporation of staff feedback in intervention design and revisions.

Iteratively Seeking Stakeholder Input to Improve Outcomes

Findings from implementation science demonstrate the effect of stakeholder variables on intervention outcomes. Although traditional research approaches typically isolate the role of researchers and site implementers, stakeholder participation is increasingly recognized as a necessary component in facilitating higher quality and more effective intervention research (Minkler et al., 2018). Community-based participatory research (CBPR) allows for a continuum of engagement of the community (Balazs & Morello-Frosch, 2013) and involves stakeholders in innovation development and/or refinement. This approach often uses stakeholders to alert the need for changes but can go as far including them as active partners in deciding what those changes should be.

Within an iterative development process, incorporating the voices of those implementing or receiving the intervention presents an opportunity to strengthen aspects that are working well

and to retool the pieces that are not. Refining an intervention iteratively with stakeholder input can use multiple levels of stakeholders (e.g. students, staff, and community members; Loeb et al., 2019) and multiple degrees of participation, start to finish. As described earlier, the acceptability and fidelity of an innovation are crucial considerations, and it is important to consider how stakeholder feedback can enhance each (Goodman & Sanders Thompson, 2017). As an example, Anytown Middle School's leadership team is interested in moving forward with a research project; however, the implementation team raises concerns about designating an overloaded certified staff member as the primary implementer. As a result, the intervention no longer appears feasible to the team. Soliciting input from district partners from the outset allows this research team to make adaptations that require less commitment for the certified staff and shift some duties to a classified staff member, while still adequately supporting the goals of the intervention. As seen in this example, stakeholder feedback in the hands of researchers provides the opportunity to reduce contextual barriers and ultimately allows for greater understanding of the mechanisms of interest.

Although seeking input from site staff throughout a study requires additional time from all parties, moving toward community-based participatory research affords two distinct advantages to researchers creating the interventions and school teams charged with implementing them. The first is that regular feedback alerts researchers of acceptability concerns, allowing for opportunities to collaboratively address factors that may have otherwise hindered an intervention's intended implementation or outcomes (Minkler et al., 2018). While researchers are expected to bring theory and methodological expertise, school leaders and staff bring academic, social, and cultural expertise as it relates to their school context (Lang et al., 2010). Thus, research products are enriched through strong collaborative efforts across stakeholders. Second,

soliciting and responding to stakeholder feedback acknowledges the human aspect of educational research. Conscientious communication between educators and staff implementing the research promotes trust among parties (Pivik & Goelman, 2011). This may include soliciting information through in-depth discussion, follow-up questions, and as previously discussed, demonstrates through action that those perspectives are valued. The iterative collection of stakeholder feedback improves intervention outcomes by creating a product with reduced contextual barriers that is aligned to researcher and practitioner goals and that will likely be implemented with greater fidelity (Nese et al., 2021).

Inclusive Skill-building Learning Approach (ISLA)

The current study employs the Inclusive Skill-building Learning Approach (ISLA), a universal intervention to reduce exclusionary discipline practices by providing instructional alternatives that support middle school students and teachers during instances where unwanted behavior leads to student removal from the classroom (Nese et al., 2020). The objectives of ISLA are multifaceted and include (a) providing skill-building supports to improve student social and behavioral problem-solving, (b) improving teacher and administrator practices and school systems, and (c) restoring student-teacher relationships (Nese et al., 2020). ISLA targets the reduction of instructional time lost by prioritizing systems for implementation support and providing instructional practices for behavioral skill-building as well as mechanisms for repairing student-teacher relationships. Preliminary findings from research on the ISLA intervention has demonstrated significant reductions in the percentage of students receiving all levels of exclusionary discipline and a 92% reduction in lost instructional minutes (Nese et al., 2020).

Given findings related to the challenges of implementation at the middle school level, the importance of contextual fit for high levels fidelity and acceptability, and the critical impact of stakeholder feedback, the research team utilized an iterative process to develop, implement, and refine the ISLA intervention. The iterative approach allowed both formal and informal stakeholder feedback to shape future adjustments to ISLA materials and practices while building trust among researchers and school staff (Nese et al., 2021). Actively engaging stakeholders in ISLA development and refinement demonstrates genuine interest in developing an intervention that has high levels of fidelity and staff acceptability, which is theorized to lead to improved student outcomes (Nese et al., 2021).

ISLA utilizes a proactive systems approach where most unwanted student behavior can be prevented or managed in the classroom using behavior management practices such as relationship-building, teaching class-wide expectations, and graduated discipline (e.g., reteaching, redirecting, parent contact, behavioral contracts). These practices help ensure that exclusionary discipline is reserved for the most serious behavioral incidents (Nese et al., 2020). If student behavior requires removal from class, ISLA trained support staff members are available to provide coaching and support in a designated location. ISLA practices are implemented during this process including: the triage process (i.e., determine whether behavior is a safety concern), Student Debrief (i.e., gather student's perspective on the incident), Behavior Skills Coaching (i.e., teach, model, and reinforce alternative skills), Reconnection Conversation and Card (i.e., provide coaching for upcoming conversation with teacher), Classroom Reentry (i.e., student supported by ISLA support staff in the Reconnection Conversation), and communication (i.e., data entered into ISLA tracking sheet). Together, these practices work to minimize the likelihood students are removed from class and optimize the support and skill-

building provided to students when they require additional out of classroom support (Nese et al., 2021).

Study Purpose

Preliminary student outcomes of the ISLA intervention, intended to reduce exclusionary discipline practices, have been documented in multiple studies and are on-going (Nese et al., 2020; Nese et al., 2021). The present study explores the iterative refinement of the ISLA intervention through the systematic incorporation of stakeholder input. Data were gathered through student focus groups, meetings of school staff (i.e., design team meetings), and a staff survey administered to determine acceptability and social validity of the ISLA intervention. The active involvement of school staff in the intervention design process is hypothesized to increase contextual fit of the intervention and improve staff perceptions of the intervention as effective and relevant (i.e., acceptability) and increase intervention fidelity. Research questions are as follows:

1. Acceptability
    a. How did educators rate the acceptability of the ISLA intervention?
    b. What were the most salient areas identified by stakeholders that improved from Year 1 to Year 2 of implementation?
    c. What were the most salient areas for improvement identified by stakeholders?
    d. Did educators' ratings and comments vary by respondent characteristics (i.e., year, school, and participant role)?
2. Fidelity of Implementation
    a. Did self-reported implementation fidelity change over time?

Method

Participants and Settings

Stakeholder participants were recruited from two public middle schools located in the Pacific Northwest serving students in grades six through eight. Schools had a predominately white student body, as approximately 34% of the student body identified as racial or ethnic minorities. Sixty-seven percent of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). See Table 1 for individual school demographics.

All study activities occurred at the school sites and online. The feedback analyzed in this study was primarily solicited through the Primary Intervention Rating Scale (PIRS; Lane et al., 2002). During the spring of 2019 and 2020, all staff members were invited to complete the PIRS.

Participants who completed the survey included 48 staff members in 2019 and 59 staff members in 2020. In 2019, participating staff included 21 general education teachers, 5 special education teachers, 6 related arts teachers (e.g., art, computers), 2 school administrators, 8 classified support staff (e.g., educational assistants), and 6 licensed support staff (e.g., school psychologist, school counselor). In 2020, participating staff included 25 general education teachers, 4 special education teachers, 8 related arts teachers, 3 school administrators, 12 classified support staff, and 7 licensed support staff. All PIRS survey responses were anonymized, and active consent was gathered according to Institutional Review Board guidelines. Further descriptive statistics about the sample are reported in Table 2.

Procedures

Staff members in each middle school were involved in refining ISLA practices and procedures, testing the intervention within different school contexts, and engaging in continuous conversations to solicit staff feedback. Each year, school staff were engaged in carefully

sequenced activities related to the ISLA intervention development (2018–2019) or ISLA intervention refinement (2019–2020).

Year 1 (2018-2019)

Year 1 foci included piloting the intervention, identifying targeted areas of improvement, and gathering stakeholder feedback to improve implementation. With administrator help, Design Teams (i.e., representative samples of educators in a variety of school roles) facilitated ongoing dialogue regarding staff feedback and recommendations throughout this iterative process. Design Team feedback was instrumental in identifying critical contextual considerations for implementation of ISLA Systems Components and the ISLA Implementation Checklist. This process familiarized the research team with school needs and resources and allowed for candid discussions surrounding feasibility.

Following Design Team meetings, at least three school staff members from each building (i.e., ISLA Support Team members including at least one administrator) were trained to deliver the ISLA curriculum. Training objectives included key intervention components – the triage process when students are initially sent to the office, the ISLA debrief, behavioral skills coaching, and classroom reentry facilitated by the ISLA reconnection conversation. ISLA Support Team members then participated in a field test of the curriculum to manage students sent to the office. Feedback was solicited from participating staff and discussed with the Design Team. In the spring of 2019, all building staff were invited to comment on ISLA usability and relevance by completing the PIRS via a Qualtrics survey.

To analyze qualitative data from the PIRS open-ended questions, participant comments were selected to add depth and alternative perspectives, and thus are used here to supplement our quantitative results and provide a voice beyond the quantitative. The research team discussed and

summarized the PIRS feedback and reconvened with the Design Teams to determine any necessary curriculum revisions.

Year 2 (2019-2020)

During Year 2, the research team implemented the ISLA intervention enhanced by stakeholder feedback and participated in ongoing discussions with school staff. Priorities of the refined ISLA intervention included providing additional strategic coaching and gathering input regarding recommended changes. The research team collected PIRS data again in the spring of 2020 to gauge significant changes in staff perceptions.

Across both years of building involvement, research team members remained in consistent contact with school staff in a variety of ways. Staff-wide professional development trainings occurred at the beginning of each year. These trainings reviewed classroom management strategies to equip teachers with additional tools to manage common or low-level behaviors within the classroom and ISLA curriculum components. ISLA team meetings, involving ISLA coaches and ISLA Support Team members, occurred bi-monthly. These check-ins served as opportunities to raise specific concerns and troubleshoot, as necessary. Additionally, Design Team meetings occurred four times per year and served as opportunities to gather specific feedback from school stakeholders to inform changes to the ISLA model.

Measures

Primary Intervention Rating Scale (PIRS)

The PIRS was used as a measure of acceptability developed to gather stakeholder perceptions of the social validity of intervention goals and procedures (Lane et al., 2009). The PIRS is a 17-item survey completed on a Likert scale with allowable responses of *Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Slightly Disagree, Slightly Agree, Agree, and Strongly Agree*. Staff were invited to complete this

measure in the spring of 2019 and 2020. In addition, school staff had the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions providing more specific feedback regarding improvements to key intervention components and procedures (Appendix A). Psychometric properties such as high internal consistency ($\alpha = .97$) contribute to the strong predictive validity of implementation fidelity (Lane et al., 2002).

Fidelity

Fidelity of ISLA implementation was measured using the ISLA Self-Rating Fidelity Tool, completed by the school-based ISLA interventionists. For each student seen by the interventionist, they were to record whether the following six ISLA components were delivered: (a) *Was the ISLA debrief completed?* (b) *Was the student coached on the appropriate behavior skill?* (c) *Did the student practice the reconnection conversation with the interventionist?* (d) *Did the student complete a reconnection card?* (e) *Did the student do the reconnection conversation with the referring teacher?* And (f) *Did the student re-enter the classroom?*

Data Analysis

PIRS Survey Data

Responses to the PIRS quantitative questions were coded on an ascending ordinal scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (6). Responses were grouped by year (2018–19 or 2019–20), school, and the role of the respondent in the school. Educators' responses to the PIRS were removed for incomplete data ($n = 8$) and withholding consent ($n = 5$), leading to a final sample of $n = 48$ in Year 1 and 59 in Year 2.

Univariate descriptive statistics were conducted, and mean differences were examined via a one-way, repeated measures analysis of variance. Mean differences were calculated between

years (whether mean ratings for an item differed by year; “Was Item 4 rated more highly in Year 2 than Year 1?”) and also by items (whether mean ratings for an item differed from other items that year; “Did respondents in Year 1 respond to Item 4 more favorably than the other items?”).

PIRS ratings were regressed on respondent characteristics (year, school, and participant role) to explore the extent each explained variance in PIRS ratings. Lastly, qualitative responses were reviewed and data that reflected the quantitative findings were identified.

Fidelity of Implementation Data

For each year’s fidelity, we calculated an average proportion of fidelity for each of the six ISLA components (dividing the number of times a component was delivered by the total number of possible opportunities to deliver the component). We then estimated Cohen’s h (1988), an effect size (ES) statistic for comparison of ISLA component fidelity proportions across years. We also conduct a series of logistic regression analyses, regressing the fidelity of each of the six ISLA components (delivered to a student or not) on a dichotomous predictor representing the implementation year, to determine the likelihood of receiving the ISLA component from Year 1 (2018–19) to Year 2 (2019–20). That is, we conducted six logistic regression analyses, one for each of the ISLA components: (a) Was the ISLA debrief completed? (b) Was the student coached on the appropriate behavior skill? (c) Did the student practice the re-connection conversation with the interventionist? (d) Did the student complete a re-connection card? (e) Did the student do the re-connection conversation with the referring teacher? (f) Did the student reenter the classroom? Each regression had only one independent variable, a dichotomous indicator of the year, where Year 1 = 0, and Year 2 = 1. Thus, the intercept represents the ISLA fidelity for Year 1, and the coefficient for the IV represents the ISLA fidelity for Year 2.

Results

General results are presented first, followed by data identifying improvements from the first to second year of the study and then by data identifying areas for further improvement.

Acceptability

Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 3. First, item ratings were compared amongst themselves to identify salient components of the intervention. Items were analyzed, meeting statistical assumptions, within year cohort to account for varying responders. Within the first year of the study, participants responded significantly more favorably to Item 1 (“ISLA is an acceptable intervention for middle schools.”) and Item 7 (“I am willing to use ISLA in the school setting.”). In the second year of the study, participants responded significantly more favorably to Items 1 and 7 again, as well as Item 9 (“ISLA is appropriate for a variety of students.”).

These findings are aligned with qualitative perspectives from staff, especially in the second year. One school administrator in the second year demonstrates the appropriateness of the ISLA procedures for promoting skill-building in this population by noting, “the ISLA process is helping a kid analyze a problem behavior, coaching them on pro-social skills, rehearsing the reconnection conversation and then facilitating the actual reconnection conversation. This is a great thing”. Similarly, a classified support staff in that same year adds their approval of the intervention and its relevance to students in saying, “Students are responsible and held accountable for their behaviors and have a clearer understanding of what, why and how. They also get the opportunity to see their peers modeling class/social expectations”.

Another notable response pattern to the PIRS is that, in Year 1, 21 participants responded “not applicable” to 71 items. This decreased in Year 2, with only 6 participants responding “not applicable” to 11 items. In Year 1, many of the participants who responded “not applicable”

commented specifically on not being well informed or aware about ISLA and how it is being implemented at their schools. For example:

> "I have no idea how ISLA is being implemented in my school. I have no idea what students it is being used with and I have never been told when, where, who or with whom it is being used. The only time I hear about ISLA is during these surveys, a few trainings, and once someone from U of O observed my classroom. It is difficult for me to evaluate effectiveness with a program that isn't evident in my classroom" (general education teacher, 2018).

> "[The program] was/has not been "rolled" out in a way that teachers really understood what ISLA was and how to do the forms/reconnections etc." (licensed support staff, 2018).

By contrast, whereas several participants in Year 1 commented about not participating in the intervention or being uninformed about implementation at their schools, no one in Year 2 commented about not being knowledgeable about the intervention. Participants in Year 2 responded to the survey demonstrating their knowledge about ISLA implementation. Year 1 survey responses are starkly different compared to Year 2 where the very few participants who responded "not applicable" to certain survey items provided detailed responses pointing to specific aspects of the interventions that they would like to see changed or improved. For example:

> "I wish we could have more staff and more staff hours dedicated to supporting effective ISLA implementation (not a real issue with the model and probably not especially realistic, I know). Sometimes we had one or two staff members to support us, when we really could have used two or three… I think

> this year's changes were a really positive move. I think the only thing I worry about moving forward is making sure that I am documenting my participation in ISLA in good faith, and being supported in that documentation [i.e.] writing "Reset Room" slips, "Think Sheets" for Buddy Classrooms, calling down to our Reset Room, etc. (general education teacher, 2019).

> "The least beneficial part is filling out the form. It is good as a form to help us talk to the student but the students do not want to fill it out. Especially, students who are frequently needing redirection" (classified support staff, 2019).

Next, to understand salient PIRS item ratings across years, mean ratings of PIRS items across the two years were examined as a one-way, repeated measures analysis of variance. The independent variable was the participant's year with 2 levels and the dependent variable was the mean PIRS rating. The main effect of year on mean PIRS ratings was not significant, $F(1, 104) = 1.19$, $p = .28$. Participants rated the acceptability of the ISLA intervention similarly in the first ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.92$) and second ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.82$) years, on average. There were no significant pairwise comparisons between mean PIRS ratings for individual items across years. In other words, ratings for specific PIRS items did not differ from Year 1 to Year 2.

When examining item differences within each year, participants in Year 1 responded significantly less favorably to Item 15 ("The ISLA fidelity procedures are manageable."). As one licensed support staff comments:

> "It's the getting to fidelity part that concerns me. Specifically, how do we get to fidelity when the game plan requires the reset room staff member to do quite a bit, all while doing their already overloaded job. Same for our Assistant Principal. He might get lucky and have time once in a blue moon to walk a

> student back to class for a reconnection, but the amount of work that is being asked of the two of them to me is the biggest barrier to fidelity taking place" (2018).

In Year 2, respondents answered significantly less favorably to Item 6 ("Most teachers find ISLA suitable for the school's needs and mission.") and Item 11 ("The amount of time required to implement ISLA is reasonable.") and, again, Item 15. This is also reflected in the qualitative comments, such as:

> "I think the theory behind ISLA is good and interesting, but the logistics and actual implementation within the current educational model and a schools resources make the ISLA model fall short of its potential" (general education teacher, 2019).

> "The least beneficial part, I think, is that sometimes it is hard to fully follow the process. A lot of time the follow-up conversation with the teacher or whoever it is gets lost in translation because of how little time there is between class periods or with how busy teachers are with facilitating a large group of students" (classified support staff, 2019).

Next, PIRS ratings were regressed stepwise on participant characteristics of role and school. All correlations between participant variables (year, role, and school) were unrelated ($r < |.06|$) and nonsignificant ($p > .05$). Meeting all statistical assumptions, the first model regressed on participant role, comparing the effect of a participant's role in the school on their ratings of the ISLA intervention. This model was statistically significant and suggests that participant's role explained 16% of the variance in mean PIRS ratings, $F(5, 100) = 3.89$, $p < .01$.). According to this model, a mean rating of 5.22 ($SE = 0.37$, $p < .01$) is expected for administrators. This is

higher than the mean ratings for general education teachers (4.09; SE = 0.38, $p < .01$) and related arts teachers (4.05; SE = 0.42, $p < .01$). Classified staff (such as office or janitorial staff), licensed staff (such as school counselors or school psychologists) and special education teachers were not significant predictors ($p = .09$, .30, and .38, respectively). Accounting for year within the model did not significantly affect the results.

Administrators rating the ISLA intervention more favorably than other school staff is consistent with the qualitative results where all three administrators who participated in the ISLA survey expressed positive impacts of the ISLA model. To the question "Do you think that you and your students' participation in the ISLA model will cause your students' performance to change?", one administrator reflected:

> "I do think the ISLA process does teach some good skills around behavior and it prompts students to reflect on their words and actions. Having kids reflect on their impact is great for developing empathetic skills and it is a very important element of social-emotional learning. Also, the connections with restorative justice is very helpful" (2019).

Another administrator added:

> "The ISLA process is a great idea. It definitely lives within the restorative justice frame of reference and this is important. It also works within a school and district's existing behavior systems which is good too" (2019).

Conversely, respondents identifying as a general education teacher ($b = 4.02$), related arts teacher ($b = 4.00$), or classified staff ($b = 4.52$) were associated with lower average PIRS ratings compared to administrators (5.22). These perspectives contrast those shared by administrators and are reflected in qualitative comments, such as:

> "I think being able to collect data has been the most beneficial. I think the least beneficial is the fact that a lot of us teachers don't have direct access to the data at all times" (general education teacher, 2019).
>
> "My biggest concern is that schools do not have enough trained staff and even staff time to really work through the process with students to make it real and meaningful" (general education teacher, 2019).

Lastly, regressing PIRS ratings on school was not statistically significant ($F(1, 104) = 1.39$, $p = .24$).

Fidelity of Implementation

Year 1 (2018–19) self-report fidelity data were collected on 743 incidents from 296 students from Apr 1, 2019, through Jun 14, 2019. Year 2 (2019–20) self-report fidelity data were collected on 1,805 incidents from 371 students from Sep 5, 2019, through Mar 13, 2020. Table 4 shows the descriptive data for the six components, the effect size (h) for the change in ISLA component fidelity proportions (Yes delivered) across years, and the logistic regression results.

Across the six ISLA components, approximately 29% of Year 1 (2018–19) entries and approximately 26.5% of Year 2 (2019–20) entries were missing. For each ISLA component, there were more missing data in Year 1 (2018–19) than in Year 2 (2019–20; h from 0.01 to 0.1), suggesting that fidelity records were slightly improved in Year 2 (2019–20).

The fidelity of implementation for each of the six ISLA components increased from Year 1 (2018–19) to Year 2 (2019–20). Was the ISLA debrief completed? increased from 40% to 50% (h = 0.22). Was the student coached on the appropriate behavior skill? increased from 45% to 66% (h = 0.44). Did the student practice the reconnection conversation with the interventionist? increased from 23% to 31% (h = 0.17). Did the student complete a reconnection card? increased

from 22% to 26% (h = 0.1). Did the student do the reconnection conversation with the referring teacher? increased from 11% to 21% (h = 0.29). Did the student reenter the classroom? increased from 16% to 26% (h = 0.24).

The results of the logistic regression analyses presented in Table 4 show the β coefficients which represent the logits for receiving an ISLA component in Year 2. The β coefficients (logits) can be converted into odds ratios (exp(β)) to represent the odds-ratio of receiving the ISLA component in Year 2 (2019–20) compared to Year 1 (2018–19). Compared to a student in Year 1 (2018–19), a student in Year 2 (2019–20) was: 1.5 times more likely to complete the ISLA debrief; nearly 2.5 times more likely to be coached on the appropriate behavior skill; 1.5 times more likely to practice the reconnection conversation with the interventionist; 1.3 times more likely to complete a reconnection card; about 2.25 times more likely to do the reconnection conversation with the referring teacher; and 1.8 times more likely to reenter the classroom. All coefficient estimates are statistically significant at $p < .01$, except for "Did the student complete a reconnection card?"

In the qualitative survey, school staff also reflected on student reconnection conversations. A SPED instructor from the first year commented, "[The] most beneficial part is building relationships between students and staff (2019). Similarly, in the second year, a classified support staff also indicated, "the most beneficial aspect of ISLA is the reconnection between staff members and students" (2020). Another general education teacher explains that the most beneficial component of ISLA is "the immediate communication between student and teacher" (2020).

In Year 2 specifically, the results indicated that a student was 2.25 times more likely to do the reconnection conversation with the referring teacher than in Year 1. The increased

implementation of the reconnection conversation in the second year aligns with staff members' positive regard for this intervention component. This is demonstrated repeatedly in the responses to the open-ended questions in the qualitative survey. For example:

> "I feel that the ISLA model allows for a mature conversation between student and educator. It's an opportunity for the student to take responsibility or possibly explain what is going on with them (in a larger picture) that may have resulted in their actions" (classified support staff, 2020).

> "Some students that participated in the reconnection process really took it to heart and appreciated the opportunity to make amends and improvements to the actions" (general education teacher, 2020).

Discussion

Exclusionary discipline remains a common approach utilized in schools for addressing unwanted student behavior, despite its link to significant negative student outcomes (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba et al., 2014). Research indicates that marginalized youth such as students of color and students with disabilities experience exclusionary discipline at much higher rates, and time out of the classroom results in missed opportunities for learning, further widening the educational opportunity gap for marginalized youth (Losen & Martinez, 2020; Skiba & Losen, 2016). While SW-PBIS approaches are effective in reducing exclusionary practices and benefit students, research on factors affecting implementation in realistic school contexts is limited. This study aimed to explore the acceptability and fidelity of ISLA implementation for achieving intervention outcomes at the middle school level.

To better understand stakeholder perspectives and experiences, stakeholder survey responses from Year 1 (2018–1) and Year 2 (2019–20) were examined. These responses were

useful in the intervention refinement process as it allowed for more in-depth examination of stakeholders' engagement and experience with the intervention implementation process (Castillo, 2020). Though the quantitative acceptability findings do not demonstrate statistically significant differences from Year 1 to Year 2, the responses from school staff indicate an increase in positive perceptions, increased knowledge of ISLA implementation, and a greater understanding of the valuable skills students gain from ISLA. Overall, school staff highly valued the core components of the intervention and implemented the various components with higher fidelity in Year 2. Within the first and second year of the study, participants widely agreed that ISLA is an acceptable intervention for middle schools which addresses varying student needs in building communication and behavioral management skills.

However, time and limited staff resources presented as barriers to effective implementation in both years. This indicates that though an intervention might have high acceptability among stakeholders, structural barriers such as lack of available time or staff are consistent challenges for achieving the intended outcomes of school-based interventions. Teachers and school staff are often overburdened with duties and expectations of program implementation yet not provided with the necessary resources to achieve intended goals (McGoey et al., 2014). This further emphasizes the need for researcher and stakeholder collaboration throughout the development, implementation, and refinement process, to not only better understand the critical components of an effective intervention but to also arrive at practical procedures. Knowing the pervasive burden on educators, researchers may explore diverse ways to diffuse intervention knowledge, such as online materials, videos, and resources for teachers to flexibly access. Proactively supporting the logistical demands of school staff may

be critical to intervention success, particularly due to the fragility of intervention sustainment in the first year (McIntosh et al., 2016).

Comparing the response patterns to the PIRS items in Year 1 and Year 2 provided additional insight. Almost half of the participants in Year 1 responded “not applicable” to 71 items, whereas in Year 2 only six participants responded “not applicable” to only 11 items. This is further emphasized in the Year 1 qualitative responses where many participants demonstrated unawareness and lack of knowledge about the intervention. By contrast, Year 2 participants provided detailed feedback for future improvement, demonstrating how iterative stakeholder input from Year 1 contributed to increased knowledge and awareness of ISLA implementation by school staff in Year 2.

Soliciting staff feedback allowed the research team to identify salient strengths as well as areas of improvement. School staff noted several positive impacts related to the implementation of ISLA, including connections with restorative justice, ties to social-emotional learning outcomes, and the utility of the reconnection conversation. Identified for improvement were structural barriers such as limited time and a reliance on overburdened staff members to implement intervention components. Teachers voiced concerns about not having direct access to the data being collected and the utility of the data collection forms. Staff feedback allowed the research team to devote time and resources refining components that otherwise may have been ignored.

Positive administrative support was evident throughout the PIRS data. The significance of administrator support for ISLA is supported by research highlighting the essential role of administrators in implementing and sustaining evidence-based practices in their schools. Mathews and colleagues (2014) found that school staff rated administrator support as the most

important factor influencing both implementation and sustainability of school-wide positive behavioral interventions. Additionally, the implementation of school-wide interventions is facilitated when the principal and other building-level administrators engage in behavior that demonstrates their direct support of and investment in the success of school-wide interventions (Forman et al., 2009). This is reflected in our findings – that school administrators' ratings reflected high levels of acceptability and support of the ISLA intervention. By soliciting administrator feedback, the research team was able to assess the investment of building leaders in supporting the success of the intervention. Additionally, administrator ratings could plausibly be linked with increased fidelity, as both improved in Year 2.

Fidelity of Implementation

Findings showed that fidelity of implementation for each of the six ISLA components increased from Year 1 (2018–19) to Year 2 (2019–20). The β coefficients of the logistic regression analysis were converted into odds ratios to represent the odds of a student receiving an ISLA component in Year 2 in comparison to Year 1 across all components1. Findings indicate the odds of a student receiving an ISLA component was much higher in Year 2 compared to Year 1.

In Year 2, self-report fidelity data increased for both incidents and number of students, suggesting fidelity improved in Year 2. Data collected on incidents more than doubled in Year 2 and the number of students for which data was collected also increased, even though data collection was interrupted by COVID-19 school closures. Furthermore, the number of missing entries across ISLA components decreased from approximately from 31% to 27%, suggesting that fidelity records slightly improved in Year 2.

This increase in fidelity in Year 2 may be associated with higher acceptability by school staff. The research team collaborated with school staff throughout the intervention's iterative process, resulting in stakeholder buy-in and gaining regular feedback that was incorporated in refining ISLA. Understanding which components of ISLA were successful in a realistic school context and which aspects needed adjustments allowed the research team to adapt the intervention appropriately, leading to increased fidelity in Year 2. In this regard, including key stakeholders in the refinement process was very beneficial and likely improved acceptability ratings among school staff, which is then associated with improved fidelity.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations of this study provide multiple opportunities for future research to address. Firstly, the sample size of this study was small, limiting the ability to detect differences between and within groups. The sample was also from a relatively demographically homogenous area, and therefore not necessarily generalizable to more diverse settings. In the future, a larger sample incorporating additional sites and more diverse regions is recommended. Secondly, this study lacks a control group, and derived results from comparisons between and within schools where stakeholder feedback was incorporated into the iterative development process. Use of a more rigorous design, such as a randomized control trial, would allow for causal inferences to be made about the impact of stakeholder feedback on treatment acceptability and implementation.

Third, PIRS data was collected from all staff with indication of their role within the school but did not ask about their degree of involvement or role within the ISLA process. Administrators hold a unique role in implementation, but teachers and classified staff can have varying degrees of interaction in ISLA implementation. Considering a respondent's level of interaction with the intervention allows for a greater understanding of how their feedback

correlates with acceptability. Fourth, there is a potential for respondent bias within the PIRS results due to five staff members withholding consent to be included in the study. Although the reasons for withholding consent are unknown, it is possible that those withholding consent had a less favorable view of the intervention, with the reported acceptability being higher than if they had participated.

Lastly, fidelity data relied solely on self-report by interventionists on their completion of the ISLA components, which presents a risk of social desirability bias toward artificially higher implementation ratings. Future studies could include ratings from an outside observer to provide information on interobserver agreement. Additionally, PIRS data in Year 2 were collected after schools in the region closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The dramatic shift in school operations may have influenced PIRS responses.

Implications for Practice

Adelman and Taylor (1997) described a scale-up approach for the implementation of new initiatives that includes four stages: Creating Readiness, Initial Implementation, Institutionalization, and Ongoing Evolution. One common theme through all four of the stages is an emphasis on empowering all stakeholders, in part through their engagement in decision-making and design processes, to create a positive climate for change. This positive climate supports comprehensive change and sustained motivation over time, ultimately leading to improved student outcomes. This theme was apparent in the findings of our study.

The outcomes of the present study have important practice implications for school leadership such as administrators and school psychologists, as well as classroom teachers. The study outcomes demonstrate that researcher and stakeholder collaboration throughout the development, implementation, and refinement process is useful and beneficial for

implementation fidelity. This collaborative culture fosters a school climate that is inclusive of all school staff and researchers and expects community-wide participation in the intervention implementation process, described by Adelman and Taylor (1997) as a “culture of change”. This culture leads to greater stakeholder buy-in and fosters a community where feedback is valued, shared freely, and met openly.

School psychologists, often serving as liaisons between administration and staff, are in a prime position to influence participation in the implementation process. Adelman and Taylor (1997) describe an initial implementation stage, Creating Readiness, where grassroots support for an intervention is nourished and structures are reorganized to accommodate change. In this stage and beyond, as staff are recruited to leadership teams and committees, school psychologists can advocate for inclusive voices to be heard that represent a community. School psychologists, trained in consultation, are also uniquely qualified to shape the culture around feedback. For example, staff need formal and informal avenues for providing constructive criticism and celebrating achievements about the intervention implementation process. School psychologists can facilitate this discourse through focus groups, office hours, informal check-ins, technology drop boxes, and building in space on leadership meeting agendas. The purpose of this feedback is not only important for collaboration and acceptability of the intervention, but their feedback is a powerful tool in creating an improved, refined, and effective intervention that can ultimately lead to better student outcomes.

Though the present study focused on the engaging stakeholders, the role of the researcher in supporting the scaling of evidence-based interventions in schools cannot be understated. Where school staff and students bring valuable information about their specific contexts, researchers often better understand the current evidence base and critical implementation

mechanisms, such as fidelity. Researchers are also uniquely situated to facilitate the development and implementation of evidence-based practices across contexts, allowing for greater dissemination within and across communities. It is the partnership of stakeholders and researchers that can enable better tools and outcomes for students.

Conclusion

The two-year iterative process of ISLA implementation in two middle schools allowed the research team to gather stakeholder feedback throughout development, implementation, and refinement of the intervention. The reduction of exclusionary discipline practices results in fewer lost instructional minutes for students and more positive school climates. Addressing a critical and deep-rooted issue such as exclusionary discipline was successful with staff buy-in and regular constructive feedback; this was facilitated by ongoing communication between research and school staff. Findings demonstrate the critical nature of staff involvement and buy-in for ISLA intervention fidelity and sustainability. Intentional efforts to engage school stakeholders throughout ISLA development and roll-out resulted in an enhanced intervention with higher staff acceptability.

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Table 1

School Demographic Information

Variable	School 1 Frequency (%)	School 2 Frequency (%)
Level		
6th grade	193 (37%)	217 (36%)
7th grade	170 (33%)	187 (31%)
8th grade	154 (30%)	196 (33%)
Race/Ethnicity		
African American/Black	4 (2%)	4 (1%)
American Indian/Alaskan Native	8 (1%)	5 (1%)
Asian/Pacific Islander	2 (1%)	3 (1%)
Hispanic/Latino	116 (20%)	168 (28%)
White	354 (70%)	379 (63%)
Two or more Races	31 (6%)	38 (6%)
Gender		
Female	259 (50%)	305 (51%)
Male	257 (50%)	295 (49%)
Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch	332 (64%)	419 (70%)
Total Enrollment	517	600

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of PIRS Respondents by Year

Variable	Year 1 Frequency (%)	Year 2 Frequency (%)
Site		
School 1	25 (52.1%)	30 (50.8%)
School 2	23 (47.9%)	29 (49.2%)
Role		
Administrator	2 (4.17%)	3 (5.08%)
Classified Support Staff	8 (16.7%)	12 (20.3%)
General Education Teacher	21 (43.8%)	25 (42.4%)
Licensed Support Staff	6 (12.5%)	7 (11.9%)
Related Arts Teacher	6 (12.5%)	8 (13.6%)
Special Education Teacher	5 (10.4%)	4 (6.78%)
Total Responses	48 (100%)	59 (100%)

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of PIRS Ratings by Year

Variable	Year 1 Rating (*SD*)	Year 2 Rating (*SD*)
1. ISLA is an acceptable intervention for middle schools.	4.81 (0.88)*	5.02 (0.94)*
2. Most teachers find ISLA appropriate to address reducing exclusionary discipline practices.	4.12 (0.88)	4.33 (0.96)
3. ISLA is effective in meeting the goal of reducing exclusionary discipline practices.	4.17 (0.97)	4.42 (1.00)
4. I would suggest the use of ISLA to other teachers.	4.55 (0.99)	4.63 (1.00)
5. ISLA is appropriate to meet the school's needs and mission.	4.43 (1.17)	4.49 (1.14)
6. Most teachers find ISLA suitable for the school's needs and mission.	4.05 (0.94)	4.00 (1.01)**
7. I am willing to use ISLA in the school setting.	5.02 (0.89)*	5.07 (0.87)*
8. ISLA does not result in negative side-effects for students.	4.20 (1.36)	4.36 (1.31)
9. ISLA is appropriate for a variety of students.	4.62 (1.19)	4.80 (0.98)*
10. ISLA is consistent with other programs I have used in school settings.	4.40 (1.03)	4.60 (1.00)
11. The amount of time required to implement ISLA is reasonable.	3.87 (1.25)	3.72 (1.31)**
12. ISLA is reasonable to reduce exclusionary discipline practices.	4.23 (1.09)	4.46 (0.90)
13. I like the procedures used in ISLA.	4.61 (0.92)	4.64 (0.98)
14. ISLA is a good way to reduce exclusionary discipline for middle schools.	4.24 (1.15)	4.39 (0.95)
15. The ISLA fidelity procedures are manageable.	3.56 (1.27)**	3.78 (1.30)**
16. The ISLA fidelity procedures will give the necessary information to evaluate the plan.	4.00 (1.22)	4.24 (0.97)
17. Overall, ISLA is beneficial for middle school students.	4.43 (1.11)	4.68 (1.07)
Mean	4.26 (0.92)	4.45 (0.82)

Note. * denotes items rated statistically significantly ($p < .05$) higher than the average item within that year, ** denotes items rated statistically significantly ($p < .05$) lower than the average item within that year.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics of Fidelity Data

	Year 1 (2018-19)						Year 2 (2019-20)						Effect Size	Logistic Regression Results		
	Yes		No		Missing		Yes		No		Missing					
ISLA Component	*n*	(%)	*n*	(%)	*n*	(%)	*n*	(%)	*n*	(%)	*n*	(%)	*h*	β	*SE*	Odds-Ratios
Was the ISLA debrief completed?	295	(40)	249	(34)	199	(27)	911	(50)	421	(23)	473	(26)	0.22	0.44*	0.09	1.55
Was the student coached on the appropriate behavior skill?	332	(45)	204	(27)	207	(28)	1194	(66)	138	(8)	473	(26)	0.44	0.88*	0.09	2.42
Did the student practice the reconnection conversation with the interventionist?	173	(23)	341	(46)	229	(31)	553	(31)	780	(43)	472	(26)	0.17	0.38*	0.10	1.46
Did the student complete a reconnection card?	163	(22)	359	(48)	221	(30)	470	(26)	863	(48)	472	(26)	0.10	0.23	0.10	1.25
Did the student do the reconnection conversation with the referring teacher?	79	(11)	435	(59)	229	(31)	379	(21)	946	(52)	480	(27)	0.29	0.80*	0.13	2.23

Did the student reenter the classroom?	118	(16)	401	(54)	224	(30)	462	(26)	857	(47)	486	(27)	0.24	0.60*	0.11	1.82

* $p < .05$
h = Cohen's (1988) h.

Appendix A

Qualitative Questions Posed to School Staff

- What do you feel is most beneficial about the ISLA model? What is the least beneficial part?
- Do you think that you and your students' participation in the ISLA model will cause your students' performance to change? If so, how?
- What would you change about the ISLA model (components, design, implementation, etc.) to make it more student-friendly and teacher-friendly?
- What other information would you like to contribute about this intervention?