

Beyond the Blueprint: Exploring Elementary Teachers' Experiences with Long-Term PBIS
Implementation

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ABSTRACT

This basic interpretive qualitative study explored how teachers make meaning of their experiences with long-term implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in a rural elementary school in Georgia. The study aimed to understand how PBIS has influenced teachers' daily instructional practices, classroom environments, and professional roles over time. Through purposeful sampling, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight teachers who had actively participated in PBIS implementation for multiple years. Data were analyzed thematically, guided by an interpretivist framework, to identify recurring patterns and insights within the participants' narratives.

The findings revealed that teachers perceived PBIS as a framework that supported the development of positive relationships, fostered student self-regulation, and provided concrete strategies for proactive classroom management. Additionally, teachers described the challenges and benefits of sustaining PBIS practices within their school and classroom communities amidst varying levels of administrative support, differing teacher mindsets, and inconsistencies in student responsiveness to rewards and consequences. Participants noted that successful implementation relied on balancing proactive strategies with individualized attention, maintaining consistency while allowing for grace, and reflecting continuously on both student behavior and their own professional growth. These insights contribute to the existing literature on PBIS by centering the voices of teachers and highlighting the complex, evolving nature of schoolwide behavior frameworks in everyday educational practice. Implications for practice, policy, and future research on PBIS sustainability and teacher support are discussed.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Without His grace, wisdom, and strength guiding me daily, I would not be where I am today. His love has been my foundation through every challenge and my light during moments of doubt. I also want to dedicate this accomplishment to my husband, Patrick; my precious daughters, Paisley and Sophie; and my parents. Your unwavering love and support have been my anchor when things have been difficult, and you have celebrated every step forward with me. Because of you, every success feels more rewarding and every struggle more bearable. I am deeply grateful to have had you all by my side on this journey.

Chapter I

Introduction

Many schools and districts nationwide have adopted the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework as a systems-oriented approach to classroom management and discipline (Sugai & Horner, 2020). Despite their efforts, they continue to face daily behavioral challenges. Teachers, administrators, and district personnel express significant concerns regarding student misbehavior, ineffective behavior management strategies, and inadequate support from administrators for behavior issues (Education Advisory Board, 2023).

Unfortunately, existing literature provides only a general overview of the benefits and challenges associated with effective implementation (Yeung et al., 2016). While the amount of qualitative research on the topic continues to grow, the field remains largely dominated by quantitative studies (Lawrence et al., 2022). Most studies also involve schools where the framework has been used for five years or less. For this reason, additional qualitative research is needed, specifically studies that will address particular aspects of implementation, such as the long-term effects of schoolwide use, the role of leadership and teacher efforts in fidelity, specific strategies for classroom use, contextual adaptations, and methods for increasing stakeholder buy-in and support (Madden, 2025; Michael et al., 2023; Sterling, 2024; Stewart, 2024).

In this chapter, I will outline the PBIS framework and discuss its potential to enhance students' academic, social, emotional, and behavioral skills. Additionally, I provide background information regarding the purpose, historical development, and effects of PBIS, while analyzing important issues and addressing gaps in current research. This will set the stage for further

investigation of the topic and inform the goals of the current study. Lastly, I will detail the research questions and examine the study's significance and future implications for research and practice.

Background

During the 1980s, school and district leaders across the United States recognized a growing need to identify, apply, and evaluate effective behavioral interventions, particularly for students with behavioral disorders. In response to their plea for help, educational researchers at the University of Oregon conducted several studies, demonstrations, and evaluation projects to determine which interventions and specific processes would be most effective in improving and preventing issues related to behavior management (Gresham, 1991; Sugai & Horner, 1999; Walker et al., 1996). Researchers determined that educators and interventionists should focus more on research-based practices that involve data-based decision-making, developing and implementing schoolwide systems, teaching social skills, and professional development (Biglan, 1995; Colvin et al., 1993; Horner et al., 2010; Lewis & Sugai, 1999; Mayer, 1995; Sugai & Horner, 2002). They argued that emphasizing these approaches to student discipline would allow classroom teachers and administrators to function in safe, supportive, and orderly environments for learning.

In the meantime, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was reauthorized in 1997 to include requirements for specific behavior intervention strategies for students with special needs (Turnbull et al., 2001). The act named a specific approach to behavior interventions for the first time since its initial adoption in 1975. Policymakers realized that the reactive, punishment-focused approach to discipline used at the time was not working for students with behavior disorders, their classmates, or, most importantly, their teachers. Including

PBIS in the legislation meant that educators and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) were strongly urged to consider the use of positive behavior interventions when developing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for students whose behavior disrupts or prevents their learning or impacts the learning and safety of other students (Turnbull et al., 2001). More specifically, they were encouraged to develop a list of common expectations, establish clear and consistent rules, procedures, and consequences, acknowledge desired behaviors, focus on positive peer and student relationships, and reteach behaviors instead of immediately punishing students for behavior infractions (Center on PBIS, 2025b).

In response to the new legislation adopted initially in 1975, University of Oregon researchers, along with universities in other states such as Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, and Florida, saw a perfect opportunity to form a partnership and develop the National TA Center on PBIS based on their initial findings (Sugai et al., 2000). The center was established to provide guiding documents, technical assistance, and additional tools for successful implementation. The researchers developed and shared a framework for implementation that included forming schoolwide leadership teams, constructing matrices and other visuals for school and classroom expectations, creating lesson plans and professional development on positive behavior strategies, establishing a schoolwide acknowledgment system, monitoring fidelity of implementation, and using school data to inform decisions about staff and student needs (Center on PBIS, 2025b). While the framework and evaluation tools continue to evolve based on data and feedback, these elements remain crucial to successful implementation. They are addressed explicitly in the most current Implementation Blueprint (Center on PBIS, 2025a).

Although PBIS was initially developed for students with behavior disorders, the founders and researchers at the National TA Center on PBIS quickly recognized that all students could

benefit from focusing on the schoolwide implementation of positive behavior interventions. They also identified the need to provide additional support and emphasize effective implementation systems and practices (Sugai et al., 2000). The PBIS Center has supported over 27,000 schools across all 50 states over the past 26 years and recently received an additional \$21 million to fund its work through 2028 (Center on PBIS, 2025b). Successful implementation of the framework has been linked to increased academic performance, reduced bullying behaviors and office discipline referrals, an increased perception of teacher self-efficacy, and improved school climate and culture (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2023). Another compelling argument for using the framework is the correlation between effective implementation and decreased instructional time lost due to classroom disruptions and disciplinary incidents (Georgia Department of Education [GaDOE], 2025a).

PBIS remains in the most current version of IDEA, which was amended in December 2015 through Public Law 114-95, Every Student Succeeds Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Schools and districts nationwide report that implementing the framework leads to notable academic, social, and behavioral outcomes (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2023). Research from the National TA Center on PBIS also suggests that the framework, when implemented with fidelity, improves school climate and creates “positive, predictable, equitable and safe learning environments where everyone thrives” (Center on PBIS, 2025b, para 1). Additionally, recent studies conducted through a partnership with the Georgia Department of Education and the Southeast Regional Education Laboratory (REL) have also shown that positive school climate is directly related to a significant increase in student GPAs, math and reading test scores, improved high school graduation rates and college enrollment, student focus and attention, and teacher retention and job satisfaction (Institute of Education Sciences, 2023).

Problem Statement

Thousands of schools nationwide have been implementing Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) since it was first introduced in the early 1990s (Center on PBIS, 2025b; Petrusek et al., 2022). Most schools implement the PBIS framework to promote a positive school culture, reduce discipline incidents, and promote academic success (Sugai & Horner, 2020). Monitoring fidelity of implementation and providing ongoing coaching and technical assistance have been linked to PBIS sustainability for schools and districts in the first few years of implementation (Fox et al., 2021; George & Kincaid, 2008; Scaletta & Tejero Hughes, 2020; Sugai & Horner, 2020). While the number of schools trained in PBIS nationwide now exceeds 27,000, the percentage of those schools and districts actively implementing the framework and reporting annual fidelity data continues to fluctuate (Center on PBIS, 2025b).

Despite nationwide efforts to formally train, implement, and monitor PBIS practices, there still appears to be a rise in classroom disruptions, as well as an alarming disconnect between school leaders' perceptions of their schools' and districts' PBIS implementation and what their teachers and staff are experiencing in their buildings (Education Advisory Board [EAB], 2019). Results of the 2018 Student Behavior Survey conducted by the EAB revealed that while 100% of participating districts reported implementing PBIS at the school level, only 57% of teachers said they were using PBIS practices in their classrooms, either frequently or infrequently. This discrepancy highlights a possible implementation gap between school-wide systems and day-to-day classroom application. Hearing from individual teachers who have implemented the framework in their classrooms for several years could provide valuable insight into the factors that support or hinder classroom-level PBIS practices and strategies for bridging the gap between schoolwide expectations and classroom realities.

Additionally, many participants stated that they felt insufficiently trained in effectively managing behavior. The average rating given by teachers for the support they received from administrators on managing behavior was only 5.5 out of 10 (EAB, 2019). Unfortunately, the 2023 survey revealed more alarming news. Of the educators surveyed, 78% of teachers and 81% of administrators identified student behavior as a significant concern. Furthermore, the percentage of teachers who had observed physical violence between students and students and teachers doubled from 2018 to 2022, as did instances of frequent opposition and verbal abuse among students and staff (EAB, 2023). Lastly, the number of educators who had observed frequent emotional disconnect among students had tripled from 20% in 2018 to 61% in 2022 (EAB, 2023).

EAB's research on student behavior indicates that existing teaching methods and classroom management strategies may fail to address the increasing behavioral issues in schools (EAB, 2023). Despite the expansion of research surrounding PBIS implementation, much of the recent literature focuses on quantitative data, which limits our understanding of the contextual, interpretive, and relational elements of implementation that numerical data cannot adequately reflect (Freeman et al., 2016; Lawrence et al., 2022). While quantitative studies have shown outcomes related to PBIS, there remains a significant lack of qualitative research that delves into how educators and school teams make sense of the framework, interpret its implementation within their specific school contexts, and utilize those insights to navigate the challenges of sustaining consistent practices over time. Investigating how educators perceive and interact with PBIS in context is crucial for formulating more responsive, relevant, and sustainable classroom and schoolwide implementation strategies (Lawrence et al., 2022; Madden, 2025; Michael et al., 2023; Sterling, 2024; Stewart, 2024).

Purpose of the Study

This study utilized a basic interpretive qualitative methodology to explore teachers' perceptions and interpretations of their experiences with long-term PBIS implementation. The purpose of this basic interpretive qualitative study was to explore how teachers make meaning of their experiences with long-term PBIS implementation and how they interpret its influence on their daily work, classroom environments, and professional roles. Data were gathered through individual, semi-structured interviews with teachers from an elementary school in a rural Georgia district that has used the PBIS framework in the same setting for multiple years. The focus was on understanding how teachers interpret their personal and professional experiences with PBIS over time and how these interpretations affect their instructional methods, professional identities, and engagement with the framework in their specific school contexts. Additionally, this research examined how contextual factors shaped teachers' experiences, as there has been limited qualitative research on PBIS implementation in schools that have sustained the framework for over five years, especially in instances where separate school communities with independent PBIS histories have merged their efforts on a single campus.

Open-ended, semi-structured interview questions encouraged educators to express their interpretations and the significance of their experiences with various framework elements, including school leadership teams, professional development, coaching, data-driven decision-making, classroom instruction, and behavior management techniques. While PBIS resources like the PBIS Implementation Blueprint (Center on PBIS, 2025a) highlight the importance of these elements, research on teachers' experiences and understandings of these practices within their school and classroom contexts is limited. Collecting teachers' personal experiences and viewpoints about the impact of PBIS on their professional roles, classroom dynamics, and

student outcomes offers valuable insights into facets of implementation rarely covered in broad, quantitative studies. This study aimed to bridge the gap in existing literature by focusing on educators' views regarding classroom and student-level encounters with PBIS. Moreover, although recent perception research has revealed barriers to maintaining fidelity and sustainability of implementation, more investigation is needed that transcends simply listing and describing these challenges (Ascetta, 2021; EAB, 2023; McDaniel et al., 2017; Pinnock, 2020; Scott, 2018). This study examines how teachers perceive, interpret, and address these issues in their everyday practice and how their leadership teams have adjusted to facilitate ongoing implementation within their unique school environments.

Research Questions

While numerous documents produced by the technical center, including the PBIS Implementation Blueprint (Center on PBIS, 2025a), highlight school teams' actions to ensure fidelity, they often neglect to clarify how specific processes and procedures are tailored to various contexts. Furthermore, there is limited information regarding the use of PBIS in individual classrooms, with these resources generally lacking explanations for how educators deal with challenges such as limited time and funding, inconsistent implementation, and increasing behavioral issues. Exploring these elements through the unique experiences and perspectives of teachers who have used the framework for several years will provide valuable and pertinent data. This exploration will deepen understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and contextual factors linked to the perceived successes and challenges of the PBIS framework.

The study was guided by the following research questions, which are based on basic interpretive qualitative methodology principles. The questions aimed to thoroughly explore the

unique perspectives and experiences of teachers who have implemented the framework over time and the meanings they have constructed regarding PBIS based on those experiences.

Research Question 1

How do teachers make sense of the benefits and challenges they encounter in sustaining PBIS practices?

Research Question 2

How do teachers describe the influence of PBIS on their instructional practices, school culture, and professional identity over time?

Conceptual Framework

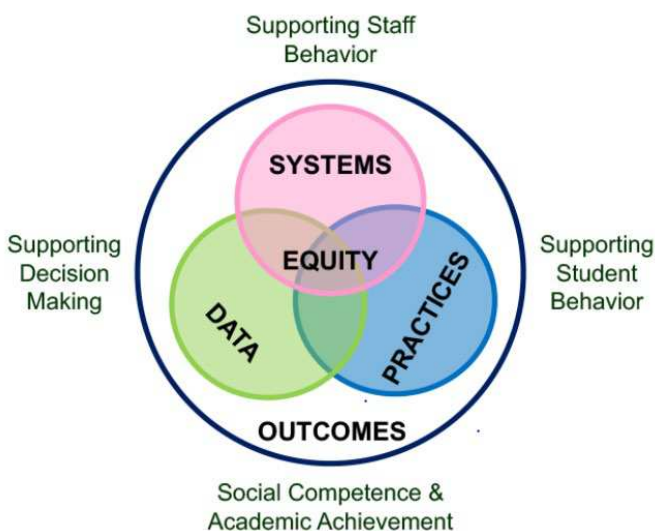
In this study, I examined how educators interpret and make sense of their experiences implementing the PBIS framework over several years. By analyzing the specific practices, procedures, and contextual factors that teachers see as contributing to meaningful, lasting implementation, this research offers insights that can inform reflection and improvement efforts for current and future PBIS schools, leaders, and educators. Attention was also given to how participants understand and overcome obstacles and challenges, as well as their strategies for addressing them within their unique school and classroom settings. Because the PBIS framework is linked to Implementation Science, this study also explored how educators experience and interpret key stages of implementation, including planning, establishing, and maintaining systems and practices, and how these experiences influence their daily work and long-term engagement with PBIS.

As shown in Figure 1, the PBIS framework consists of five main elements: systems, data, practices, equity, and outcomes. These elements are all interconnected with equity at the center and are essential to supporting staff and student behavior and decision-making. Outcomes are

shown in the outer circle because the ultimate goal of PBIS implementation is to improve outcomes within the building. Those desired outcomes are clearly defined to determine what practices, processes, and procedures are necessary to promote staff and student success. Examples of improved student outcomes related to PBIS implementation include reduced exclusionary discipline, academic achievement, attendance, reduced bullying and harassment, emotional regulation, and prosocial behavior. The framework supports improved teacher outcomes, such as teacher efficacy and well-being, teacher-student relationships, engagement and instructional time, culture and climate, safety, and overall job satisfaction (Center on PBIS, 2025c).

Figure 1

Five Elements of the PBIS Framework



Note. Adapted from *What is PBIS*, by Center on PBIS, 2025b.

Regarding PBIS, systems include variables such as team composition, operating procedures, behavior definitions, discipline policies, and professional development. These processes, procedures, and policies set the foundation for how the school defines, addresses, and

reinforces desired behavior. The next element involves the specific practices in a school's PBIS program. These include interventions and strategies to achieve a school's intended outcomes by supporting student behavior. This framework encourages school teams to explicitly name and teach specific behavior expectations, schoolwide and classroom-specific procedures, and feedback and acknowledgment systems to reinforce desired behaviors (Center on PBIS, 2025a). These are unique in every building, and each teacher experiences them differently based on various contextual factors that support adult and student behavior. In alignment with a basic interpretive qualitative study, this research will explore how teachers interpret and make meaning of these systems and practices within their specific school contexts and how those interpretations shape their day-to-day implementation of PBIS.

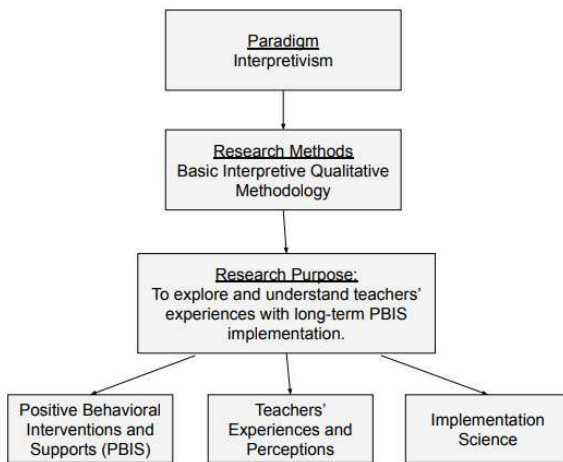
Data are an essential part of the framework and should be continuously collected, reviewed, and utilized for informed decision-making across all implementation aspects. This process includes regularly collecting and monitoring discipline and fidelity data, conducting annual evaluations, and sharing that information with all stakeholders to support continuous improvement. Each circle in the figure is also connected to equity, as it lies at the center of the visual, because all systems and practices should be tailored to meet the needs of students and staff to promote success and a sense of belonging. Data should also be disaggregated to ensure all students have the support necessary to experience success. Lastly, the outer circle includes outcomes. The inclusion and specific placement of this element suggest that when schools develop and monitor systems and practices tailored to student and staff needs, and make decisions based on regularly collected data, they will achieve desired outcomes related to academics, behavior, and school culture (Center on PBIS, 2025a).

As shown in Figure 2, this study was also guided by a conceptual framework rooted in the interpretivist paradigm, which aims to understand how individuals make meaning of their experiences within particular social and cultural contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Interpretivism recognizes that reality is subjective and socially constructed. It also emphasizes the value of exploring participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences from their unique points of view. This paradigm aligns with the central purpose of this study, as it seeks to explore and interpret the personal experiences and perspectives of teachers involved in the long-term application of the PBIS framework.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework



Based on the central tenets of interpretivism, I employed a basic interpretive qualitative methodology, which focuses on understanding how people make sense of their experiences and the meanings they attach to them. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described this approach as one in which the researcher was primarily interested in how participants interpreted their experiences, constructed their realities, and attributed meaning to their experiences. This method allows me, the researcher, to understand and interpret multiple perspectives by collecting qualitative data

through interviews while analyzing it for recurring patterns and themes that reflected the participants' viewpoints.

Through this study, I aim to explore and understand teachers' experiences with long-term PBIS implementation. PBIS is a framework grounded in behaviorist theory and Implementation Science, designed to promote a positive school climate and improve student outcomes through proactive strategies for defining, teaching, and supporting appropriate student behaviors (Sugai & Horner, 1999). Implementation Science outlines the stages of implementing evidence-based interventions and the factors that influence the successful and sustained use of practices like PBIS within educational settings (Lyon, 2017).

Lastly, the study centers on teachers' unique experiences with implementing PBIS. Their perspectives adds significant value to the study as they are essential sources of knowledge about the practical realities, challenges, and benefits of sustaining PBIS practices over time. By connecting their narratives to the broader context of PBIS and Implementation Science, this study illuminates how teachers interpret, adapt, and experience the ongoing use of PBIS in their schools.

This conceptual framework (see Figure 2) represents the connections between the interpretive paradigm, the selected qualitative methodology, the study's objectives, and the central concepts of PBIS, Implementation Science, and teachers' unique experiences and perceptions. These elements work together to inform the research inquiry and shape the interpretation of findings.

Significance of the Study

Examining PBIS implementation through a basic interpretive qualitative lens enables researchers to move beyond broad, quantitative investigations of schoolwide implementation

based on checklists, surveys, and discipline referrals, which have dominated current research (Lawrence et al., 2022; Yeung et al., 2016). Recent studies on teachers' perceptions of their schools' PBIS programs have identified positive outcomes, such as decreased office referrals, increased collective efficacy, and stronger teacher-student relationships (Martin, 2013; Pinnock, 2020; Roberts-Clawson, 2017; Salinas-Cavazos, 2020; Scott, 2018). However, these same educators have also voiced frustrations related to inconsistent implementation, limited training, scarce resources, and inadequate support for students with more intensive behavioral needs. While recent perception studies have outlined the general advantages and disadvantages of PBIS, they frequently overlook the deeper, contextual experiences of educators navigating this work over time. Gathering insights from teachers with years of PBIS experience helps better understand how they interpret their roles, manage daily and long-term challenges, and make meaning of their implementation efforts within their unique school contexts. These educators have developed personal, experience-based strategies for cultivating classroom communities, teaching behavioral expectations, and supporting various student needs. Furthermore, their ongoing interactions with colleagues, students, families, and the broader community have influenced their perceptions and professional practices. Many have encountered significant successes and persistent challenges, leading them to adapt their methods or advocate for meaningful changes. Consequently, their experiences hold valuable lessons for advancing effective, sustainable PBIS practices.

The findings of this study provide rich, qualitative data that amplify teachers' voices and illuminate the meanings they assign to their work with PBIS. Through open-ended, semi-structured interviews, participants reflect on specific practices and procedures that have shaped their school and classroom environments, influenced student behavior, and impacted academic

outcomes. While recent studies have identified barriers to PBIS sustainability, they have rarely detailed educators' specific, context-driven strategies to overcome these obstacles (Berg, 2021). This study contributes to the existing body of research by enabling readers to examine how teachers have navigated these challenges and sustained PBIS in their buildings by adapting the framework to fit their particular needs and circumstances.

The outcomes of this study provide detailed insights into how teachers perceive and interpret PBIS during prolonged implementation. The distinctive stories, varied realities, and diverse experiences of today's educators reveal underlying factors related to fidelity, sustainability, and adaptation that might remain hidden when relying solely on quantitative data. Additionally, these findings offer valuable guidance for schools and districts struggling to maintain momentum in their PBIS efforts, providing direction for adjustments and supports that enhance long-term success. The perspectives of these experienced educators may also prompt state and national leaders to revisit and revise aspects of the current PBIS framework and fidelity tools to better align with the needs of those working most closely with students. By demonstrating how teachers' daily experiences, challenges, and professional relationships shape their implementation efforts, this study will encourage further research on the essential role of educators in achieving positive, sustainable outcomes with PBIS. Ultimately, improved and consistent implementation guided by comprehensive qualitative inquiry could contribute to higher graduation rates, reduced exclusionary disciplinary practices, and safer, more supportive school environments nationwide.

Delimitations

This study is intentionally bound to explore the experiences of elementary teachers who have implemented the PBIS framework for several years at a single rural school in southeast

Georgia. The focus is limited to certified classroom teachers and does not include administrators, support staff, or students. Data were collected through individual interviews and document review, rather than observations or survey instruments. The study focuses on teachers' perceptions, meanings, and reflections regarding PBIS practices, implementation fidelity, and school climate. It does not attempt to measure behavioral outcomes or compare PBIS models across schools. These delimitations were established to maintain a clear and focused scope, aligning with the purpose of the basic interpretive qualitative design.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were used throughout the study. The definitions are provided to help the reader understand the overall topic and key concepts that are addressed.

Acknowledgement System. A reward system recognizes and encourages students to meet behavior expectations by offering specific praise related to prosocial behaviors (Center on PBIS, 2025a).

Benchmarks of Quality (BoQ). An annual survey completed by the school PBIS team and external coach is used to assess how well school staff are implementing the core features of PBIS (fidelity). Team members complete the survey individually and combine their results for a final score. The results help the team identify areas of need for further action planning (Center on PBIS, 2025a).

Fidelity. The degree to which educators follow necessary routines and procedures when implementing programs and interventions as intended.

Office Discipline Referral (ODR). A form of documentation used by administrators when a student has been involved in a behavior incident that warrants their involvement. Incidents could include fighting, defiance, skipping class, stealing, etc. (Center on PBIS, 2025a).

Self-Assessment Survey (SAS) The PBIS Self-Assessment Survey (SAS) is a digital survey completed once per school year by staff members. It allows school staff and team members to evaluate the current status and improvement priorities. It guides action planning for schoolwide discipline, non-classroom management systems such as cafeterias, gyms, hallways, etc., classroom management systems, and systems for individual students who need additional behavioral support (Center on PBIS, 2025a).

Sustainability. The ability to fully implement a specific practice or intervention for an extended time while reaping positive benefits.

Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI). Like the BoQ, the Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI) is an annual survey completed by the school PBIS team and external coach to assess how well school staff are implementing the core features of PBIS (fidelity). The administration of TFI is slightly different than the BoQ because the team completes the survey together. The results are then reviewed to help the team identify areas needing further action planning, such as professional development, common expectations, and acknowledging desired behaviors (Center on PBIS, 2025a).

Chapter Summary

Using a basic interpretive qualitative methodology, I conduct semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions based on key concepts of the PBIS framework and Implementation Science. This has enabled me to explore and interpret teachers' unique experiences with PBIS over time in the same environment. I have asked participants to share stories and reflections on how they have applied PBIS practices at both school and classroom levels. I also encourage discussion on how their efforts have influenced school culture and affected students' academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. The study provides insights into how teachers

interpret and describe their experiences adapting the framework to meet the specific needs of their students, colleagues, and communities. Additionally, I have examined how teachers handle common challenges and barriers during long-term PBIS implementation, along with the strategies they have developed—both independently and collaboratively—to sustain and improve the framework in their educational settings.

The first chapter introduced the PBIS framework and its expected impact on students' development across academic, social, emotional, and behavioral domains. It provides background on PBIS origins, outlines key components of the framework, and summarizes existing literature, highlighting areas where recent research remains limited. The chapter also presents the research questions guiding this study, emphasizing its focus on teachers' experiences with sustained PBIS implementation and the meanings they associate with those experiences within their unique school contexts. Lastly, it discusses the study's significance and potential contributions to research and practice.

The second chapter will provide a comprehensive literature review, examining the purpose, historical development, and impact of the PBIS framework. It will introduce key theories and concepts that inform the framework and the study of its implementation in school settings. The chapter will summarize findings from recent research, identify persistent gaps in the literature, and underscore the need for additional qualitative studies that explore how educators experience, interpret, and adapt PBIS within the context of their schools and classrooms.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) continues to be one of the most widely adopted evidence-based frameworks in schools and districts throughout the United States (Kittelman et al., 2019). According to George and Kincaid (2008), “Nearly every state has adopted some form of schoolwide positive behavior support (SWPBS) as a model for systems-level school improvement” (p. 1). Over 27,000 schools are implementing PBIS in the United States (Center on PBIS, 2025b). The state of Georgia adopted its version of PBIS in 2008 to address concerns related to graduation rates, discipline referrals, and disproportionality data for out-of-school suspension (OSS) among ELL students, males, African American students, and those receiving free and reduced lunch (GaDOE, 2013). In 2012, Georgia’s graduation rate of 67.4% was “the third lowest in the nation, followed only by Nevada and New Mexico” (GaDOE, 2013, p. 3). Georgia also had the tenth-highest rate of OSS in the nation during the 2005-2006 school year. Exclusionary discipline was prevalent in the state before adopting PBIS (GaDOE, 2013).

While Georgia educators’ PBIS efforts, alongside other school improvement initiatives, have contributed to increasing the current graduation rate to 85.4%, and exclusionary discipline continues to decline, the focus now shifts to PBIS sustainability (GaDOE, 2024). Yeung et al. (2016) shared that while PBIS led to improved academic and behavioral outcomes worldwide, there was a significant concern about sustaining the efforts of PBIS implementation so that

schools and districts could continue to reap the positive benefits of the framework. The authors suggested that factors such as administrator support, school culture, data use, and teaming could make or break a school's ability to implement the framework effectively. Yeung et al. (2016) also cautioned that sustainability was not simply about implementing the framework for an extended period. However, they were instead more about the quality and specific contextual factors of each school's implementation process and their commitment to continuous improvement.

This literature review first discusses practical theories that formed the foundation of this study. It will enable the reader to explore the definition and purpose of PBIS in greater depth and examine the positive effects of implementing the framework in any school setting. Most importantly, this review will include research findings on teachers' experiences and perceptions of PBIS and address the specific tools, approaches, and procedures that can be used to build and sustain an effective PBIS framework at the school level. Additionally, current research will be included to address the barriers and challenges to sustainability, and to identify gaps in the research that may reveal the need for further investigation.

Theoretical Framework

In qualitative research, theory can either be used to frame research and explain findings, or it can be developed or discovered based on data collected (Maxwell, 2016). With the first option, the theoretical perspective is used as a lens through which the research is oriented. This lens is "a transformative perspective that shapes the types of questions asked, informs how data are collected and analyzed, and provides a call for action or change" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 62). The theoretical lens also determines how the final account of the research will be written and guides the recommendations for future action and change. According to Maxwell (2016), existing theory can be viewed as a coat closet, where data can be hung and organized on

hangers, representing the theory's key concepts. It can also serve as a spotlight, illuminating key information, “draws your attention to key events or phenomena, and sheds light on relationships that might otherwise go unnoticed or misunderstood” (Maxwell, 2016, pp. 49-50). Theoretical perspectives allow researchers to develop a basis for exploring a problem.

Through this study, I chose to examine teachers’ experiences with long-term PBIS implementation within the same school setting. I have employed a basic interpretive qualitative approach to understand how educators perceive, interpret, and make sense of their experiences with PBIS over time in that setting. This methodology enables me to focus on individual teachers' perspectives within a specific context, emphasizing how they interpret their experiences and the importance they assign to them. By collecting detailed, descriptive data through semi-structured interviews, I have sought to uncover how educators view the ongoing use of PBIS at both schoolwide and classroom levels and how these perceptions affect their sense of efficacy and commitment to sustaining the framework beyond initial implementation. Exploring educators’ unique experiences and the meanings they derive from navigating the complexities of using PBIS in real-world school environments helped shed light on the connections between their experiences, personal and professional beliefs, and their perceptions of their ability to maintain the framework successfully over several years. This study also identifies the key contextual factors, challenges, and supports that educators view as vital for sustaining PBIS with fidelity, providing insights that will guide future research, practices, training, and policy decisions related to schoolwide implementation.

Implementation Science

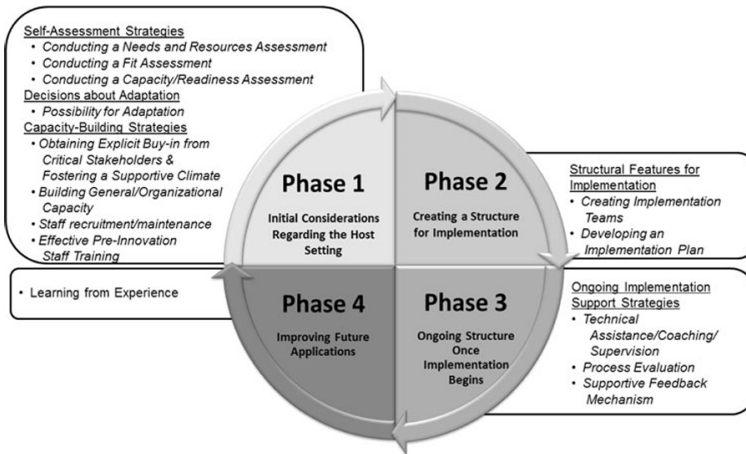
The primary purpose of Implementation Science is to examine how evidence-based interventions are discovered, adopted, and implemented to determine specific processes,

structures, and contextual factors that contribute to the successful, sustained application of the intervention itself (Brownson et al., 2022). This approach shifts the focus from the dissemination of information to meaningful, effective implementation by “using deliberate strategies in specific settings to adopt new interventions, integrate them effectively, and change practice patterns” (Lyon, 2017, p. 1). Researchers are encouraged to study how evidence-based interventions are adopted, implemented, and sustained (Ryan & Baker, 2019). While it was initially developed for the healthcare field in the 1940s and later used in social services and business, educational research for Implementation Science has grown significantly over the past decade (Nordstrum et al., 2017).

The theory and its various models allow educational researchers to explore multiple variables and contextual factors when studying the adoption and use of evidence-based practices. Implementation Science also encourages educational researchers to consider participants’ beliefs, attitudes, and experiences when determining how well they accept and implement specific interventions in the school setting (Nordstrum et al., 2017). The Quality Implementation Framework shown in Figure 3 is one of several models commonly used within Implementation Science (Meyers et al., 2012). It also closely aligns with the core principles of the PBIS framework and offers a visual overview of the essential elements and variables involved in each phase of implementation.

Figure 3

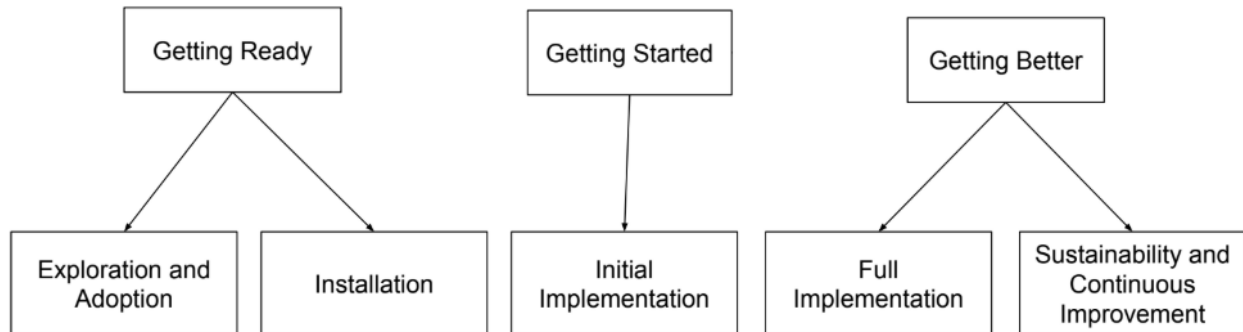
The Quality Implementation Framework



The PBIS framework was based on a simple yet concise interpretation of Implementation Science (Center on PBIS, 2025b). This model has been narrowed down to five stages for schools to move through as they plan, adopt, implement, and improve the use of the framework in their buildings. Those five stages include exploration and adoption, installation, initial implementation, full implementation, sustainability, and continuous improvement (Ryan & Baker, 2019). The PBIS Implementation Blueprint's authors condensed the list further into three phases: “Getting Ready, Getting Started, and Getting Better” (Center on PBIS, 2025a, p. 52). A visual representation of the merging of the simplified stages is presented in Figure 4. At each implementation stage, data, systems, and practices related to the specific setting, staff, and students are evaluated and adjusted to improve efforts and promote full, effective implementation and sustainability. This idea of identifying, implementing, and continuously improving specific systems and processes related to current needs and contextual factors at various stages of implementation is why Implementation Science is an effective lens to use when examining the long-term implementation of PBIS in specific settings (Ryan & Baker, 2019).

Figure 4

Phases of PBIS Implementation



Examining teachers’ experiences with evidence-based practices in educational settings provides researchers with valuable insights into the everyday factors that influence their consistent use and long-term sustainability (Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2019). One topic explored in current research through the lens of Implementation Science is the use of a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). While this is an evidence-based practice that is either required or strongly encouraged in every state, there are significant issues, including over-identification of students, ineffective instructional practices, a lack of written plans, and minimal data review and data-based decision-making (Balu et al., 2015; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Silva et al., 2021). Evidence of an implementation gap is clear, and further research is essential to improve staff and student success. Using Implementation Science to investigate current barriers allows educational researchers to influence the overall success and sustainability of MTSS, ultimately benefiting all students. This research is especially impactful for students with academic, social, emotional, and behavioral challenges who may need additional Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions (Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2019).

PBIS is recognized as a crucial evidence-based practice essential for effective MTSS programs at both school and district levels (GaDOE, 2025a). If significant gaps exist in MTSS

implementation, it likely indicates challenges similar to those faced by PBIS. Therefore, addressing these implementation gaps in behavior interventions within the MTSS framework can enhance student outcomes and support the sustainability of existing PBIS initiatives in schools. Unfortunately, exploring these gaps demands more than the current fidelity tools and data collection strategies. Furthermore, as PBIS outcomes are fluid, obtaining longitudinal data beyond student discipline is essential for understanding the framework's sustainability. By examining all elements linked to PBIS efforts within a specific context, alongside valuable insights from teachers who have implemented the framework at each phase over a long period, we can better understand and inform current and future initiatives, ultimately bolstering the effectiveness and longevity of PBIS (Ash et al., 2024; Benedetti, 2024; Brunson, 2023; Goutas et al., 2021; Horner et al., 2017; Hulin, 2024; Marion, 2024; Michael et al., 2023; Salinas-Cavazos, 2020; Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2019; Zolkowski, 2024).

Defining PBIS

Before investigating the potential impact and sustainability of PBIS, essential is to understand what PBIS is about, and how and why it has been developed as a framework at the national and state levels. The Georgia Department of Education defines PBIS as “a systematic framework designed to enhance academic and social-behavior outcomes by implementing a continuum of evidence-based interventions” (GaDOE, 2013, p.4). The framework's foundation is a positive, proactive, preventive approach to discipline that focuses on teaching, reteaching, and rewarding positively stated schoolwide behavior expectations. Practical application is centered on classroom management, logical consequences, prevention, and relationships (Berg, 2021).

Foundational Principles

PBIS is based on the principles of behaviorism, a psychological theory focused on observable behavior and the environmental factors that influence it. Behaviorism, advanced by early theorists such as Watson (1913) and Skinner (1938), emphasized that human behavior was shaped and maintained by consequences that either reinforce or discourage one's actions (Cooper et al., 2020). This perspective focuses on observable actions and the external variables that can be manipulated to promote desired behaviors while discouraging undesirable ones.

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), a systematic and evidence-based approach to understanding and altering behavior, is at the heart of behaviorism. Baer et al. (1968) identified ABA as a discipline focused on pinpointing specific, measurable behaviors and analyzing the environmental factors that influence those behaviors while implementing interventions aimed at increasing positive behaviors while decreasing problematic ones. ABA relies on continuous data collection and analysis to guide decision-making and refine intervention strategies for effectiveness (Cooper et al., 2020).

PBIS applies behaviorist and ABA principles in the educational context through a proactive, multi-tiered framework to promote positive student behavior and enhance school climate. By teaching, reinforcing, and consistently acknowledging expected behaviors, while preventing and addressing challenging behaviors through data-driven practices, PBIS aligns with the ABA model (Sugai & Horner, 2002). The framework emphasizes clearly defined behavioral expectations, direct instruction, continuous monitoring, and positive reinforcement to shape and sustain appropriate student behavior. Core ABA strategies also include antecedent modifications (changes to the environment or specific situations that happen before an undesired behavior), reinforcement systems (specific praise, rewards, token economy systems), and consistent

consequences, which are also embedded within the PBIS framework (Center on PBIS, 2025b). Understanding this theoretical foundation is crucial for examining the practical application of PBIS and how educators interpret and implement its core features in various school settings.

Essential Components

At the universal Tier 1 level of the PBIS framework, teachers focus on building a safe, supportive school and classroom community to encourage positive interactions with adults and peers (GaDOE, 2013). All students are explicitly taught 3-5 positively stated behavior expectations, such as “Be Safe, Be Kind, Be Responsible.” Those expectations are displayed via matrices throughout the school building with specific rules for various locations. For example, students are encouraged to “Be Safe” in the hallway by walking. To reinforce desired behaviors, students are regularly praised and rewarded. Acknowledgment can be provided through specific verbal praise, Class Dojo points, or tangible rewards such as stickers, candy, or behavior bucks, which can be utilized within a token economy system. Still, some students may require additional support through specific behavior interventions if they cannot follow school and classroom rules with basic reinforcement and reteaching (GaDOE, 2013). Additional supports are built into the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) process based on a three-tiered approach to specific behavior interventions. All interventions aim to teach lagging social, emotional, and behavioral skills and range in intensity by the number of students receiving the intervention at one time, how broad or specific the student's goal is, and the frequency with which the intervention is delivered. Interventions include evidence-based practices such as social skills groups, peer or adult mentors, behavior contracts, and checking in and out daily with an adult to review progress towards specific behavior goals. A student receiving Tier 2 support may

participate in a social skills group, while a Tier 3 student may meet individually with a mentor to create and monitor specific goals.

The PBIS framework includes several essential components. The first and arguably the most important is a PBIS Leadership Team that meets regularly to develop systems and supports, make decisions, and guide implementation. The team is responsible for leading school staff in creating three to five positively stated expectations, accompanied by matrices that explain what those expectations and behaviors look like in specific areas of the building. This team also works to create a continuum of procedures for encouraging and rewarding positive behaviors, develops lesson plans for teaching and reteaching expectations in classroom and non-classroom settings, creates flowcharts for addressing student misbehaviors and assigning consequences, and chooses or develops a data-based system for monitoring fidelity and intended outcomes (Ryan & Baker, 2019). Effective implementation also includes regular professional development, family and community partnerships, data-based decision-making, and a tiered framework based on a continuum of support to meet diverse student needs for academics, social-emotional skills, and behavior (Center on PBIS, 2025b). The leadership team develops a PBIS framework to meet their school's needs, emphasizing fidelity and fostering an environment for sustainable processes and procedures.

Stages of Implementation

The PBIS framework was developed based on Implementation Science, primarily because the initial developers wanted stakeholders to view the framework as a continuous process with multiple layers and ongoing stages of implementation, rather than an isolated event or a single attainable goal. The “process of adopting a new system of practice, no matter how popular, tends to take up to three to five years or more” (Ryan & Baker, 2019, p.15). These key

stages, explained below, involve specific practices related to the initial adoption of the framework, implementation, and continuous improvement, which lead to sustainability.

Getting Ready

Strategically planning for the adoption and uptake of the framework while considering specific contextual factors is essential to the future success of PBIS in any setting. According to George and Martinez (2007), “The most important activity required for successful implementation and sustainability is the pre-planning efforts undertaken at your school” (p. 3). Administrators work with carefully selected staff members in the initial planning phase to develop a PBIS leadership team. This team will prepare for successful implementation by ensuring they have the right people at the helm to lead their efforts. They will also be tasked with obtaining and sharing key information about PBIS and how it works, as this will be essential to encouraging staff buy-in and commitment. Taking an inventory to determine if there is an adequate infrastructure to support their school’s efforts with PBIS will also be an important task because without the necessary staff, resources, and data-based systems to support and evaluate their efforts, school teams may not be able to sustain their work (Center on PBIS, 2025a; George & Martinez, 2007; Ryan & Baker, 2019). As school teams prepare to implement the PBIS framework, important is to ensure that PBIS is a good fit for their school and consider its potential benefits. This planning stage guides staff in developing their vision and setting goals based on desired outcomes from successful implementation (Ryan & Baker, 2019).

Getting Started

During this implementation stage, the school's PBIS team works with administrators and staff to use the framework as a roadmap for developing its identity and establishing its brand as a PBIS school. Together, all stakeholders will determine their vision and purpose for PBIS,

identify three to five positively stated expectations, and create matrices to explain specific indicators for those expectations in different settings. They will also establish a schoolwide system for acknowledging desired behaviors and develop a flow chart for responding to negative behaviors (Ryan & Baker, 2019). The flow chart will serve as a visual aid for teachers and staff to help them determine whether specific behaviors should be managed in the classroom or office, and it will list acceptable consequences and procedures for documenting behaviors. Establishing clear expectations and responses to behavior at the universal Tier 1 level is the foundation for an effective PBIS program (Center on PBIS, 2025a). Once expectations and responses have been identified and all staff have had the opportunity to provide feedback to support overall buy-in and support, those expectations are used to develop specific lesson plans for teaching and reteaching desired behaviors through examples and non-examples in classroom and non-classroom settings (Simonsen & Myers, 2015).

Next, the team will develop data systems to monitor the effects of implementation. Outcome data such as office discipline referrals (ODRs), minor classroom infractions, classroom discipline referrals, attendance, academic achievement, and student and staff perception surveys will be used, as well as additional evaluation tools developed for PBIS at the national level (Center on PBIS, 2025a; Ryan & Baker, 2019). The team must determine how all the data will be collected and establish procedures for reviewing and sharing the data with all stakeholders. As the data are reviewed, the team will also begin to make decisions based on that information to improve their efforts, increase fidelity, and better support staff and students to encourage effective implementation.

Once all key features of the PBIS framework are established, the team will support staff and students, meeting regularly to evaluate their efforts and make necessary adjustments to their

approach. They will also continue to provide regular professional development for staff on key PBIS practices and teaching strategies while facilitating ongoing coaching and feedback for all staff. All of these things will occur simultaneously, along with the routine day-to-day tasks and challenges that are experienced within the walls of any school building. For this reason, leadership teams should plan to meet regularly to discuss their observations, identify student and staff needs, review data, identify areas for improvement, and plan professional development and coaching opportunities (Ryan & Baker, 2019).

Getting Better

During this phase, the school's leadership team guides its stakeholders through a continuous improvement process. The last stage of the process directly affects the overall success and sustainability of any school's efforts with PBIS. Once systems and processes have been adopted and implemented regularly, the team needs to enhance their efforts based on ongoing changes in staff and student needs, available resources, and other contextual factors (Ryan & Baker, 2019). Unfortunately, many educators assume that they are finished with PBIS after a few years of implementation, or they may inadvertently shift their energy and attention to other initiatives, which is why this phase is essential to long-term success (Center on PBIS, 2025a). For this reason, specific tools are used to measure the framework's effectiveness, identify areas of need, and reveal perceptions that may affect staff and student buy-in. If a team is committed to this stage of the implementation process, they will analyze all aspects of the school's PBIS efforts multiple times per year. Continuous review ensures that the framework is still being implemented as intended so that staff and students can continue to experience desired outcomes (Ryan & Baker, 2019).

One key tool used during this implementation stage is the Self-Assessment Survey (SAS). The SAS is an online survey distributed to all staff once per year. It is recommended that all adults in the building complete the survey, as each has a unique perspective on how PBIS works based on their needs. Participants rate the current status and priority for improving the key features of PBIS at each implementation tier, such as team composition, expectations, feedback and acknowledgment, behavior definitions, professional development, communication, and data-based decision-making. Data are available for immediate review by the leadership team on the PBISApps website and are considered a key component in the team's annual evaluation (Center on PBIS, 2025a). While this information can be used to evaluate key components of the PBIS framework, the survey is not designed to allow participants to provide specific feedback or explain their rating on each section.

Another essential tool for continued improvement and sustainability is the Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI). The purpose of this online survey is “to provide a valid, reliable, and efficient measure of the extent to which school personnel are applying the core features of schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports (SWPBIS)” (Algozzine et al., 2019, p. 3). The features rated are very similar to the SAS, and possible data sources are listed to help the team determine their rating. PBIS leadership teams at each school are encouraged to complete the TFI at least twice yearly until they consistently score 70% or above in all areas. The survey is also used to rate the fidelity of implementation at each of the three tiers of the MTSS process, so the overall score will fluctuate when additional tiers are rated (Center on PBIS, 2025a). The SAS and TFI are used to develop and regularly update the team's action plan, another key component of continuous improvement (Ryan & Baker, 2019).

Similar to the SAS, the TFI does not provide an opportunity for specific feedback or explanations, and a team consensus or average is used to determine each rating. Unfortunately, individual perspectives are also not collected and shared through this data, and only the school's PBIS leadership team is involved in completing the survey. This highlights a limitation often found in quantitative evaluation tools, which may overlook the nuanced experiences and viewpoints of those directly involved in implementation processes. Additional studies are needed to capture these personal insights, as they can reveal important contextual factors, challenges, and interpretations that standardized measures fail to detect. Qualitative research, particularly studies designed to explore individual perceptions and experiences, can help fill this gap by providing a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of implementation efforts in real-world settings. This type of inquiry supports more meaningful interpretations of data and can inform future decision-making, professional development, and practice in ways that purely numerical assessments cannot.

Benefits of Implementation

Before considering the factors that promote or prevent the sustainability of PBIS implementation, one must first investigate the value and impact of PBIS. After all, the potential benefits of the framework often lead schools and districts to commit to initial implementation. Understanding why the framework is valuable and identifying the factors with the most significant impact enables school teams to establish a clear purpose for their journey with PBIS. This information also reveals additional components that could encourage school teams and individual educators to continue their commitment to the framework after the first few years of implementation.

Improved Student Outcomes

The primary goal of the PBIS framework is to enhance the overall learning environment in ways that support student success (Center on PBIS, 2025c). Many schools and districts adopt PBIS and other improvement initiatives in response to the need for better academic outcomes, attendance, and student behavior. Since Georgia began providing PBIS training to hundreds of schools, the state's graduation rate increased from 67.4% in 2012 to 85.4% in 2024 (GaDOE, 2024). While this growth reflects the combined impact of multiple educational initiatives, PBIS has played a significant role in fostering more positive, consistent school environments. For example, Murray County Schools increased their graduation rate by 14% within the first five years of PBIS implementation, while Griffin-Spalding Schools saw a 10% rise within their first four years (GaDOE, 2013). These outcomes align with research linking improved motivation, student engagement, and uninterrupted instructional time, benefits associated with PBIS, to stronger academic performance (Center on PBIS, 2025c).

Establishing a common language while teaching and reteaching expected behaviors with PBIS can create a calm, structured environment where all students can succeed. According to Petrusek et al. (2022), directly targeting and monitoring students' on-task behaviors and reducing classroom disruptions with a schoolwide PBIS framework can affect many student outcomes. In a quasi-experimental study of two middle schools in the western United States, researchers found that the treatment school, which received ongoing training with PBIS over four years, experienced statistically significant decreases in unexcused absences and tardiness (Caldarella et al., 2011). Freeman et al. (2016) also reported that the attendance rates for schools implementing PBIS with high fidelity rates based on evaluation measures such as the Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI) were significantly higher than those not fully implementing the framework as intended.

Bradshaw et al. (2012) also found that elementary students in PBIS schools experienced improved concentration, prosocial behaviors, and social-emotional knowledge. According to Lawrence (2017), implementing the PBIS framework also allowed schools to tackle bullying behavior. When these negative behaviors are specifically addressed and replaced with positive choices, it can improve students' perceptions of safety, belonging, and support, leading to improved attendance, engagement, academic achievement, and overall satisfaction at school.

Interestingly, most current research findings regarding academic achievement, specifically on standardized tests, range from insignificant to nonexistent. Bradshaw et al. (2010) expected to find a connection between PBIS implementation and student scores on standardized tests for third and fifth-grade reading and math. While there was a slight improvement in scores for schools actively implementing PBIS, it was not statistically significant. This was also the case for Freeman et al. (2016), as they examined the impact of PBIS on academic, behavioral, and attendance outcomes for high schools across 37 states. While high implementation levels significantly impacted attendance and behavior, the link between fidelity of implementation and academic outcomes was statistically insignificant.

Additionally, Gage et al. (2017) noted a similar revelation based on their study of all elementary schools in Florida. While schools implementing PBIS with fidelity had more students at or above grade level, the effect sizes were small, making it difficult for researchers to attribute their success to overall fidelity. Kim et al. (2018) reported similar findings after reviewing longitudinal data from 477 schools in 10 states. Although schools implementing the framework for three or more years reported higher mathematics scores, the relationship between PBIS fidelity and academic outcomes appeared statistically insignificant. Even so, teachers' daily

interactions and firsthand experiences could provide valuable insights into how PBIS fidelity may influence academic performance in ways not fully captured by quantitative measures.

Further research is needed to determine the lasting impact of PBIS implementation on academic achievement, specifically reading. Sugai and Horner (2020) noted that while a significant body of research exists on the impact of PBIS on school culture and discipline referrals, additional studies were needed further to investigate the impact of PBIS on academic outcomes. Freeman et al. (2016) also suggested that more research was necessary to examine individual student outcomes, as many current studies examined the impact of PBIS on the entire student body. Qualitative studies focused on teachers' experiences, specifically their interactions and observations of how the framework has impacted instruction and benefited individual students, could provide a rich new layer of discovery.

Improved Teacher Outcomes

While PBIS can significantly improve students' learning environment, it can also have a positive impact on teachers. PBIS implementation can lead to teachers feeling less exhausted, more connected with students and colleagues, and more equipped to do their jobs successfully (Center on PBIS, 2025c). Educators implementing PBIS can also play an active role in helping their students experience social and academic success. Many teachers interviewed in recent studies have stated that they exerted less time and energy in correcting undesired behaviors, resolving conflict, and de-escalating students, which led to more positive interactions and more time to teach in a way that was more enjoyable for them and their students (Ascetta, 2021; Ashley, 2015; Benedetti, 2024; Brunson, 2023; Gillham, 2024; Hulin, 2024; Jimenez, 2024; Sterling, 2024; Stewart, 2024; Zolkowski, 2024).

Collective Teacher Efficacy is a commonly held belief among a group of teachers in a particular educational environment that they have the tools and skills to positively influence student outcomes (Corwin, 2024). This sense of purpose and belonging is directly connected to a culture of collaboration, excellence, team-based leadership, and an overall shared responsibility for student learning and success (Michael et al., 2023). While the average effect size of a majority of the instructional practices researched by John Hattie over the last two decades was .4, which represented one year of growth, Collective Teacher Efficacy produced an effect size of 1.57, which also happened to be the largest of all 252 influences explored through Hattie's research (Corwin, 2024). Current research on the factors that influence Collective Teacher Efficacy suggests great value in organizing and establishing clear expectations, structures, processes, and procedures when implementing new strategies and interventions (Goddard et al., 2004). When teachers understand the why and how behind an intervention, they feel more confident applying it effectively (Goutas et al., 2021). Teachers who have implemented the PBIS framework reported that it often leads to rich conversations about student behavior and creates a shared sense of purpose and teamwork among their staff (Brunson, 2023; Gillham, 2024; Hulin, 2024; Sterling, 2024; Stewart, 2024; Zolkowski, 2024). These findings capture the essence of the PBIS framework and raise an important question: How can educators maximize the benefits of positive behavior interventions while also building Collective Teacher Efficacy?

PBIS implementation has also been tied to improved teacher self-efficacy. In a recent study involving 530 teachers in 60 primary schools in Cyprus and Greece, Michael et al. (2023) found that those who participated in a full year of Tier 1 training and implementation of PBIS felt more confident in their ability to manage classroom behaviors and provide quality instruction. The authors also noted that the fidelity of implementation directly affected the level

of individual and collective efficacy. This concept has the potential to significantly improve student performance, which is why further research is necessary to investigate the relationship between Collective Teacher Efficacy and effective implementation of PBIS. Future research should further explore the connection between PBIS and Collective Teacher Efficacy in elementary and middle school settings, while also examining additional benefits of the framework and identifying effective strategies for promoting implementation fidelity (Michael et al., 2023).

School Culture and Climate

By emphasizing positive, proactive discipline and fostering strong student–staff relationships, PBIS helps establish a safer, more supportive learning environment (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2023). The framework focuses on creating positive, equitable school environments where all students and stakeholders can feel valued and cared for. This positive culture is one of the most notable benefits of PBIS implementation. When students are excited about earning rewards and participating in schoolwide celebrations, they generally have a more positive outlook on school and put forth more effort to reach their goals. Student attendance also improves as students want to be at school to earn rewards and participate in incentives (Sterling, 2024).

Committing to a positive approach to discipline that emphasizes rewarding desired behaviors creates a safe and engaging environment for all students and adults alike. It also fosters inclusivity and trust, allowing individuals to build meaningful relationships and classroom communities where learning is more personal and enjoyable (Ascetta, 2021; Ash et al., 2024; Benedetti, 2024; Brunson, 2023; Gillham, 2024; Goutas et al., 2021; Hulin, 2024; Jimenez, 2024; Michael et al., 2023; Salinas-Cavazos, 2020; Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2019; Sterling, 2024).

Providing a positive, inclusive learning environment ensures that all students can experience success both behaviorally and academically (Benedetti, 2024). Sugai and Horner (2020) claimed that focusing on a school's culture could yield lasting social, cultural, behavioral, and academic benefits. The Institute of Education Sciences (2023) further supported this argument, stating that a positive school climate is directly linked to improving various student outcomes. The cornerstone of this positive climate is clear expectations and positive relationships. As teachers and staff concentrate on building and maintaining positive relationships with their students and one another, they undergo a culture shift that enhances the overall sense of belonging and mutual respect (Ascetta, 2021; Ash et al., 2024; Ashley, 2015; Benedetti, 2024; Brunson, 2023; Gillham, 2024; Goutas et al., 2021; Hulin, 2024; Jimenez, 2024; Michael et al., 2023; Salinas-Cavazos, 2020; Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2019; Sterling, 2024).

PBIS implementation has also been linked to students' positive perceptions of their schools' overall climate and safety. Elrod et al. (2021) conducted a study of 288 public middle and high schools to examine the effects of long-term PBIS implementation on school climate and student discipline. The study included results from the Georgia Student Health Survey, an assessment tool for PBIS fidelity known as the Benchmarks of Quality (BOQ), and office discipline referral (ODR) data. Regarding school climate, the authors found that students' perceptions of a positive learning environment increased significantly with PBIS implementation. They also noted a direct correlation between school climate and fidelity data. As the school's framework began to influence all aspects of its approach to teaching and learning, the overall culture and climate shifted positively. In summary, schools implementing the framework with fidelity experienced a positive school climate, promoting sustainability.

Lawrence et al. (2022) reported similar findings based on the connection between PBIS and school climate. During interviews with staff members from three different schools, the researchers found that every participant mentioned an improvement in school climate. Some noted that their school felt more positive, friendly, and welcoming due to their efforts in implementing the framework. Brunson (2023) found that teachers in the southeast described their schools as more structured and supportive, mainly due to their focused efforts with PBIS. Overall, teachers and students in PBIS schools appreciated the predictability and consistency that the framework provided, and students seemed to enjoy the rewards and incentives (Ascetta, 2021; Brunson, 2023; Jimenez, 2024; Marion, 2024; Sterling, 2024; Zolkowski, 2024). Further exploration of teachers' perceptions on this topic is necessary to understand the meaningful, day-to-day impact of improved school climate on teaching practices, student relationships, and overall school culture. Also important is to examine how teachers describe school climate in terms of safety, collaboration and support, student behavior, and a sense of community within the school.

Reduced Exclusionary Discipline

Georgia schools reported the tenth-highest out-of-school suspension (OSS) rate in the nation during the 2005-2006 school year (GaDOE, 2013). However, several schools in Georgia saw a significant reduction in discipline referrals after their initial few years of implementation. Lee County Schools observed a 58% reduction in total referrals system-wide and a 35% decline in referrals written per day. Murray County Schools experienced a 37% decrease in overall referrals and a 45% reduction in discipline events throughout the district. Finally, Griffin Spalding Schools noted a 30% reduction in OSS days, and bus referrals declined by 53% (GaDOE, 2013).

Using the PBIS framework can have a significant impact on student behavior. Caldarella et al. (2011) reported a significant decrease in suspensions and office discipline referrals (ODRs) due to PBIS training and implementation. Bradshaw et al. (2010) also found similar results after conducting a longitudinal study of 37 public elementary schools in Maryland. The schools actively implementing PBIS had a statistically significant reduction in ODRs and suspensions as opposed to schools not using the framework. This was also the case for high schools in 37 states, according to research conducted by Freeman et al. (2016). Childs et al. (2015) also examined discipline data from 1,122 Florida schools. Their longitudinal study revealed a relationship between PBIS implementation and a notable trend in reducing ODRs, in-school suspension (ISS), and out-of-school suspension (OSS) over four years. Kim et al. (2018) reported similar findings for schools that had implemented the PBIS framework over three years, as they had also experienced a noteworthy decline in ODRs and suspensions. Thus, the research indicates that PBIS positively impacts students' behaviors and increases the likelihood of avoiding suspensions (Ascetta, 2021; Brunson, 2023; Jimenez, 2024; Marion, 2024; Zolkowski, 2024).

Long-term implementation has been linked to continued positive effects on student discipline. Elrod et al. (2021) found that the number of office discipline referrals (ODRs) continued to decrease from year one to year three of implementation. They also found that schools with fewer discipline referrals were more likely to implement PBIS with greater fidelity in later years. Additional research is needed to better understand how educators engage with and make sense of PBIS in practice, and how these experiences influence the continued success and sustainability of the framework in varying school contexts (Ascetta, 2021; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Brunson, 2023; Caldarella et al., 2011; Childs et al., 2015; Hulin, 2024; McIntosh et al., 2014; Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2019; Zolkowski, 2024). The longitudinal data shared in recent studies

only provide a brief snapshot of the impact after three to five years. What happens after that time? How do school teams and individual teachers shift their focus once discipline referrals are at a desired level? Further qualitative research on individual teachers' experiences with long-term implementation could help to address these questions and inform future practice.

Factors Related to Sustainability

The main topic of interest for PBIS implementation has recently shifted to its sustainability (Sugai & Horner, 2020). Sustainability is “the creation of a social norm, the point at which a practice ceases to be a project or initiative and becomes institutionalized” (McIntosh et al., 2009, p. 328). While many studies have demonstrated the impact of PBIS implementation on school culture, discipline referrals, and academic outcomes during the first few years, little is known about what happens after those initial years. According to Berg (2021), many PBIS programs in previous research failed or fizzled out after the first few years. Many teachers have expressed that a lack of leadership support, staff buy-in, and necessary resources were the greatest threats to sustaining a successful PBIS program in their schools over time (Ascetta, 2021; Brunson, 2023; Gillham, 2024; Scaletta & Tejero Hughes, 2020; Sterling, 2024). These variables can make or break a school or district's efforts to implement the PBIS framework. Therefore, careful consideration must be taken to ensure that the necessary structures and supports are in place for effective implementation (Berg, 2021). Sugai et al. (2000) added that the key to sustainability was not necessarily more procedures and practices but more specific processes and interventions with a contextual fit that aligned and supported a school's needs and interests. Sugai and Horner (2020) expressed similar concerns based on the need for specific strategies to lead to effective, sustained implementation of PBIS. Ultimately, leaders must be equally dedicated to developing and sustaining their school's PBIS framework as they are to

their current academic standards and initiatives (Ryan & Baker, 2019). Investigating PBIS through a qualitative lens, especially one focused on specific experiences of teachers in the field, provides rich data on the unique ways that educators have made meaning of the framework and adjusted their practices to meet the needs of their school community.

Fidelity and sustainability of the PBIS framework occur only through targeted efforts to continuously improve systems and processes at the school and classroom levels. Kittelman et al. (2019) found that long-term success relied heavily on administrator support, professional development, and building school and district capacity. Through their study of 860 schools across 14 states, McIntosh et al. (2014) found that school team actions related to coaching, sharing data, and data-based decision-making appeared to impact overall sustainability more than other factors. Yeung et al. (2016) also addressed the issue of sustainability. While many schools and districts seemed to experience positive effects in the first three years, discipline data often became stagnant instead of continuing on a downward trend. This lull in quantitative evidence often leads teams and leaders to wonder if the framework is still producing the desired impact, if it only worked in the earlier years because it was novel and implemented with fidelity, or if the framework has served its purpose and is no longer necessary. Ryan and Baker (2019) and Lyon (2017) challenged that assumption by sharing that implementing the framework was an ongoing, multi-layered process instead of a single destination or easily attainable goal.

Leadership

Leadership is the most significant determining factor of PBIS sustainability, as the framework's success relies heavily on the commitment and support of those in charge of planning, implementation, and improvement (Berg, 2021). This key variable was mentioned most frequently in current literature, and according to Coffey and Horner (2012), the principal

was often seen as “the most critical player” (p. 408). The authors studied 117 schools across six states to determine the features that led to sustainability. They found that the leader had the greatest impact on sustainability. They credited their significant impact to the fact that they are responsible for acquiring resources, creating the budget, setting expectations, organizing professional development, offering feedback, and monitoring fidelity in their building (Coffey & Horner, 2012). Ryan and Baker (2019) also expressed the importance of adequate support from school leaders. They mentioned that they held a key role in establishing initial commitment, encouraging participation, providing resources and support, and encouraging unity among staff towards a common goal of improving behavior. Martin (2013) discovered varied perceptions of administrator support in their study of teachers' perceptions in two Georgia schools. While survey results revealed that most teachers agreed that administrators in their building supported their efforts to implement the PBIS framework, some felt that administrators did not handle major behavior concerns promptly or provide an open-door policy for listening to teachers' concerns and suggestions. These data highlight the importance of examining teachers' perspectives and perceptions of administrator support, as their experiences with leadership practices, responsiveness, and communication can significantly shape their views of PBIS practices and affect their willingness to implement the framework consistently and with fidelity.

While school leaders are tasked with establishing processes and procedures for PBIS in their buildings, they must also create an atmosphere that encourages staff buy-in and commitment to the framework. Through interviews with various teachers in PBIS schools in Jamaica, Pinnock (2020) discovered that most teachers were adamant about the important role that administrators play in encouraging buy-in with the framework from staff and students, ensuring that there is an adequate budget, gaining excitement and investment in behavioral

incentives, and enforcing rules and expectations. They also noted that administrators had a key responsibility in keeping teachers accountable and monitoring whether or not the framework was being implemented consistently throughout the school. Scaletta and Tejero Hughes (2020) interviewed 24 school leaders to determine what processes and procedures allowed them to implement the PBIS framework successfully in their buildings. Focusing on teacher leadership, stakeholder engagement, and using data to inform decisions were just a few of their key suggestions. They also mentioned prioritizing professional development, sharing the positive impact of PBIS, providing necessary resources and support, and encouraging collaboration among staff as ways to promote staff buy-in and fidelity. Lastly, they noted that their most significant challenges were balancing the workload for teacher leaders, encouraging parent understanding and buy-in, and shifting mindsets from punitive to positive discipline. Many teachers have also shared that administrator support, specifically with de-escalating students and addressing behavior issues with parents, is essential to successfully implementing the PBIS framework (Brunson, 2023; Gillham, 2024; Madden, 2025; Sterling, 2024; Stewart, 2024; Zolkowski, 2024).

Administrators and leaders can mitigate some of the imbalances and stress associated with PBIS implementation. Exploring the underlying causes of these challenges for educators could provide valuable insights into creating environments that support manageable workloads and promote active participation from all stakeholders. This directly relates to the aim of the current study, which examines how educators view the relationship between their day-to-day teaching responsibilities, administrative support, and the demands of meaningful PBIS implementation. Their experiences help identify the conditions that promote or hinder sustained, effective PBIS practices. Exploring the interactions that have shaped teachers' perceptions also

reveals valuable insights into their needs, concerns, and expectations, helping administrators better understand how to provide meaningful support, address challenges, and foster a positive, collaborative environment that promotes successful PBIS implementation.

Coaching and Professional Development

The PBIS framework should not be shared and implemented without careful planning, support, and ongoing professional development (Ryan & Baker, 2019). The framework must be used to create a well-developed plan with systems and processes that naturally encourage fidelity (George & Kincaid, 2008). For this reason, ongoing coaching is necessary to ensure the framework is implemented correctly and has the most significant possible impact (Berg, 2021). Much like students learning and applying a new skill, teachers need to receive regular feedback on their use of the framework within their classrooms, and school teams need additional support in collecting, monitoring, using, and sharing data with their staff (Ash et al., 2024; Benedetti, 2024; Gillham, 2024; Pinnock, 2020; Sterling, 2024). George and Kincaid (2008) added that while school coaches should provide regular feedback to their staff, they should also receive additional coaching at the district and state levels to be most effective in monitoring implementation in their building. Professional development is key to effective implementation. Additional research on how teachers experience and interpret professional development related to PBIS can provide important insights into how training practices influence educators' understanding, confidence, and commitment to the daily application of the framework and how professional learning opportunities can be improved to better support sustained, context-driven implementation.

Unfortunately, many recent studies on teachers' perceptions of PBIS in their buildings revealed that proper training and ongoing coaching need immediate attention. Scott (2018)

interviewed elementary school teachers in the southeast and discovered that many described initial training as hastily conducted through a brief meeting or previously recorded videos. They attributed the lack of buy-in and fidelity in their building to those poorly planned initial experiences. Those same teachers, along with participants in other settings, suggested that a lack of follow-up and support could be hindering their efforts to ensure that their schoolwide practices and procedures are being applied with fidelity in all settings by all staff members (Benedetti, 2024; Madden, 2025; Pinnock, 2020; Roberts-Clawson, 2017; Scott, 2018; Sterling, 2024). Thus, adequate training and coaching are consistently needed.

Various studies emphasize the importance of consistent, actionable feedback and data-driven coaching in supporting PBIS initiatives (Gillham, 2024; Madden, 2025; Scaletta & Tejero Hughes, 2020). However, a gap still exists in the literature regarding teachers' perceptions of the quality, frequency, and effectiveness of the training and support they receive. By sharing teachers' stories about these processes, this study deepens the understanding of how teachers experience and interpret them and how feedback and coaching systems can be adjusted to improve PBIS fidelity, teacher confidence, and positive school climate outcomes. Future research based on these insights can identify ways to customize these experiences to better meet teachers' needs for delivering ongoing, impactful coaching and feedback across different educational settings.

Data-Based Decision-Making

Data-based decision-making is a crucial aspect of PBIS directly linked to fidelity and sustainability (Center on PBIS, 2025b). Although many leading researchers in the PBIS field argue that data should be regularly shared and utilized to modify current practices and processes for interventions and incentives, this is not necessarily the case for many schools. For instance,

Pinnock (2020) reported that fewer than 60% of teachers believed their school's PBIS initiatives were data-driven. Participants indicated that while specific issues were addressed, they were often handled informally or inconsistently, and adjustments were rarely made afterward. While teachers recognized the importance of using data to inform and improve their efforts with PBIS (Ash et al., 2024; Silva et al., 2021), some also reported that collecting and discussing data added stress when they were not adequately trained (Madden, 2025; Sterling, 2024). Teachers further expressed frustration when asked to take time to collect data that was never discussed or used to inform practices (Brunson, 2023; Marion, 2024).

Limited use of data also highlights two additional barriers to sustainability: insufficient time and resources. Data may not be shared due to time constraints during regular meetings or professional development. Schools might also lack the financial or technological resources to maintain a real-time platform that offers discipline data. Nevertheless, teachers are eager to learn more about data collection and usage within the PBIS framework, and they want to be included in conversations about behavior data to enhance their efforts (Ash et al., 2024; Benedetti, 2024; Madden, 2025; Marion, 2024). Because data-based decision-making is a vital component of PBIS fidelity and is heavily emphasized in Implementation Science (Horner et al., 2017; Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2019), further investigation is needed to explore teachers' experiences with the successes and challenges of data-based decision-making. Specific insights gained through interviews can reveal how teachers perceive these processes and address ways to promote and support data-based decision-making within the context of the PBIS framework.

This study addresses a significant gap in existing literature by exploring teachers' unique perspectives and experiences with specific aspects of the PBIS framework, such as collecting and utilizing behavior data. Teachers typically serve as the principal data collectors and initial

implementers of behavioral interventions. However, their insights into these processes are often overlooked. Examining how teachers engage with data collection and analysis illuminates the complexities of classroom and school decision-making. It reveals how data-driven practices impact their sense of efficacy and commitment to PBIS.

Classroom Implementation

The fidelity of classroom implementation has been identified as one of the key factors of PBIS sustainability. While Yeung et al. (2016) and Matthews et al. (2014) agreed that other factors, such as leadership, school culture, and coaching, were essential to practical implementation, the specific activities and interactions in individual classrooms across the school had the most significant impact on sustainability. When positive, meaningful relationships and proactive discipline are at the heart of daily instruction and the foundation of all classroom activities, PBIS principles tend to have a greater, more long-term effect at the school level (Benedetti, 2024; Berg, 2021; Brunson, 2023; Scaletta & Tejero Hughes, 2020). Teachers are also often inspired by real, personal stories about student success that can be shared regularly to encourage others. Discussing personal victories and collaborating with coworkers to improve instructional practices can promote Collective Teacher Efficacy (Goddard et al., 2004).

While many teachers have praised the positive impact of using strengths-based approaches in applying PBIS within their classrooms, there is limited information available about their specific strategies and adaptations (Benedetti, 2024; Gillham, 2024; Stewart, 2024). By focusing on the daily experiences and interactions within individual classroom settings, this study will examine how teachers interpret and implement PBIS in their daily practice. This exploration can provide valuable insights for school staff aiming to refine and improve schoolwide PBIS efforts. Additionally, understanding these classroom-level practices from

teachers' perspectives may help enhance implementation fidelity and academic outcomes, thereby supporting the long-term sustainability of the framework (Ascetta, 2021; Brunson, 2023; Madden, 2025; Matthews et al., 2014).

Currently, most available research provides a broad overview of how implementation occurs at the school level. While qualitative studies on PBIS have significantly increased in the last several years, many focus on teachers' general views regarding the significance and effectiveness of PBIS instead of examining the specific experiences and interactions that contribute to its relevance for teachers and students. These studies often serve more as program evaluations than as opportunities to explore how teachers find meaning in their experiences with the framework. As a result, this study aimed to investigate the classroom-level implementation of the PBIS framework by concentrating on teachers' direct experiences in their unique classroom environments. By interviewing teachers and using open-ended questions, this research provides comprehensive insights into the perceived advantages and challenges of PBIS and its effects on classroom culture, instructional practices, and student behavior.

Teachers' Perceptions

Recent studies have revealed an extensive list of barriers and challenges to the fidelity and sustainability of schoolwide efforts based on teachers' perceptions and experiences with implementing the PBIS framework. Professional development, support for significant behaviors, and limited resources were frequently mentioned. Administrator support, ongoing coaching, and consistent implementation across all school settings were also noted as areas of concern.

Exploring current research on these factors helps to frame future qualitative research.

Additionally, it highlights the need to investigate the meaning-making process that occurs when

teachers encounter various barriers and challenges during the implementation of PBIS in their unique school settings.

Teacher Burnout and Behavior

As the number of schools implementing the PBIS framework increases, so do teachers' concerns and frustrations with burnout and behavior. In a report on the alarming status of teacher burnout in their state, the Georgia Department of Education (2022) included many of the barriers and challenges mentioned above. While participants represented a wide array of schools, their concerns were still quite similar. Overall, teachers expressed that a lack of sufficient planning time, combating initiatives, inadequate or ineffective professional development, and limited support and autonomy were the most significant barriers to their success and satisfaction at work (GaDOE, 2022). The need for autonomy within the PBIS framework was mentioned by several teachers who were interviewed in a recent study (Brunson, 2023). Many felt that establishing and supporting teacher buy-in and ownership was one of the most significant challenges to fidelity in their building. Teachers noted that negative experiences with initial training, frustrations with inadequate support, and insufficient professional development may have led some peers to avoid initial commitment.

Classroom disruptions in the early grades are on the rise, and many schools and districts still lack clear guidelines and protocols for managing student behaviors. The Education Advisory Board (2019, 2023) revealed that an alarming 78% of teachers who completed the most recent survey identified student behavior as a significant concern. Many teachers also indicated that they felt unprepared and unsupported in dealing with behavior issues in their classrooms due to a lack of sufficient training, increased pressure to prioritize academic initiatives over behavior, limited support staff for handling behavior issues, and misconceptions between staff and

administrators on when and how to follow behavior frameworks for negative behaviors (EAB, 2023). While graduation rates and discipline referrals may be positively affected by PBIS, the data suggest that more issues under the surface may need attention. Additional research on teachers' experiences with the barriers and challenges of daily implementation could help address underlying issues and concerns and inform future efforts.

Inadequate Training and Support

Professional development and support for significant behaviors are among educators' greatest concerns with their schools' current efforts. Pinnock (2020) and Ascetta (2021) reported that many teachers expressed the need for additional staff to come into their classrooms and help with behavior support, especially for those students who were not responding to schoolwide interventions due to increased behavior needs or unique motivations. Additionally, many staff members from schools implementing the PBIS framework reported that they had not received formal training or that their training was limited to initial exposure during onboarding or when their school first adopted the framework (Stewart, 2024). Several teachers also shared that there was no additional check-in or follow-up after initial training to determine if there were challenges, misconceptions, or additional questions that needed to be addressed after they began to implement the framework themselves (Benedetti, 2024; Brunson, 2023; Marion, 2024; Pinnock, 2020; Stewart, 2024).

Unfortunately, much of the professional development and collaboration discussed in recent studies on PBIS was informal or insufficient due to various factors (Benedetti, 2024; Marion, 2024; Pinnock, 2020; Stewart, 2024). Many teachers felt unprepared and unsure about effectively implementing the appropriate practices and procedures with their students (Sterling, 2024). Roberts-Clawson (2017) revealed that several educators also expressed concerns about a

lack of school-level support and adequate training on tiered behavior interventions. While teachers hoped to learn more about effective strategies to manage specific behaviors, that training was never provided (Benedetti, 2024; Brunson, 2023; Sterling, 2024). Teachers attributed their lack of training and effective collaboration to an ongoing struggle for time and resources between academic and behavioral initiatives (Ascetta, 2021; EAB, 2023; McDaniel et al., 2017).

Inconsistent Implementation

Many teachers expressed concern about the lack of consistency in their buildings regarding PBIS implementation. For example, four out of ten teachers interviewed at a Maryland elementary school identified consistency as a significant challenge and potential barrier to overall fidelity (Sterling, 2024). Participants acknowledged that their efforts in applying the framework were much more organized and effective in the fall than in the spring. Additionally, one teacher noted that she did not always provide the proper acknowledgment and often resorted to simple praise due to time constraints or other factors. Others reported frequently neglecting to collect or review student behavior data and failing to distribute rewards as suggested in their schoolwide plan.

Additional studies indicate that inconsistent implementation is often influenced by inadequate or ineffective training, varying teacher buy-in, insufficient support for Tier 2 and Tier 3 behavior needs, and a lack of follow-through from administrators (Ash et al., 2024; Benedetti, 2024; Brunson, 2023; Marion, 2024; Scott, 2018). Delving deeper into the inconsistencies in PBIS fidelity across classrooms and various segments of the school year can uncover the underlying barriers affecting consistent implementation. Additionally, exploring how teachers' emotions and personal experiences influence their motivation to adopt the PBIS framework,

despite mixed outcomes, will provide valuable insight into the complex dynamics shaping fidelity.

Student-Specific Challenges

PBIS is not an immediate fix for all student misbehavior. In a recent study on teachers' perceptions and satisfaction with their school's current PBIS efforts, Martin (2013) found that most teachers selected high ratings for their behaviors related to their consistent use of the PBIS framework. Surprisingly, their lowest rankings were related to student behavior, specifically, whether implementing PBIS practices had positively impacted students and improved their overall behavior and attitudes. Some still had students with significant behavior issues in their classrooms, while others stated they were still consistently dealing with classroom disruptions. Madden (2025) interviewed 12 elementary teachers in an urban setting and found that most did not mind teaching students with challenging behaviors. However, they were more reluctant to take on the challenge when they felt they would not receive the necessary training and support to succeed. They also urged administrators to understand that support with parents was equally important as support in the classroom during the school day (Ash et al., 2024; Hulin, 2024; Zolkowski, 2024). Many teachers felt that they had not received the proper support from administrators when dealing with significant behavior issues, which negatively affected their perceptions of the overall impact of the framework itself (Martin, 2013).

While most students responded well to schoolwide procedures and were motivated by current rewards and consequences, some took time adjusting and responding accordingly. Roberts-Clawson (2017) and Pinnock (2020) noted that the PBIS framework may not be effective for all students, particularly those resistant to schoolwide interventions or unmotivated by the offered rewards and consequences. Stewart (2024) conducted a case study centered on

teachers' perspectives on PBIS, which revealed that additional training for students requiring Tier 2 and Tier 3 support was a key area of concern. The lack of training for this particular group of students had a negative impact on teachers' beliefs about their ability to implement the framework effectively. It also appeared to influence the initial positive perceptions and encourage skepticism in those not entirely on board.

Unfortunately, there are differing perspectives on what PBIS should look like in schools and classrooms for students with significant behavioral challenges. Zagona et al. (2025) developed a national survey examining teachers' views on using PBIS with this specific group of students. They found that teachers' perspectives varied significantly regarding whether these students should be taught schoolwide expectations. They also observed that teachers had different opinions on how these expectations should be taught to students with diverse cognitive and behavioral abilities. Many educators held differing views on how to reward or discipline these students, and their opinions on whether these students could meet schoolwide expectations varied across different settings. The researchers considered whether lowered expectations or limited exposure to Tier 1 practices might be underlying issues.

Exploring teachers' experiences with individual students, especially those needing additional support, provides valuable insights into the adaptability and limitations of PBIS in diverse school and classroom contexts. Teachers often develop informal, individualized strategies to engage these students, relying on their personal experiences, professional judgment, and relational approaches that may fall outside the formal PBIS framework. Understanding these perspectives and experiences highlights the complexities of classroom management, the emotional labor involved in supporting resistant students, and the need for flexible, tailored interventions. Further exploration of teachers' experiences also provides valuable insights for

future research and potential enhancements to PBIS frameworks, ensuring they are inclusive and effective for every student and educator.

Chapter Summary

Implementing PBIS, along with other school improvement initiatives, has profoundly impacted the culture and climate of schools in Georgia, contributing to reductions in exclusionary disciplinary actions and bullying, while fostering safer, more positive, and engaging learning environments (Brunson, 2023; GaDOE, 2013, 2024; Jimenez, 2024; Lawrence, 2017; Sterling, 2024; Zolkowski, 2024). While research supports the overall effectiveness of PBIS, most existing studies focus on schools in the early years of implementation, typically less than five years (Matthews et al., 2014). Additionally, much of the research relies heavily on quantitative data, implementation checklists, and administrative reports, offering limited insight into the everyday experiences of the classroom teachers responsible for executing PBIS practices (Freeman et al., 2016; Madden, 2025).

Although educators and researchers widely acknowledge the advantages of PBIS in enhancing student outcomes and school climate, there remains a substantial gap in understanding the elements that contribute to its long-term sustainability (Hume & McIntosh, 2013; Scaletta & Tejero Hughes, 2020). Existing literature tends to emphasize schoolwide outcomes and administrator perspectives while overlooking the intricate, day-to-day realities of teachers tasked with maintaining PBIS practices within their classrooms (Freeman et al., 2016; Madden, 2025). Researchers must move beyond surface-level studies to identify the specific structures, strategies, and relational dynamics that support sustainable PBIS implementation in diverse educational settings (Benedetti, 2024; Sterling, 2024). In particular, gathering in-depth accounts from teachers who have successfully maintained implementation over time can reveal valuable

insights into the roles of collaborative teams, instructional leadership, professional development, and positive school culture in sustaining these efforts (Ascetta, 2021; Brunson, 2023; Gillham, 2024).

Another critical area for further research involves examining how school leadership teams foster conditions encouraging staff engagement and effective implementation, especially concerning Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions (McDaniel et al., 2017; Scaletta & Tejero Hughes, 2020; Scott, 2018). Numerous studies have identified strong administrative leadership, clear behavioral expectations, and well-structured professional development as essential for promoting consistent, schoolwide PBIS practices (Ascetta, 2021; Gillham, 2024). Furthermore, exploring how teachers navigate ongoing challenges, such as time constraints, competing initiatives, limited resources, and varying levels of staff commitment, can provide valuable context for understanding the factors influencing implementation fidelity (Benedetti, 2024; Madden, 2025; Marion, 2024). Investigating the specific instructional strategies, classroom routines, and relationship-building practices that teachers use to foster positive student behavior and reinforce a supportive classroom environment will also expand the current understanding of effective PBIS implementation at the classroom level (Pinnock, 2020; Sugai & Horner, 2020; Zolkowski, 2024).

While many teachers support the common language and strengths-based approaches promoted by PBIS, there is limited information about the specific adaptations and classroom-level practices educators use (Benedetti, 2024; Gillham, 2024; Stewart, 2024). Focusing on individual teachers' experiences in their unique classroom settings provides essential insights into how these practices are implemented. Additional qualitative research on these experiences could improve implementation fidelity, boost academic outcomes, and support the long-term sustainability of the framework (Ascetta, 2021; Brunson, 2023; Madden, 2025; Matthews et al.,

2014). By highlighting teacher voices in this study, I aim to explore the complexities and adaptive strategies educators develop to handle challenges such as shifting priorities, limited resources, and staff turnover; factors consistently identified as barriers to maintaining PBIS fidelity over time (Michael et al., 2023; Zolkowski, 2024).

In conclusion, the literature on PBIS fidelity and sustainability highlights the importance of consistent implementation and a collective commitment to continuous improvement in achieving lasting success. Although previous research has identified facilitators and barriers to sustaining effective PBIS practices, a significant gap remains in understanding the personal experiences and perspectives of teachers navigating these realities in their classrooms daily. Through this study, I aim to address that gap by examining how elementary teachers in schools with multiple years of PBIS implementation perceive and respond to ongoing challenges and supports related to sustainability. By centering teachers' experiences, this research offers deeper insights into the relational, structural, and instructional factors influencing implementation fidelity and sustainability, ultimately informing future efforts to strengthen PBIS practices across varied educational contexts.

Chapter 3 will outline the basic interpretive qualitative methodology guiding the study's data collection and analysis processes. It will detail the procedures for selecting participants, describe the tools and techniques used to gather data, and explain the steps for analyzing the data to identify recurring patterns and themes. The next chapter will also discuss how the findings, grounded in educators' personal experiences and everyday practices, will offer practical insights and recommendations to support the ongoing fidelity and long-term sustainability of the PBIS framework within school setting

Chapter III

Methodology

In this chapter, I will describe the research design and methods I have used to investigate teachers' experiences with the long-term implementation of PBIS within a single elementary school setting. In this study, I aim to understand how teachers perceive the benefits, challenges, and everyday realities of sustaining PBIS over multiple years. By centering teachers' voices, I have worked to uncover the factors that shape their work with PBIS and give deeper meaning to their experiences. Teachers' valuable insights are often overlooked in structured checklists and quantitative outcome measures. However, elevating teacher perspectives is essential to ensuring that those most directly responsible for implementation have an opportunity to influence how these frameworks evolve.

Recent findings from The Teacher Burnout Report (GaDOE, 2024) and surveys from the Education Advisory Board (EAB, 2023) underscore the importance of involving teachers in discussions about schoolwide initiatives, particularly those related to student behavior. This study will respond to that call by amplifying teachers' voices and examining how they perceive the effects of PBIS on their instructional practices, school culture, and professional identities over time. Semi-structured interviews have been employed to gather rich, descriptive data, enabling teachers to openly discuss their perceptions, frustrations, successes, and lessons learned over years of working within a PBIS framework. I have chosen a basic interpretive qualitative approach, which is well-suited for exploring how individuals make sense of their experiences

within a particular context. Using a basic interpretive framework allows me to act as the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation, emphasizing the participants' unique perspectives and the meanings they assign to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach produces in-depth, narrative data beyond quantitative findings and perception-based surveys. It also encourages reflection on additional factors that influence the fidelity and sustainability of PBIS implementation, which might not be captured in standardized guidance such as the PBIS Implementation Blueprint (Center on PBIS, 2025a). The remainder of this chapter will provide a detailed overview of the research design, participant selection process, data collection procedures, and analysis plan. I will also address ethical considerations and outline the strategies employed to ensure the study's trustworthiness and validity.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this basic interpretive qualitative study is to explore how teachers make meaning of their experiences with long-term PBIS implementation and how they interpret its influence on their daily work, classroom environments, and professional roles. Although PBIS is implemented nationally as a strategy for enhancing student behavior and fostering a positive school climate, much of the existing research focuses on evaluating its effects through quantitative data and basic perception studies of teachers (Lawrence et al., 2022). Unfortunately, there is limited understanding of how individual teachers experience, adapt to, and maintain this framework over extended periods (Michael et al., 2023; Sterling, 2024; Stewart, 2024). While the research landscape is rich with longitudinal quantitative studies, further exploration of real-world implementation is essential, particularly regarding daily decisions that might influence the fidelity and longevity of the framework (Madden, 2025; Molloy et al., 2013). By examining the meanings teachers derive from their experiences in a setting where the framework has been

implemented for ten years, I aim to reveal the challenges, complexities, and transformations that occur as PBIS becomes integrated into everyday school life.

As schools strive to implement the PBIS framework with fidelity to achieve improved outcomes over time, leaders must consider the unique perspectives of those directly responsible for daily implementation. Teachers' firsthand experiences provide valuable insights into the successes and challenges of implementing effective practices in diverse classroom environments. Their perspectives, shaped by daily interactions with students, are essential for understanding the full scope of everyday teaching. This study aims to enhance the broader understanding of the PBIS framework and its sustainability by exploring the unique perspectives of teachers responsible for implementing and upholding PBIS practices over time. Ultimately, this study will inform school leaders and policymakers on how to better support and promote long-term, meaningful implementation by leveraging their most important resource: teachers. The following research questions were used to guide this inquiry:

Research Question 1

How do teachers make sense of the benefits and challenges they encounter in sustaining PBIS practices?

Research Question 2

How do teachers describe the influence of PBIS on their instructional practices, school culture, and professional identity over time?

Research Design

For this study, I adopted an interpretivist qualitative research paradigm that emphasizes understanding human experiences and the subjective meanings individuals ascribe to them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Unlike positivism, which depends on objective, generalizable

theories, interpretivism views reality as subjective and shaped by cultural contexts and personal experiences. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that interpretive inquiry acknowledges the existence of multiple realities within a single setting, influenced by the unique experiences and interactions of individuals within their environment. In the context of basic interpretive research on PBIS implementation within a specific school, teachers' perceptions of the PBIS framework are influenced by their experiences with various factors such as administrator support, professional development, data-informed decision-making, school and classroom culture, and student behavior. I have selected this methodology because it allows exploration of how teachers perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to their experiences of implementing the PBIS framework over time within the same school setting. Additionally, by embracing the subjective nature of knowledge through interpretivism in an educational context, this study provides a valuable opportunity to amplify teachers' voices and gain a comprehensive understanding of the benefits, challenges, and complexities of long-term PBIS implementation in a real-world environment.

Basic interpretive qualitative research differs from other qualitative approaches based on its overall purpose and scope. Unlike narrative inquiry, which focuses on building detailed life stories, or case study, which utilizes multiple evidence sources to examine a single, bounded system or event in depth, basic interpretive research aims to understand how participants interpret and assign meaning to their experiences within a specific context. Basic interpretive methods also differ from phenomenology, which focuses on capturing the essence of a shared experience and describing what it is like from participants' perspectives. Instead, basic interpretive research recognizes that meaning is shaped by each participant's unique background, context, and perspective. This approach seeks to capture the unique variations in experiences

without generating or testing theories. A basic interpretive method also enables a deeper exploration of how participants' interpretations of others' actions, combined with their personal histories, influence their approach to future situations and their commitment to certain practices. To understand how teachers interpret their experiences with PBIS, a method that respects participant meaning, enables rich, contextual analysis, and centers on subjective experience is essential. That is why basic interpretive qualitative methodology is the most suitable approach.

The PBIS Implementation Blueprint, guided by Implementation Science, highlights the importance of examining each aspect of adopting, implementing, and maintaining evidence-based interventions. The crucial roles of context and stakeholder engagement are also centered in these processes (Brownson et al., 2022; Center on PBIS, 2025a). By employing a basic interpretive qualitative approach to explore long-term PBIS implementation, I aim to uncover the complex experiences of teachers who have worked with the framework for several years within their unique school and community contexts. Through detailed descriptions of teachers' perspectives, this research can provide a deeper understanding of how educators interpret and navigate the successes and challenges of applying PBIS practices in their classrooms.

I have collected data through in-depth, one-on-one semi-structured interviews, which are ideal for qualitative research as they promote reflective storytelling and provide rich, detailed descriptions of personal experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This process allows teachers to share insights about their specific successes and challenges, as well as how those experiences have influenced their perceptions of PBIS implementation. Prompts and follow-up questions were used to clarify responses, explore emerging concepts, and encourage additional reflections.

The interview guide's questions (see Appendix A) focus on participants' experiences with cultural and contextual factors, key components of the PBIS framework, and essential principles

of Implementation Science. These questions also explore how teachers' experiences have shaped their understanding of implementation fidelity and the sustainability of PBIS in their specific school environments. Teachers are the true experts in PBIS implementation, possessing invaluable first-hand experience and deep knowledge of how the framework's specific elements unfold in everyday classroom practice. However, their voices are often overshadowed by a focus on procedural mandates and quantitative data. The semi-structured interviews and corresponding interview guide reflect the principles of basic interpretive qualitative research by amplifying participants' voices and examining the complex, socially constructed processes through which meaning is created in unique educational contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Positionality

For this study, I have adopted interpretive epistemology, which states that knowledge is subjective and co-created through social interaction. From this perspective, the meanings teachers assign to their experiences with maintaining PBIS are not fixed truths to be discovered. Instead, they are context-dependent interpretations shaped by their personal histories, beliefs, and relationships. As the researcher, I actively interpret the data during both the interviews and the analysis. My interpretations are inevitably influenced by my own professional background, prior experiences with PBIS, and my role as a district employee, which offer me a deep contextual understanding but also create potential opportunities for bias. During interviews, meaning is co-constructed as I ask follow-up questions, seek clarification, and respond in ways that may influence how participants expand on their stories. In analyzing the data, my perspective influences what I observe, how I interpret participants' words, and the patterns I recognize across different accounts. By openly acknowledging these interpretive processes and practicing reflexivity throughout the research, I carefully examine how my positionality may have

influenced or even challenged my interpretations, ensuring that I accurately represent participants' viewpoints.

As a researcher, I bring extensive experience within the studied setting, having served in various roles, including classroom teacher, PBIS team member, school-based PBIS coach, and PBIS coordinator. This long-term involvement has provided me with a deep understanding of the school's culture, the evolution of PBIS practices over time, and the complexities of implementing these practices at various system levels. I am currently employed as a teacher in the same school district, which provides me with firsthand knowledge of district policies, school culture, and the history of PBIS implementation in this specific setting. This familiarity with the context enables me to offer rich, nuanced data and interpretations grounded in an understanding of the environment where participants' experiences occurred.

My positionality is shaped by a mix of positive and challenging experiences with PBIS, providing me with a balanced view that acknowledges both its practical benefits and the frustrations that can arise during implementation. Having worked in both teaching and leadership roles, I am uniquely able to understand the tensions between policy and practice, as well as between classroom realities and system-level expectations. These diverse experiences have influenced my choice to use a straightforward interpretive qualitative approach, grounded in the belief that people create meaning based on their unique experiences and social contexts. I have personally observed how multiple, sometimes conflicting, realities can exist not only among different teachers within the same school but even within the same individual, depending on factors such as their roles, the makeup of their classes, or the supports they have access to.

My broad range of both positive and negative experiences with PBIS implementation enables me to approach the data with a fair and open mind. Because I have direct experience

with both the advantages and challenges of the framework, I am less likely to overstate one point of view or seek to confirm only a single narrative. Instead, this diverse experience helps me stay aware of the complexity and subtleties in participants' responses. It also allows me to recognize and validate a variety of perspectives, whether supportive, critical, or mixed, without favoring one interpretation over others. This results in a more balanced and credible analysis that captures the multifaceted nature of teachers' experiences with PBIS.

Importantly, these experiences have also sparked genuine curiosity about how other teachers perceive and interpret the PBIS framework within the same school setting. Ultimately, this study is motivated not by a desire to confirm or promote my own opinions but by a sincere interest in understanding the diverse and personal ways in which other educators have encountered and understood PBIS in their daily work. While this insider perspective enhances my ability to understand and interpret participants' experiences, it also requires a careful and ongoing process of reflexivity.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity in qualitative research is a purposeful, continuous process of critically examining how the researcher's positionality, assumptions, and experiences influence each stage of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In this study, reflexivity is an active and ongoing practice used to improve the transparency and credibility of the findings. Acknowledging my dual role as both a researcher and an educator within the research setting, I engage in intentional reflection to assess how my background, professional relationships, and prior knowledge may have influenced data collection, interpretation, and the representation of participants' voices.

Reflexive practices included maintaining a reflexive journal to document emerging insights, questions, and potential biases throughout the research process. Journal entries have

noted moments when I became connected to a participant’s account of PBIS challenges because it resonated with my own past experiences or when I became surprised by a teacher’s interpretation of a schoolwide policy or practice. To enhance transparency and acknowledge my role in the research process, I have maintained a reflexive journal throughout the data collection and analysis stages. These entries allow me to document my reactions, biases, and evolving interpretations, ensuring that I remain attentive to how my positionality as a teacher in the district may shape the study. As shown in Table 1, the journal excerpts illustrate multiple dimensions of reflexivity, including emotional reactions, positionality, analytic decision-making, power dynamics, shifts in perspective, and the interplay between participant emotion and researcher reflexivity. For example, the Power Dynamics entry captures how the participant expresses frustration about not having control over consequences and inconsistent administrator support, and how my nods and affirmations are used to help her feel more comfortable sharing. Similarly, the Positionality entry reflects my own experience navigating gray areas in classroom celebrations and how that shaped my interpretation of participants’ struggles with balancing grace and consequences. These reflections demonstrate ongoing awareness of my influence on the research process and a commitment to accurately representing the teachers’ lived experiences while bracketing personal assumptions.

Table 1

Reflexive Journal Excerpt

Type of Reflexivity	Journal Excerpt	Relevance
Emotional Reaction	“The participant grew frustrated talking about the tug-of-war between giving grace and enforcing consequences. She shared memories of former students who ended up in alternative	Shows awareness of how personal emotions and past experiences could shape interpretation.

school or juvenile detention as she struggled with the thought of whether or not the school could have done more in the early years. I felt that weight too and caught myself wanting to agree. Writing this down helped me recognize my reaction so I could stay focused on their story, not mine.”

Positionality

“I remembered a time when I allowed a student to attend part of a behavior celebration even though he did not fully meet the criteria because his attitude about missing out was so much more positive than his peers, and I wanted to use it as an example. While it felt like a fair compromise, I later sensed tension from colleagues who saw it as all or nothing. Writing this down reminded me that my own experiences navigating these gray areas influence how I interpret participants’ struggles with balancing grace and consequences.”

Highlights how my prior experiences with nuanced classroom decisions shape the perception and interpretation of participants’ experiences.

Analytic Decisions

“Initially, I coded mentions of celebrations as positive examples of behavior recognition. However, after rereading the transcripts and excerpts more closely, I noticed that participants often described negative experiences related to celebrations, particularly frustration over shared autonomy and deciding which students should attend. Recognizing this helped me

Recognizing this helped me recode and frame the discussion around the tension teachers feel in implementing celebrations fairly, rather than assuming they are universally positive experiences.”

recode and frame the discussion around the tension teachers feel in implementing celebrations fairly, rather than assuming they are universally positive experiences.”

Power Dynamics

“The participant shared frustration about not having control over the consequences assigned to students, noting inconsistent administrator support. I noticed myself nodding and offering small affirmations to make her feel more comfortable sharing. Writing this down reminded me that my responses as a researcher, both verbal and nonverbal, can influence how freely participants express themselves.”

Acknowledges how researcher behavior and participant–researcher dynamics can shape the openness and depth of participant responses.

Shifts Over Time

“At first, I expected everyone to praise PBIS, but the more I hear, the more complicated it gets. Today’s interview really showed me how much frustration teachers feel beneath the surface. I’m realizing I need to let go of my early assumptions and let the data speak for itself.”

Demonstrates openness to evolving perspectives and letting participants’ voices shape findings.

Note. The table presents excerpts from my reflexive journal that I have maintained throughout the study. In the first column, I identify the type of reflection (e.g., positionality, methodological decision, analytic insight). The second column includes the journal excerpts, and the third column describes how each entry is relevant to my research process and interpretation of the findings.

During theme development, I have been careful not to let my familiarity with PBIS terminology cause me to interpret participants' language too technically, instead of as they intended. For example, when a teacher mentions data use, I immediately associate it with data-based decision-making, a key element of the PBIS framework. However, upon rereading the transcript, I have noticed that my initial coding does not accurately capture the intended meaning. The participant is not necessarily referring to formal data collection tools used by the leadership team to modify structures and practices, but instead to students having the correct number of points to attend a celebration. Throughout the analysis, I consistently review my reflexive notes to identify when I need to revisit the data and further explore participants' perspectives. The notes and reflections help me consider alternative interpretations and ensure the final themes genuinely reflect participants' voices. By making reflexivity a structured part of the research process, I have remained critically aware of my influence as a researcher, avoided unexamined bias, and ensured that participants' voices are authentically represented within the broader context of the study.

Research Setting

This study includes participants from "Azalea Springs Elementary School (pseudonym)" in rural southeast Georgia. With a population of nearly 1,000, Azalea Springs currently serves students in Grades PreK-6. Approximately 69% of students are White, 21% are African American, 5% are Hispanic, 4% are Multi-Racial, and 1% are Asian or Pacific Islander. Azalea Springs is also a Title 1 school, with about 62% of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch (Georgia Office of Student Achievement [GOSA], n.d.). The school has 75 certified teachers, as well as additional support staff and administrators. With more than half of the current teachers and administrators having implemented PBIS at the same school for over five years, this setting

offers a level of long-term experience not often seen in recent studies, which tend to focus on teachers from schools with only one to three years of implementation. Azalea Springs has a School Climate Star Rating of 5 out of 5 stars (GaDOE, 2025b), indicating high ratings from all stakeholders on perception surveys that cover safety, relationships, and overall school conditions, along with strong attendance and discipline data.

Staff members participated in initial training on planning and implementing the PBIS framework as part of a district-wide initiative during the 2014-2015 school year. The school's leadership team recently completed the Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI) in spring 2025 to evaluate the fidelity of PBIS implementation at each tier of their Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), based on indicators related to teaming, implementation, interventions, and evaluation. The assessment results came from formal walkthroughs conducted by the school's coach and RESA School Climate Specialists, as well as informal walkthroughs and observations by administrators, coaches, team members, and teacher feedback shared during common planning meetings. While a score of 70% or higher indicates strong PBIS implementation at each tier, Tiers 1 and 2 have scored above 90%. Tier 3 received the lowest score at 75%, but it still exceeded the recommended threshold of 70%. These data indicate that the school has a well-established framework. Based on the current action plan, the school's leadership team continues to focus on professional development, data-driven decision-making, family involvement, and strengthening ongoing efforts to establish and sustain tiered interventions and support.

Sampling

I employed a purposeful sampling strategy to select eight teachers from the same school, ensuring a shared contextual understanding of PBIS implementation and allowing for a deeper insight into how the framework has evolved and been sustained within a consistent setting over

time. Each participant has been directly involved in PBIS for multiple years and has brought valuable institutional knowledge about how the framework has developed over time. Selection criteria included length of involvement, consistency of participation, and any leadership roles held on the school's PBIS team. Their sustained engagement and varied responsibilities offered a nuanced view of both the practical and cultural dimensions of PBIS. The small sample size is intentional, allowing for a deep exploration of teachers' experiences in the same school setting while capturing the meanings they assign to their emotions, behaviors, and interactions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015).

Recruitment began with an emailed flyer to all certified staff (see Appendix B). The flyer describes the study's purpose, participation requirements, and contact information. Interested teachers have replied to indicate their interest (see Appendix C). I then followed up with an email with a Qualtrics survey designed to gather demographic and background information, including current grade level, PBIS-related roles, years at the school, and willingness to participate in interviews (see Appendix D). The survey has served as a screening tool to ensure participants reflected a range of relevant experiences.

From the survey responses, I have selected participants to maximize diversity across grade levels, years of experience, and PBIS roles. A minimum of five years at Azalea Springs Elementary is required to ensure participants have sufficient exposure to the school's PBIS practices. Most participants have had more than 10 years of experience with PBIS, offering insight into how the framework has evolved since its initial implementation in 2015. One novice teacher provided a contrasting perspective, reflecting the challenges and growth of early-career teachers while also drawing on experiences with PBIS as a parent and student teacher.

The final group includes one teacher with three years of experience at the school and seven teachers who have been present since the adoption of PBIS. Two have served as PBIS coaches, and five have been members of the school's leadership team. Their dual perspectives, as both classroom teachers and leaders responsible for schoolwide implementation, highlighted tensions between promoting systemwide practices and managing classroom realities. Teachers with long-term involvement offered historical context about PBIS's evolution, its impact on school culture, and its influence on instructional practices and professional identity. The sample represented a variety of instructional contexts, including Grades K–5, a special education inclusion teacher, a special areas teacher, and a co-teacher supporting special education classrooms.

After finalizing the sample, the selected participants received a congratulatory email with an invitation to schedule an interview at their convenience (see Appendix E). Throughout the recruitment process, I emphasized the importance of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw without penalty. The study has been approved based on alignment with ethical standards and IRB requirements to protect participants' rights and ensure informed consent (see Appendix F).

Data Collection

This section describes the procedures used to collect data for the study. It outlines how participants were recruited, the instruments and protocols used for gathering information, and the steps taken to ensure credibility throughout the process. The goal of data collection was to capture rich, detailed accounts of teachers' experiences with PBIS implementation in their school context.

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

The semi-structured interview guide for this study has been created to align with the research purpose and conceptual framework. The initial version has been developed using three key sources: (a) the PBIS framework, which serves as the main conceptual lens; (b) principles of implementation science, which highlight examining both fidelity and contextual factors influencing sustainability; and (c) the basic interpretive qualitative methodology guiding this study, which aims to understand participants' experiences and the meaning they assign to them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, the research questions themselves serve as a structural anchor, ensuring that the interview questions directly gathered responses about the benefits and challenges of PBIS implementation over time, as well as its impact on instructional strategies, school culture, and professional growth.

The first draft of the guide was tested during a pilot interview with a teacher who had extensive experience with PBIS but was not part of the final participant group. The interview experience and responses helped evaluate clarity, flow, and alignment with the study's goals. Feedback from the pilot revealed that some questions were phrased in a way that could unintentionally guide participants toward specific answers, while others required rephrasing to encourage deeper reflection. For example, early versions of some items assumed that PBIS had changed participants' teaching philosophies, instead of allowing them to decide if such changes had actually occurred. These items were then revised to be more open-ended, neutral, and exploratory, following best practices in qualitative interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The pilot also revealed the need for smoother transitions between introductory, rapport-building questions and those prompting more reflection. As a result, the guide has been reorganized to create a more logical flow, beginning with descriptive accounts and progressing toward

interpretive meaning-making. After the first interview, the guide was further revised because I noticed that the topic of professional growth and evolving teaching philosophies was addressed twice. I removed the redundant question to avoid repetition and to prevent participants from feeling their initial response was ignored or unacknowledged.

The revised interview guide intentionally integrates reflexivity and rapport-building. Scholars emphasize that establishing rapport early in qualitative interviews is essential for creating a conversational atmosphere where participants feel comfortable sharing openly (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Therefore, the guide starts with broad, non-threatening questions about participants' teaching backgrounds and initial experiences with PBIS. These early questions help build rapport, show respect for participants' expertise, and facilitate a smooth transition into more complex topics. As the interview continues, questions gradually shift focus to challenges of long-term implementation, changes in professional identity, and the perceived impact of PBIS on instructional practice and school culture. This sequencing strategy aims to foster comfort and guide the conversation naturally toward deeper meaning-making.

Reflexivity was also built into the guide by explicitly considering areas where my own experiences with PBIS could overlap with participants' narratives. Reflexive cues for ongoing consideration and post-interview journaling supported this process by helping me identify moments where personal assumptions might unintentionally shape question phrasing or interpretation (Berger, 2015). As part of this reflexive design, the guide incorporated non-leading prompts such as "Can you tell me more about what that looked like in practice?" or "How did that make you feel as a teacher?" These elicitations encouraged elaboration while minimizing bias, ensuring that the participant's voice remained central.

The updated guide thus demonstrates improved logical flow, more substantial alignment with the research questions, and greater sensitivity to rapport and reflexivity. Each central question corresponds to one of the study's research questions, with follow-up prompts designed to elicit rich, layered accounts. By starting with descriptive experiences and gradually progressing toward interpretive reflections, the guide encourages narratives that not only describe participants' experiences but also reveal the meanings they assign to PBIS implementation over time. This layered approach enhances both the trustworthiness and depth of the data collection process.

Participant Interviews

Individual interviews have been held in a quiet, private location to ensure confidentiality and reduce distractions. To better protect participants' privacy and create a comfortable environment for open communication, interviews occurred outside of school at a location chosen by the participant. This method also helps minimize any influence or pressure from the school setting. Session times ranged from 30 minutes to an hour, providing sufficient time to thoroughly explore participants' experiences and perspectives while respecting their schedules. Participants were informed that they could take breaks or pause the interview at any time if needed.

I have used Otter.ai, a secure, AI-assisted transcription software, to transcribe the audio recordings of in-person interviews verbatim. All recordings and transcripts have been stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to me, the researcher. After each interview, I manually reviewed the transcript alongside the audio recording to ensure that all verbal responses were fully and accurately transcribed as spoken, without altering or editing the participants' original wording or intent. During interviews and while reviewing the transcripts, I also noted nonverbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, and tone to capture meaning

beyond participants' spoken words. According to Saldaña (2016), paying attention to subtle signals, such as tone of voice, pauses, hesitations, or shifts in emphasis, could provide deeper insight into participants' feelings and attitudes. During my manual review of each transcript alongside the audio recording, I have focused on these cues to help interpret participants' emotional responses and levels of certainty, discomfort, or enthusiasm when discussing the implementation of PBIS. I have also created analytical memos during this process to document my observations and interpretations, grounding them in the context of the participants' words and checking for consistency across the data. Paying close attention to these subtle cues is crucial for my study, as it offers a richer understanding of how teachers genuinely experience and interpret the PBIS framework beyond the literal transcription of words. While the interviews provide explicit content, these nonverbal nuances reveal underlying tensions, doubts, or convictions that might otherwise go unnoticed, offering a more layered and authentic depiction of their experiences.

Pseudonyms have been assigned to each participant immediately after their interview was completed. I have created a list of common first names and assigned the next available name on the list to each participant in the order of their interviews. These pseudonyms are used consistently across all transcripts, notes, and reports to protect participant confidentiality. A master list linking real names to pseudonyms has been stored in a secure, password-protected file separate from the research data on a password-protected computer. Transcripts are also de-identified and stored on a password-protected device accessible only to me, the researcher.

Data Analysis

I have used Braun and Clarke's six phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (2006, 2019, 2021), a method rooted in an interpretivist epistemological framework that aligns with the

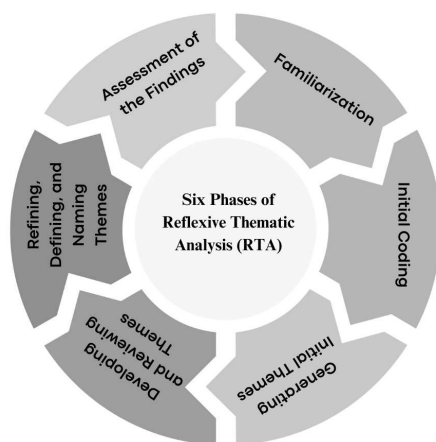
study's focus on understanding how teachers create meaning within their specific contexts. Interpretivism emphasizes the subjective nature of knowledge and the co-creation of meaning between the researcher and the participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), a perspective that RTA aligns with. This approach acknowledges that analysis is not a neutral or purely objective process, but an interpretive act shaped by the researcher's perspectives, experiences, and interactions with the data.

RTA sets itself apart from other types of thematic analysis, like codebook or coding reliability methods, by rejecting the idea of coding reliability or objectivity as a goal to be attained. Instead, RTA highlights the researcher's active and reflective role in developing themes through a highly interpretive, adaptable, and iterative process. This approach is well-suited for this study because it enables a detailed and nuanced understanding of participants' experiences without attempting to measure or standardize coding across multiple coders. RTA also views positionality as a tool for deep reflection and interpretation, rather than a source of bias to be minimized or eliminated. Within an interpretivist framework, it is understood that individuals create meaning based on their unique experiences, contexts, and perspectives. There is no single objective reality to discover. Because meaning varies and depends on context, data analysis cannot be standardized or reduced to a fixed set of procedures or coding rules. This makes RTA especially suitable for the current study because it offers the flexibility needed to explore the diverse and layered ways that teachers understand PBIS implementation over time. Instead of striving for coding consistency among researchers, RTA promotes an engaged, reflective process that emphasizes co-constructing meaning and the researcher's active role in interpreting complex, context-specific stories.

The six-phase process (as shown in Figure 5) is iterative, cycling continuously through data familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation. At each stage, I have read and re-read transcripts, applied and refined codes, and compared emerging patterns across participants and time points. This approach fostered a constant, reflexive dialogue between the data and my conceptual lens, enabling interpretations to be revisited and adjusted as new insights emerged. I intentionally explore contradictions, tensions, and complexities in participants' narratives by grouping similar accounts, noting divergences, and tracking shifts in how teachers described their experiences, challenges, and definitions of success with PBIS.

Figure 5

The Six Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)



Note. This figure represents the six phases of RTA. Adapted from *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* by Braun and Clarke, 2021.

Through this process, reflexive thematic analysis uncovered the diverse ways teachers interpret and implement the PBIS framework within their school environments, professional responsibilities, and personal beliefs, providing a clear pathway to address the research questions. The six-phase process involves continuous movement between data familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation, enabling an ongoing, reflexive dialogue between

the data and the researcher's conceptual lens. During the analysis, I have carefully examined contradictions, tensions, and complexities within the participants' narratives. For example, when teachers described feeling both supported and overwhelmed by PBIS demands, or when some participants celebrated improving student behavior by giving additional attention to struggling students, while others felt frustrated with the limited focus on well-behaved students. I have also identified patterns in how teachers describe their experiences, challenges, and perceptions of success in maintaining PBIS implementation over time, as well as explored the contextual factors and individual experiences that shape their views of the framework. RTA helps answer the research questions by highlighting the varied ways teachers make sense of PBIS within their school environments, professional roles, and personal beliefs.

In line with the epistemological stance of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), I have kept a reflexive journal to record my analytical decisions, emotional reactions, and reflections on how my positionality as a PBIS-implementing educator influenced my analysis and interpretations. For example, after coding a transcript in which a teacher tearfully expressed how implementing PBIS inspired her to be more intentional about highlighting the positives at home with her own children, I noted my immediate emotional response. I considered how my own experiences with using PBIS practices as a parent might influence the attention I have paid to this particular topic in my final analysis, regardless of whether other participants had similar experiences. I noted this in my journal and coding template and waited to see if additional interview data revealed a pattern related to this personal insight. I also wrote analytical memos to track emerging themes, such as the recurring tensions between participants who wanted autonomy in decisions related to rewards and consequences, or the consideration of when to offer grace versus discipline. This

practice allows me to reflect on how these individual accounts and patterns connect to broader contextual factors.

RTA recognizes that subjectivity is not something to be eliminated, but rather a valuable tool that enhances understanding. For example, my familiarity with the daily realities of PBIS implementation enables me to notice subtle details in teachers' descriptions of classroom management strategies and interpret jargon that someone without this insider perspective might overlook. At the same time, I have used analytical memos to critically evaluate whether emerging themes overly reflected my own experiences or assumptions, intentionally working to stay true to participants' voices and meanings. By actively exploring how my experiences, beliefs, and emotions interact with the data, I can uncover deeper meanings and nuances that might otherwise be overlooked. Embracing subjectivity in this way increases transparency and rigor. Documenting my thoughts, feelings, and decision-making processes forces me to remain self-aware and critically engaged, which makes my interpretive decisions clear to readers. This process ultimately enhances the trustworthiness and richness of the study's findings.

Overall, incorporating reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) within a basic interpretive qualitative framework allows me to produce rich, contextually grounded findings that authentically respect participants' voices. At the same time, this approach requires me to engage critically and continuously with my own positionality, recognizing how my background, beliefs, and experiences influence the interpretation process. This balance ensures that the findings are both firmly rooted in participants' perspectives and carefully examined through a reflexive lens, increasing the study's credibility and depth.

Familiarization with the Data

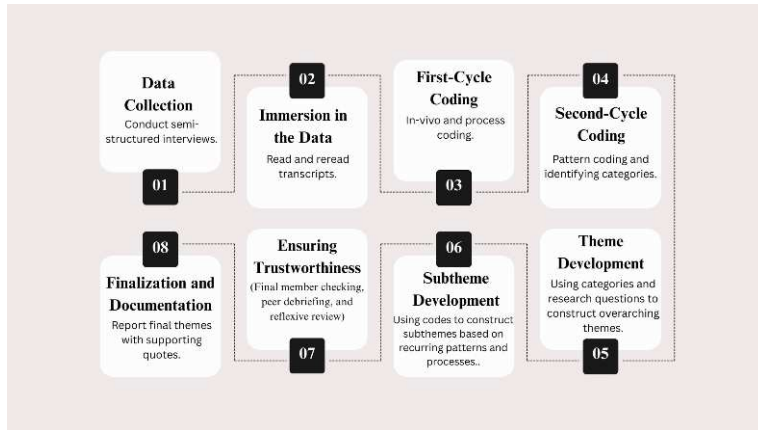
I started the analysis by immersing myself in the data, following the first phase of Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic analysis process (2006, 2019, 2021). This involves thoroughly reading and re-reading interview transcripts multiple times, highlighting important quotes, and taking notes on key concepts, ideas, and emerging questions to gain a deep understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions. I also listened to the audio recordings to capture nuances that transcripts alone might not reveal, while writing analytic memos to reflect on emerging ideas, patterns, and potential themes. This sustained immersion helps me identify subtle patterns, contradictions, and complexities within and across transcripts that might otherwise be overlooked. Such thorough engagement provided a solid foundation for coding and theme development, ensuring that interpretations genuinely reflect teachers' experiences in maintaining PBIS practices (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). Once I achieved a thorough understanding of the data, I began the coding process.

Generating Initial Codes

In qualitative research, coding involves identifying and labeling significant data segments to reveal recurring patterns, establish categories, and develop emerging themes. Saldaña (2016) recommended that researchers adopt an iterative coding approach for basic interpretive studies. This method ensures that continuous analysis accurately reflects participants' experiences. With each transcript and document review, a deeper understanding is gained, uncovering new insights, connections, and even contradictions within responses and data sources. This iterative process is represented by Figure 6 below.

Figure 6

Data Analysis Process



Note. This figure presents the steps of the data analysis process: (1) data collection, (2) immersion in the data, (3) first cycle coding, (4) second cycle coding, (5) theme development, (6) subtheme development, (7) ensuring trustworthiness, and (8) finalization and documentation. Each step reflects the systematic procedures I follow to organize, analyze, and interpret the qualitative data through a reflexive and iterative process, continually revisiting the data, my interpretations, and analytic decisions to ensure rigor and depth of understanding.

I began the first cycle of coding by using open coding techniques, including In Vivo and Process coding. In Vivo coding enables me to focus on participants' exact words, honoring and amplifying their voices. This approach helps share participants' unique narratives and faithfully represent their experiences in their language (Saldaña, 2016). Process coding also enables me to accurately capture specific actions and processes related to the PBIS framework and Implementation Science. For instance, expressions like “building relationships” or “navigating challenges” could be recognized to gather participants' feedback and link the data to the research questions. Table 2 provides examples of In Vivo and Process codes constructed during this initial cycle of coding. Rather than relying on set phrases based on my experiences, I chose to adopt an

inductive coding approach, steering clear of predetermined phrases and classifications. This strategy is consistent with the fundamental tenets of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Table 2

Examples of First-Cycle Codes

Transcript Excerpt	In Vivo Code	Process Code	Reflective Note
“It was always really private. You had to really be paying attention to even know a student was getting in trouble.”	“You had to really be paying attention...”	Managing behavior privately	Captures teachers’ efforts to address behavior discreetly to avoid embarrassment and preserve relationships.
“...when it's very black and white on paper, but you're in a world that's constantly grey, it's hard to have this program that's going to meet the needs of every teacher.	“... but you’re in a world where it’s constantly grey.”	Navigating autonomy and accountability with schoolwide systems	Captures teachers’ experiences with specific requirements for schoolwide celebrations.
“use the journal prompts and things that you asked them and actually take the time to read it”	“and actually take the time to read it”	Building relationships through meaningful instruction	Speaks to teachers’ intentional effort to connect with students
“We try to keep everything consistent because kids notice when the rules change from teacher to teacher.”	“kids notice when the rules change”	Maintaining consistency	Teachers reinforce consistency as part of shaping expectations and fairness
“I think it’s made me better at it (dealing with behavior) from all the trainings and	“Made me better... I dissect and figure out how to move forward and problem solve”	Problem-solving and considering all aspects of behavior	Highlights how ongoing professional learning and

just also how I dissect and figure out how to move forward and problem solve”

reflection support teachers’ skills and confidence in dealing with behavior

Note. This table presents examples of my first cycle coding process. The first column includes transcript excerpts from participant interviews. The second column shows In Vivo codes drawn directly from participants’ own words. The third column lists process codes that capture actions and experiences. The final column contains my reflective notes, which document insights and connections that informed later stages of analysis.

Next, I apply second-cycle coding techniques to reorganize and refine the initial codes into broader, more meaningful categories that reveal patterns within the data. I use pattern coding to group similar first-cycle codes into explanatory categories representing teachers' shared actions, challenges, and experiences related to PBIS implementation. This process enables me to identify recurring patterns, including strategies for teaching expectations, challenges in addressing undesired behavior, and the effective use of positive reinforcement. Table 3.2 demonstrates the progression of codes from first-cycle to second-cycle coding.

Table 3

Progression of First to Second-Cycle Codes

First-Cycle Codes	Second-Cycle Codes	Category	Potential Theme
“You had to really be paying attention...”	Managing behavior privately	Private redirection	Meaningful Relationships
“... but you’re in a world where it’s constantly grey.”	Navigating autonomy	Tensions in implementation	Challenges and Tensions
“and actually take the time to read it”	Building relationships through instruction	Instructional strategies	Influence on Instruction

“kids notice when the rules change”	Maintaining consistency	Common language and expectations	Shaping School Culture
“Made me better... I dissect and figure out how to move forward and problem solve”	Growing through experience and reflection	Professional skill development	Developing Professional Identity

Note. This table illustrates the transition from first-cycle to second-cycle coding in my analysis.

The first column lists the initial codes generated during the initial coding cycle. The second column presents second-cycle codes that reorganize, combine, or refine the first-cycle codes to capture broader patterns in the data. The third column identifies category codes, which group related second-cycle codes into meaningful clusters. The fourth column outlines potential themes that emerged from these categories

Throughout this process, I have continued to use reflexive journaling and analytical memos to document coding decisions, developing insights, and my evolving interpretations. Keeping a record of these decisions helps to ensure that the analysis remains grounded in the participants’ perspectives while maintaining transparency and confirmability (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Saldaña, 2016).

Constructing and Refining Initial Themes

After reading and rereading all interview transcripts and generating initial codes, the next phase involves organizing these codes into potential themes based on patterns of shared meaning. I then examine codes for commonalities, relationships, and points of divergence that captured how teachers experience and interpret the benefits, challenges, and personal impacts of PBIS implementation. Codes have been collated into thematic clusters that reflect the broader narratives or concepts within the data. Within these thematic clusters, subthemes have been constructed to capture nuanced aspects of teachers’ experiences and to highlight variations in how participants interpreted and enacted PBIS practices. By identifying subthemes, the analysis

moves beyond surface-level descriptions of what teachers have done or observed, allowing for a more thorough, layered explanation of how and why these experiences occurred. Subthemes provide insight into the depth and complexity of participants' perspectives, revealing patterns, tensions, and individual differences that enrich understanding of the broader themes related to relationships, instructional practices, professional identity, and school culture.

Next, I use member checking by sharing a summary of preliminary themes with participants to verify the accuracy and resonance of my interpretations. This step helps ensure that the findings accurately reflect participants' intended meanings and provides them with an opportunity to clarify or expand on their earlier responses. During peer debriefing, I present the initial set of themes and subthemes for critical feedback from colleagues familiar with qualitative analysis. This process highlights the need to refine the wording of certain subthemes, particularly in terms of verb choice. Peers have pointed out that some of the verbs used initially (e.g., *exploring, reflecting*) do not fully capture the active, intentional nature of teachers' practices. As a result, I have revised these verbs to emphasize teachers' agency and deliberate actions in implementing PBIS strategies.

During this phase, I have maintained a reflexive journal to document how my insider knowledge of PBIS practices, school culture, and district expectations may have influenced the grouping and prioritization of codes. This practice helps ensure that the development of initial themes remains grounded in participants' language and perspectives, rather than being shaped by my assumptions or preconceptions about PBIS frameworks and teacher experiences.

One example of this reflexive process involved behavior celebrations. As I reviewed codes and excerpts about these events, I initially planned to include them within the main themes, highlighting the framework's benefits. However, upon examining the full scope of the

data, I realized that this topic needs to be addressed as part of the tensions and challenges. Participants did not consistently frame celebrations as positive; instead, several expressed frustration about unclear criteria for student participation and the lack of autonomy in deciding who could attend. In my journal, I noted how my own experiences with using partial participation as a form of encouragement might have led me to view celebrations more favorably. This reflection helps me step back and reconsider how participants' perspectives differed from my own, which ultimately led to the decision to place celebrations under subthemes addressing tensions rather than benefits.

I have also added an extra layer of member checking by sharing summaries of the identified themes and subthemes with participants and requesting their feedback to verify accuracy and clear up any misunderstandings. This collaborative approach helps ensure that the interpretations truly reflect participants' perspectives and increase the credibility of the findings. Teachers were excited to see how their perceptions and experiences were combined with those of others to tell the full story of the successes and challenges with PBIS implementation in their school setting.

Defining and Naming Themes

Once the final set of themes has been established, each theme is clearly defined and named to reflect its core idea and relevance to the study's research questions. In this phase, I have carefully selected the language to describe each theme, ensuring it accurately represents participants' experiences rather than using programmatic, evaluative, or administrative terms related to PBIS frameworks. Within each theme, subthemes have been identified to capture the nuanced aspects and variations of teachers' experiences, highlighting the different ways participants interpreted and enacted PBIS practices. Theme definitions include a detailed

summary of the main narrative within each theme, an explanation of how the subthemes contribute to a more layered understanding of teachers' experiences, and an explanation of how they help clarify PBIS implementation over time. Reflexive journaling is also employed during this stage to record moments when my insider knowledge or personal assumptions might have influenced the interpretation or naming of themes, supporting a deliberate effort to respect participant meaning-making in the final analysis.

Writing the Report

The final stage involves creating a detailed, analytical report that presents the themes and subthemes alongside rich, illustrative data excerpts and reflexive commentary. In this study, the report includes thorough descriptions of each theme and subtheme, supported by participants' direct quotes, which authentically reflect their voices and experiences. The report also clarifies how each theme connects to the broader research questions regarding the benefits, challenges, and long-term effects of PBIS implementation on teachers' instructional practices, school culture, and professional identity. Throughout the analysis and in the final report, I have included examples of reflexive journal entries to show how my positionality and reflections may have influenced the interpretation process. These excerpts will be explained to highlight moments when my background as a PBIS practitioner affected analytic decisions, such as why I focused on specific themes or revisited initial impressions. By sharing these journal reflections, I aim to provide transparency about my ongoing self-awareness and how I address potential biases or assumptions. Including these examples should help readers understand the active role I played in constructing meaning from the data, thereby increasing the credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

Interpreting the Data

I analyzed the findings by situating them within the PBIS framework, Implementation Science, and existing research. This process included examining relationships among themes, identifying tensions or contradictions, and considering how social, institutional, and community contexts shaped teachers' experiences. To illustrate themes and subthemes, I have incorporated detailed participant stories, paraphrases, and direct quotes, accompanied by interpretations grounded in both the school context and relevant literature. I have also examined factors related to fidelity and sustainability, as well as implications for practice and future research. Attention has been given to patterns reflecting the school's culture and to those aligning with or diverging from prior studies. My goal is to move beyond description and provide contextually grounded insights into how PBIS evolved and influenced teachers' professional identities and practices.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity is essential to this study. I have made sure that all procedures protect participants' rights, privacy, and well-being. Before collecting data, I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure that the study adheres to ethical research standards (see Appendix F). Participants received a detailed informed consent form explaining the study's purpose, emphasizing that participation is voluntary, and outlining how confidentiality would be maintained. The form also reminded them of their right to withdraw at any time without repercussion, a point that has been verbally reinforced at the start of each interview. Pseudonyms have been used for school sites and participants in all transcripts, notes, and reports to protect their privacy and identity. Additionally, all digital recordings and transcripts have been securely stored on password-protected devices that only I can access. Participants received a copy of their transcripts to review for accuracy and confirm that their words and intentions are accurately

captured. They were also encouraged to clarify or omit any details they felt uncomfortable sharing. This review process starts the second phase of member checking, following the first phase, which involves summarizing participants' answers at the end of the interview. Both phases provide opportunities for collaborative verification of the data's authenticity. Later, I shared with participants a summary of the initial and final themes to ensure my interpretations accurately reflected their experiences. This four-step member checking process has strengthened the study's trustworthiness by involving participants in shaping how their voices are represented in the results.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

In qualitative research, ensuring trustworthiness is crucial for establishing the rigor and value of the findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four key criteria for trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Building trustworthiness in this basic interpretive study is essential to ensure that the findings accurately and thoroughly reflect the participants' experiences and perceptions of PBIS. This study uses multiple strategies aligned with these criteria to improve the quality and integrity of the research process and results.

Credibility

Credibility relates to the confidence in the accuracy of participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Planned triangulation of documents has been considered during the design phase. However, participants did not reference specific data from shared documents central to the phenomenon during the interview phase. Although I have not reviewed and analyzed additional documents, I have compared and cross-checked the data from interview transcripts, which helps verify themes and provide a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences. Ultimately, I focus on trustworthiness through

adequate engagement, an audit trail, member checking during data collection and analysis phases, and peer debriefing throughout the research process. These approaches support the study's goal of understanding how teachers interpret PBIS within their unique school environments, while also enhancing trustworthiness through a rigorous methodology.

I have used member checking as a strategy to verify the credibility of the data throughout the research process. This process requires four stages. First, I summarized participants' responses at the end of each interview by highlighting key points and confirming their accuracy. All participants received a copy of their full interview transcript to review for accuracy, clarify any statements, or request the removal of details they were uncomfortable sharing. This second step ensures that the data accurately reflect their intended meaning and offers a chance to refine their responses collaboratively. In the final two stages, after the initial analysis, participants reviewed summaries of the early and final themes derived from their interviews and provided feedback on whether the interpretations accurately represented their experiences and perspectives. This process enables participants to confirm, clarify, or expand on their responses, ensuring that their viewpoints are accurately captured. Member checking built trustworthiness by promoting transparency between the participants and me, and provided an opportunity for shared understanding. This process helps identify potential misinterpretations, reduce researcher bias, and ensure the analysis remains connected to the participants' real experiences rather than just my own perspective as the researcher. By including participants' voices in the interpretive process, member checking enhances the credibility and ethical integrity of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Reflexive journal entries have been recorded throughout the study as a key strategy for ensuring the credibility of the research. In this study, reflexive journal entries are completed

before, during, and after each interview, as well as during the analysis process. After interviews, I recorded my immediate impressions, emotional responses, and observations of nonverbal cues that may not have been fully captured in transcripts. For example, I have noted the emotional connection to Sarah's story about the influence that PBIS implementation has had on her relationship with her daughter, and the way she encourages her growth with affirmations and praise instead of pointing out areas where she needs improvement. I realized that I was drawn to her story as I have struggled with the same concept as a mom of daughters. While I found her story powerful, I recognized the need to align it with the experiences of multiple participants before incorporating parenting choices into specific themes related to personal growth or shifts in teaching philosophy. However, I made a note beside the questions related to these topics on the interview guide to ensure that I actively listened to responses and asked follow-up questions to explore whether other participants have similar stories or mentioned the influence that PBIS has had on their parenting choices. The reflections helped me remain aware of personal reactions that could have unconsciously influenced how questions were asked in future interviews or how participant responses were interpreted.

During data analysis, reflexive journal entries have been used to document decisions regarding coding, theme development, and resolving data contradictions. By openly recognizing areas where my previous experiences with PBIS might overlap with or differ from participants' accounts, reflexive journaling helps prevent overinterpretation or projection. Using reflexive journaling also increases transparency for the reader. Journal excerpts showed how I addressed potential bias in my interpretations as well as during the creation of both initial and final themes. For example, Grace's interview initially seemed to stand out as having a more frustrated or constructive tone than the others. At one point in the interview, she even apologized for her

responses because they appeared more negative and critical overall. I reassured her that the interview's purpose was to capture her voice and share her unique experiences, whether positive or negative. As I coded the data, I continued to extract quotes related to frustrations over a lack of consequences and an imbalance of rewards between students who consistently made correct choices and those on a behavior plan. However, as I stayed aware of my initial interpretation and committed to exploring the transcript further, I noticed an underlying emotional struggle woven into her stories and opinions about students who continued to make poor choices. She was not simply angry about logistics or the misapplication of the framework. Instead, she was invested in students' behavioral growth and overall success, and felt personally responsible for previous students who ended up at the district's alternative school or in the local paper for committing a crime. She continued to grapple with her choices, as well as those of her colleagues and administrators, wondering if striking the right balance between grace and consequences could have made a meaningful difference. This process strengthened credibility by showing how interpretations have been developed, revised, or challenged during the analysis. In this way, reflexive journaling serves both as an internal check on my assumptions and as an external tool for verifying the authenticity of the study's findings.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which findings can be applied to other settings. This study enhances transferability by providing detailed descriptions of participants' experiences and the unique educational contexts in which they are part. These detailed narrative accounts enable readers to determine whether the findings are relevant to their own environments, experiences, or professional challenges. By incorporating participants' perspectives within their specific school

contexts, the study aims to provide sufficient detail for readers to evaluate the applicability of the findings to their own settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability

Dependability highlights the stability and consistency of findings over time and different conditions. To improve dependability in this study, peer debriefing has been used as an external review of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing ensures that the research questions matched the semi-structured interview guide, and that any revisions made after the pilot interview are logically aligned with the study's objectives. Additional feedback helped determine if questions are neutrally worded and free of assumptions that could bias responses. Members of my research committee, who have expertise in qualitative methods, also reviewed the coding process, emerging themes, and methodological choices. I have also shared initial thoughts and next steps during data collection and analysis phases to promote open discussions about my positionality and potential biases. Through these structured conversations, dependability is strengthened by continually examining both the process and interpretation, thus reducing the risk of researcher bias or methodological drift.

Confirmability

Confirmability ensures that findings are grounded in participants' experiences rather than in the researcher's bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To support this, I maintained an audit trail throughout the study to document methodological decisions, coding choices, theme development, and interpretive shifts. Table 4 below includes examples of how an audit trail has been documented and monitored throughout the research process.

Table 4*Audit Trail Excerpts*

Date/Phase	Specific Activity	Decision/ Rationale	Supporting Documentation
August 18, 2025- Interview Guide Revision	Revised interview guide after pilot interview	Adjusted wording, changed the order of questions, and added prompts to build rapport; to ensure participant comfort and evoke personal reflection.	Pilot interview transcript, revised interview guide, reflexive notes
August 26, 2025- Interview Guide Refinement	Removed question 18 due to similarity with question 14.	Avoid redundancy; use prompts for question 14 to fully explore professional identity.	Interview guide, reflexive notes
September 2, 2025- First to Second Cycle Coding	Reviewed first-cycle in vivo and process codes; clustered into preliminary pattern codes.	Framed “Challenges with Celebrations” as a challenge rather than a benefit; combined goal setting, reflection, and pointing out the positives under “meaningful relationships.”	Audio recordings, interview transcripts, reflexive journal entries, codebook,
September 5, 2025- Theme Development	Cross-checked pattern codes and subthemes with additional participants.	Ensured patterns were grounded in multiple participant experiences, not researcher bias.	Pattern code list, reflexive notes, memo notes
September 8, 2025 Theme Revision	Revised themes verbiage based on peer debriefing.	Reduced overlap between themes and provided space to address social-emotional learning.	Theme list, reflexive notes, memo notes, email

Note. This table presents examples from my audit trail, documenting key decisions and analytic steps throughout the study. The first column indicates the date and research phase. The second column describes the specific activity I undertook, the third column explains the decision or rationale guiding that activity, including reflections on my positionality and emerging interpretations, and the fourth column lists supporting documentation, demonstrating how I maintained transparency, rigor, and reflexivity in the research process.

A key element of the audit trail for my research is the use of a reflexive journal to reflect on my positionality and assumptions, as well as to record moments when my prior experience with PBIS might have influenced my interpretation (e.g., noting when a participant’s description of specific challenges either aligns with or contradicts mine). I also describe how I have worked to reduce assumptions by rereading transcripts or reexamining codes to represent participants’ voices rather than my own. For instance, I initially coded celebrations as an indicator of the benefits of PBIS implementation, drawing on my personal experiences and perceptions. However, after revisiting the transcript and analyzing participants’ direct quotes more carefully, I realized that many of the references were not made in a positive context. I then revised the code to “deciding who attends celebrations.” I have observed that this process is part of a broader challenge concerning strains on peer relationships and perceptions of administrator support tied to shared autonomy.

Additionally, I have constructed analytic memos during coding and theme development to document my decisions, such as why two similar codes were merged or why contradictory data were retained in the analysis. Third, decision logs are included in the study’s audit trail to record changes to the interview guide, coding framework, and thematic structure over time, along with the reasons for each revision. For example, the decision to reorder rapport-building

questions after the pilot and peer debriefing was logged, showing how this change improved participant comfort. The reflexive journal, analytic memos, and decision logs help ensure transparency. They establish a clear chain of evidence, demonstrating how raw transcripts have been used to derive final interpretations that remained true to the participants' voices.

Collectively, strategies for triangulation, member checking, thick description, audit trail, and reflexivity embody Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework for trustworthiness. By employing multiple safeguards across credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, I can improve the integrity and authenticity of the study's findings. Participants' voices remain central to the analysis, analytic decisions are made transparent and systematically documented, and interpretations are based on the genuine realities of teachers rather than my own experiences and assumptions.

Chapter Summary

In summary, this chapter outlines the qualitative methodology used to explore teachers' experiences and perspectives with long-term PBIS implementation in the same school setting. The chapter details the research design, participant selection, and contextual background that framed the study. Procedures for data collection and analysis are described in depth, emphasizing the systematic approach used to capture and interpret participants' narratives. Strategies to ensure trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, are also discussed, along with my reflexive stance throughout the inquiry process. Together, these components established the rigor and transparency of the study. The next chapter presents the findings derived from the data, highlighting the key themes, subthemes, and illustrative excerpts that reflect participants' lived experiences. These findings lay the foundation for the subsequent discussion, interpretation, and implications addressed in Chapter 5.

Chapter IV

Findings

The purpose of this basic interpretive qualitative study was to explore teachers' unique experiences with the long-term implementation of the PBIS framework in a rural elementary school in southeast Georgia. This chapter presents the findings generated through individual, semi-structured interviews with eight elementary school teachers who have actively engaged in PBIS implementation for several years in the same school setting. The findings answered the research questions guiding the study:

Research Question 1

How do teachers make sense of the benefits and challenges they encounter in sustaining PBIS practices?

Research Question 2

How do teachers describe the influence of PBIS on their instructional practices, school culture, and professional identity over time?

The findings are organized into five overarching themes, constructed through a thematic analysis of the interview data. These themes reflect teachers' experiences, emotions, perceived benefits and challenges, sustainability efforts, instructional impact, professional identity, and personal growth associated with the implementation of PBIS over time. Participant quotes help to illustrate the themes and provide rich, authentic insight into the educators' perspectives.

Within each theme, I have developed subthemes to capture the more nuanced aspects of teachers' perspectives and to highlight variation in their experiences. Subthemes were

constructed by clustering closely related codes that shared meaning but reflected distinct dimensions of a broader theme. For example, under the theme of Nurturing Relationships, subthemes such as building trust and connection, leveraging positive reinforcement, fostering student engagement and investment, and minimizing negative interactions illustrate the multiple ways teachers cultivated supportive and meaningful relationships with students. Similarly, the theme Balancing Tensions and Challenges was organized into subthemes, including navigating shared autonomy, acknowledging all students, maintaining accountability and consequences, and sustaining motivation, reflecting the complex decisions teachers navigated to sustain PBIS practices effectively. This approach allowed the analysis to move beyond surface-level descriptions to reveal the richness and complexity of teachers' experiences, ensuring both common patterns and meaningful variations were represented in the findings.

This chapter begins with participant profiles, providing context about the individuals whose voices shape the study's findings. Then, a brief overview of the data collection and analysis methods is provided. The remainder of the chapter is organized by themes and subthemes, with each section presenting relevant codes and excerpts that illustrate participants' perspectives in relation to the study's research questions. These excerpts serve as evidence of how the data are interpreted and grouped, showing the progression from first-cycle coding to broader thematic development. By grounding each theme in participants' own words, the analysis highlights both commonalities and variations in teachers' experiences. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key findings that sets the stage for interpretation and discussion in the final chapter.

Participant Profiles

This study included eight teachers from diverse backgrounds, roles, and experiences with the schoolwide PBIS framework. Participants ranged from early-career educators to those with over 20 years of experience, representing multiple grade levels, inclusive special education classrooms, special area instruction, and varying levels of involvement on PBIS teams. To provide context for the findings, Table 5 summarizes the participants’ teaching backgrounds, current roles, and PBIS-related experiences. The table details each teacher’s years of experience, grade level or role, perspectives on PBIS, and main challenges faced during implementation.

Table 5

Summary of Participant Profiles

Participant	Years Taught (Current School/Total)	Grade(s)/Role	PBIS Perspectives/ Highlights	Key Challenges/ Concerns
Sarah	3/3	Fourth- grade math, science, social studies, Special Ed inclusion	Positive outlook; emphasizes meaningful relationships, highlighting strengths, goal setting, student reflection	Tendency to give more attention to students with behavior challenges than to those consistently following directions
Morgan	10/15	STEM 3-6; former PBIS coach	Positive outlook; values relationships, goal-setting, positive reinforcement, and classroom community	Concerns that “average” students may be overlooked; tension between teacher autonomy and fairness in quarterly celebrations
Grace	10/19	Fifth- grade reading, social studies; also K and First	Values the common language and consistent expectations of the PBIS framework; natural with	Worries that PBIS shifted staff away from consistent consequences; past students may have faced negative

			relationships and logical consequences	outcomes due to insufficient early interventions
Lauren	22/22	Third-grade reading and ELA; also First and former PBIS team member	PBIS makes behavior management engaging/fun; focuses on student strengths; helps view behavior positively	Inconsistencies in determining quarterly celebration eligibility; lack of consequences contributing to current behavior challenges
Mary	15/15	First grade; also second grade, PreK, and EIP, and former PBIS team member	Values clear expectations and discipline flowchart; emphasizes reinforcing positive behaviors	Ensuring recognition of students who consistently follow rules; engaging students who are unmotivated by rewards/consequences
Kate	17/17	First grade; former PBIS coach	Views behavior challenges as puzzles; emphasizes reflection, community, and social-emotional learning	Determining when behaviors require reflection vs. consequences; supporting students who “do not fit into a box”
Claire	17/17	Fifth-grade math and science; also first, second, and fourth	Values relationships and classroom communities; PBIS improved structure, consistency, and classroom language	Reaching students unmotivated by rewards/consequences; concern for well-behaved students disrupted by peers
Hannah	9/19	3-5 Special Ed Co-teacher; also a former PBIS team member with high school experience	Values meaningful relationships; emphasizes showing students that teachers are “on their team”	Engaging all staff, finding PD time, and motivating students who do not respond to interventions

Note. This table summarizes the profiles of participants in the study. The first column lists each participant's pseudonym. The second column indicates years taught in their current school and total years of teaching experience. The third column identifies their grade levels or roles, and the fourth column highlights their perspectives on PBIS and key practices they emphasized. The final column describes challenges or concerns they reported, providing context for understanding their experiences and viewpoints related to PBIS implementation.

Individual Profiles

Sarah was in her third year of teaching, all at her current school, and taught fourth-grade math, science, and social studies in a special education inclusion setting. Entering education later in life, she was inspired by educators who developed meaningful relationships with her son. Sarah held a positive outlook on PBIS, emphasizing relationships, highlighting student strengths, encouraging goal setting, and fostering student reflection, while acknowledging the tendency to give more attention to students with behavioral challenges than those consistently meeting expectations.

Morgan had 15 years of teaching experience, including 10 at her current school. She currently taught STEM for grades 3–6 and had previously taught multiple grades, served as a gifted resource teacher, and led technology initiatives for teachers. A former PBIS coach and current team member, she created morning meeting slides aligned with PBIS for all PreK–6 students. Morgan enjoyed building relationships, setting goals, and using positive reinforcement, but often wonders if average students were overlooked and perceives tension between teacher autonomy and fairness in quarterly behavior celebrations.

Grace had 19 years of teaching experience, including 10 years at her current school, where she taught fifth-grade reading, ELA, and social studies. She also taught kindergarten and

first grade. She valued the common language and consistent expectations PBIS provides and felt confident that aspects like building relationships and assigning logical consequences came naturally. Grace was concerned that PBIS may have caused the staff to move away from consistent consequences and worries that earlier students may have experienced negative outcomes due to a lack of early interventions.

Lauren had 22 years of teaching experience, all at her current school. She now had taught third-grade reading and ELA, having previously taught first grade, and was a former PBIS team member. She valued the songs, chants, and common language PBIS offered, noting that it made behavior management engaging and fun while helping teachers focus on students' strengths. She found it difficult to determine which students earned quarterly celebrations consistently and believed that a lack of consequences contributed to current behavior issues.

Mary had 15 years of teaching experience, all at her current school, and she currently taught first grade. She also had experience teaching second grade, Pre-K, and EIP. Mary valued the clear expectations and discipline flowchart provided by PBIS, noting that highlighting students' positive behaviors increased engagement. Her challenges included recognizing students who consistently met expectations and engaging students who seemed unmotivated by rewards or consequences.

Kate had 17 years of teaching experience, all in first grade at her current school, including 14 years in special education inclusion before shifting to general education. A former PBIS co-coach, she believed in solving behavior challenges collaboratively rather than personally, reflecting with students, nurturing classroom community, and integrating social-emotional learning into academics. As a parent, she was especially attentive to students who

“don’t fit into a box.” Kate mentioned the ongoing challenge of deciding when behaviors needed immediate reflection versus a direct consequence.

Claire had 17 years of teaching experience, all at her current school, and she currently taught 5th grade math and science. She also taught first, second, and fourth grades. She emphasized building relationships and classroom communities while integrating PBIS with her teaching style. PBIS had improved her structure, consistency, and use of classroom language. Claire was encouraged by the positive impact of meaningful relationships on students with past behavioral challenges, but she struggled to reach students who were unmotivated by rewards or consequences. She also worried about the experiences of consistently well-behaved students during times of classroom disruptions.

Hannah had 19 years of teaching experience, with 11 years in elementary and 8 in high school, and she had spent the last 9 years at her current school. She was a co-teacher for Grades 3-5 Special Education and a former PBIS team member. Hannah believed the most powerful aspect of PBIS was building meaningful relationships, showing students teachers were “on their team” to support success and citizenship. She also pointed out challenges like engaging all staff, finding time for professional development, and keeping students motivated when they did not always respond to interventions.

Cross-Participant Patterns

Across participants, a consistent theme was the importance of meaningful relationships and positive reinforcement in fostering student engagement and behavioral improvement. Many teachers highlighted the value of common language, structure, and consistent expectations provided by PBIS, which supported both classroom management and student reflection.

Challenges reported include maintaining consistency in consequences, motivating unmotivated

students with rewards, balancing attention between students with behavioral challenges and those who consistently followed rules, and navigating staff buy-in and autonomy regarding PBIS practices. Several participants also reflected on how their personal experiences, including parenting, influenced their attention to student needs and the implementation choices they made.

Development of Codes

During the immersion stage of analysis, I engaged deeply with the interview data by listening to audio recordings, reviewing notes, and repeatedly reading transcripts to capture participants' words. I noted powerful quotes, summarized key points, and identified benefits and challenges teachers associated with PBIS implementation. Attention was given not only to what participants said but also to the emotion conveyed, including moments of enthusiasm, frustration, or struggle. These reflections provided a foundation for first-cycle coding by highlighting recurring ideas, significant statements, and themes as they were developed.

Building on my immersion in the data, I began first-cycle coding by identifying both in vivo and process codes. Throughout this process, I applied the principles of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), moving iteratively between Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019, 2021) phases. During the code generation phase, I let participants' language guide many of the in vivo codes, such as "all kids want to please adults" or "deciding who deserves to celebrate." In vivo coding allowed me to capture participants' exact words, preserving the language and meaning they used to describe their experiences with PBIS. Process coding helped me highlight actions, behaviors, and ongoing processes described in the interviews, often using "-ing" verbs to capture movement and activity.

After completing first-cycle coding, I moved on to second-cycle coding, focusing on developing pattern and theme codes. During this stage, I reviewed the in vivo and process codes

I had created, looking for connections, clusters, and recurring ideas across participants. I grouped related codes together and started conceptualizing broader categories that captured the core of the teachers' experiences with PBIS. As part of this process, I regularly revisited my reflexive notes to make sure the patterns I found were rooted in participants' experiences rather than my own interpretations. For example, I personally enjoy PBIS celebrations, but only a few participants discussed them positively. Many others described challenges with deciding which students should attend celebrations, noting that this had become a point of contention among staff. As a former PBIS team member, I remained attentive to how my positive views could bias coding; I therefore grounded pattern codes in cross-participant evidence rather than my preferences. By referring back to my reflexive notes and original quotes, as shown in the audit trail excerpts from Table 4, I adjusted the pattern code so that celebrations were seen more as a challenge than a benefit, ensuring the code accurately reflected participants' perspectives.

Development of Themes

During this stage of analysis, I continued to move iteratively between Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019, 2021) six phases of RTA. In the searching for themes phase, I began clustering these codes into broader ideas, such as "building meaningful relationships" or "tensions around grace and consequences." During reviewing themes, I revisited both my reflexive journal and the study's research questions to ensure that the themes I was constructing aligned with the purpose of the study, remained true to participants' voices, and directly addressed the questions guiding my inquiry. For example, I considered whether the themes I constructed captured not only participants' descriptions of PBIS practices but also their perceptions of its benefits and challenges.

Within each theme, subthemes were developed to capture the nuanced aspects and variations of teachers’ experiences, highlighting the different ways participants interpreted, enacted, and responded to PBIS practices. These subthemes allowed for a more thorough explanation of the data, moving beyond surface-level description to capture the layered and multifaceted nature of teachers’ experiences, highlighting both shared patterns and individual differences. Table 6 shows how final themes and subthemes were developed to align with participants’ experiences and amplify their voices through the results. This reflexive and recursive movement between data, codes, research questions, themes, and subthemes ensured that my analysis stayed grounded in participants’ voices while maintaining a clear connection to the aims of the study.

Table 6

Development of Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes	Supporting Codes	Illustrative Quote
Theme 1: Nurturing Relationships to Support Positive Outcomes	Building Trust and Connection	“meaningful relationships”	“building those relationships first and having clear expectations in your classroom”
	Leveraging Positive Reinforcement	“pointing out the positives”	“he came back from that in just a few minutes because of one little ticket telling him he was doing something right”
	Fostering Student Engagement	“choosing rewards and designing instruction based on interests”	“I think having engaging, strong instruction is where behavior starts and ends”

	Minimizing Negative Interactions	“avoiding public discipline”	“having those private conversations with students”
Theme 2: Balancing Tensions and Challenges in PBIS Implementation	Navigating Shared Autonomy	“deciding who should attend celebrations”	“maybe their teacher has a higher tolerance for behavior or that teacher chose to look for growth”
	Acknowledging All Students	“over-rewarding students on behavior plans”	“you decide to behave one day or two segments and you get Chick Fil A, but this kid does the right thing on a more consistent basis and they don’t get that”
	Maintaining Accountability and Consequences	“choosing and sticking to effective consequences	“it has to sting... nothing around here stings anymore”
	Sustaining Motivation	“student and teacher motivation”	“but if there’s so many of them and they don’t get on board, it makes it very trying”
Theme 3: Informing Instruction Through PBIS Practices	Promoting Student Reflection	“student reflection”	“I think we have a strong handle on reflection in first grade just because of the age group; we reflect until we can’t reflect anymore”
	Using Common Language and Expectations	“common language and clear expectations”	“all of us having that plan and knowing that this is what we’re pushing; this is our goal”
	Applying Proactive Versus Reactive Approaches	“planning for responses to behavior”	“focusing on structure and using the flowchart to address behavior issues”

	Modeling and Teaching Social-Emotional Skills	“modeling self-regulation strategies”	“I tell them when I am in the yellow zone (anxious or frazzled) and show them how to stop and take a break before reacting”
Theme 4: Shaping School Culture	Embracing Schoolwide Themes	“having a common language”	“I loved our songs and our chants that we did to help the kids remember and the vocabulary words that we pulled”
	Collaborating with Colleagues	“Sharing tools and strategies”	”Everybody had a toolbox of tricks that they could use in their classroom to help with all the different needs and deficits that you had going on with behavior”
	Building Classroom Communities	“classroom community”	“make sure YOU are part of the community”
	Relying on Administrator Support and Guidance	“giving teachers autonomy”	“I loved it when admin was able to say ‘plus teacher discretion’
Theme 5: Negotiating Professional Identity and Perspectives on Behavior	Evolving Views and Professional Development	“understanding behavior holistically”	“It’s being ready to react, but in a way that still feeds their soul in a positive way”
	Balancing Grace and Discipline	“choosing when to assign consequences”	“offering grace day to day, but then again not too much where discipline issues and consequences don’t matter”

Addressing Student Disengagement	“students not responding to rewards or consequences”	“still trying to reach those same kids that keep showing up on the list every year”
Reflecting on Personal and Professional Growth	“personal reflections”	“I think it has helped me grow as a mother and as a teacher, seeing those positive things pointed out all the time.”

Note. This table illustrates the development of themes and subthemes from my analysis. The first column lists overarching themes, the second column identifies subthemes, the third column shows supporting codes, and the fourth column includes illustrative participant quotes. These elements collectively demonstrate how I interpreted the data and ensured that the themes were grounded in participants’ perspectives.

Presentation of Findings

Before presenting the themes that have been constructed from the data, it is important to provide context for how the findings are organized. The following section highlights the major patterns identified across participants’ experiences with PBIS, emphasizing both the benefits and challenges of implementing the framework. Each theme is supported by subthemes that capture nuanced aspects of teacher perspectives, including classroom practices, relational dynamics, and organizational factors. Illustrative quotes from participants are provided to give voice to their unique perspectives and experiences and to demonstrate the alignment of the findings with the following research questions:

Research Question 1

How do teachers make sense of the benefits and challenges they encounter in sustaining PBIS practices?

Research Question 2

How do teachers describe the influence of PBIS on their instructional practices, school culture, and professional identity over time?

Theme 1: Nurturing Relationships to Support Positive Outcomes

Teachers highlighted that fostering trusting, supportive relationships through PBIS provided a foundation for student engagement, positive behavior, and investment in learning. At the same time, some teachers noted that not all students were equally responsive to rewards and relationship-building efforts, revealing tensions and challenges that complicated the implementation. As shown in Table 7, the analysis revealed several subthemes related to teachers' approaches to nurturing relationships. The table also highlights key supporting codes, illustrative quotes, and counterexamples that demonstrate the range and complexity of participants' experiences.

Table 7

Theme 1 Evidence Table

Subtheme	Key Codes	Exemplar Quotes	Counterexample
Building Trust and Connection	“consistent support,” “approachability,” “connecting with students”	<i>“Had I responded with aggression or called him out, it would have broken his trust.”</i>	
Leveraging Positive Reinforcement	“acknowledging effort,” “praise,” “motivating students”	<i>“Finding really specific ways of drawing attention to positives helps.”</i>	<i>“How does a party help a child make better decisions?”</i>
Fostering Student Engagement and Investment	“focusing on student interests,” “ownership,” “responsibility”	<i>“They’re invested because they know you care.”</i>	<i>“It takes a lot more work to get those students invested.”</i>
Minimizing Negative Interactions	“private redirection” “discreetly addressing misbehavior”	<i>“You had to really be paying attention to know that the student</i>	<i>“It’s still hard for some to see the connection when</i>

was getting in
trouble.”

they're desperate to stop the
behavior no matter what.”

The analysis revealed four key subthemes related to teachers' strategies for nurturing positive relationships. *Building Trust and Connection* emphasized consistent support, approachability, and forming strong relationships with students. *Leveraging Positive Reinforcement* highlighted acknowledging effort, praise, and motivation, while also noting instances where reinforcement strategies may not always influence behavior as intended. *Fostering Student Engagement and Investment* focused on connecting with student interests and promoting ownership and responsibility, though engaging some students required additional effort. Finally, *Minimizing Negative Interactions* illustrated the use of discreet, private redirection to address misbehavior, while recognizing that some students struggled to make connections between behavior and consequences.

Building Trust and Connection. Participants emphasized that building trust through meaningful relationships with students was essential for promoting engagement and positive behavior. Claire shared a compelling story that highlighted the importance of trust and relationship-building in encouraging positive behavior change. She described her deliberate efforts to connect with a student who had historically struggled with confrontational and disrespectful behavior:

One of my students from last year had an extremely difficult year with his previous teacher. He was very combative and disrespectful. I had a feeling he would be in my class the following year, so I tried to connect with him as much as possible. I made a point to build a relationship with him the first few days of school and to point out the positives as much as possible so that he would know I was on his side. There was one day where he wasn't following directions in line and I told him he had to walk laps to reflect on his

behavior. He immediately got defensive on the way to the playground and insisted he wasn't walking. I gave him some space and didn't say a word when he walked off to go play. He eventually went and walked completely on his own and came over to reflect afterwards. He was able to describe exactly why he needed a consequence and he apologized for his initial response. I felt like that day was huge in our relationship, and it set the trajectory for the rest of the year. Had I responded with aggression or called him out, it would have broken his trust. However, he ended up being one of my most respectful, well-behaved students that year. He still comes to check in and visit me, and I've heard nothing but great things about his behavior from other teachers so far this year.

Lauren highlighted that trust was built through small, consistent gestures that demonstrated to students they were valued as individuals beyond their academic achievements. She described how she purposefully invested in these personal connections as part of fostering relationships that led to positive outcomes:

I always talk to the kids about their weekends. I always ask them for schedules if they're playing games. I want them to know that I'm not just the teacher in the classroom for the day, but I also care about them outside of the classroom, too.

Kate observed that some of the most meaningful relationship-building occurred outside of formal lessons, during casual moments that let students' personalities shine. She explained how something as simple as having lunch with students created chances to build trust, demonstrate social skills, and connect on a deeper level:

I've had some of the best conversations sitting with them and eating lunch at their table. You learn so much about your kids, and you can build those connections on day one. Just by listening to them talk and teaching them how to have a conversation at a lunch table.

We're also practicing so many skills, like expectations for the lunchroom, but also how to listen, how to take turns. You're also learning during that unscripted time to just talk to them and to laugh about their personality. You're not going to get that in the middle of a math lesson. It's exhausting, but it's also really fun and worth it.

Teachers frequently emphasized the importance of building trust by reassuring students that mistakes or tough moments would not define them. By giving students opportunities to start fresh, they fostered a feeling of safety and belonging that strengthened relationships and promoted positive development. Grace reflected on this approach by explaining:

If someone had a bad day, I don't bring it back tomorrow. I always want them to know they can start fresh, even though it may be in the back of my head. I try to start fresh each day and let them know that was yesterday. I'll meet them at the door or just sit and chat with them. I will remind them that today is a new day and we're going to do better.

Across participants' reflections, building trust functioned as the cornerstone for meaningful relationships and supported positive behavior change. Teachers described trust as something cultivated through patience, consistency, and authentic connection, whether by giving students space to regulate and repair after conflict, engaging in personal conversations about their lives, joining them during informal moments like lunch, or offering a fresh start each day. These practices signaled to students that they were valued beyond academics, fostering a sense of safety and belonging that encouraged accountability, strengthened relationships, and supported long-term growth.

Leveraging Positive Reinforcement. Teachers emphasized the importance of using positive reinforcement to encourage desired behaviors, while also fostering engagement and building strong relationships. Sarah described her approach at the beginning of the school year:

At the very beginning of the year, I just told my class that I love to hear compliments from them in the hallway and we talked about the best way to get compliments. We practiced a lot and walked in the hallways and they would get compliments constantly at the beginning of the year. They started sliding back a little bit and I stopped them and asked them, I was like, ‘Instead of me assigning laps to everybody that's talking right now, let's talk about this. What can we do to get better? We're sliding backwards. We're talking in line. Tell me some things that we can do and just trying to get back on track of the stars in the jar and all the positive things about it.’ They were able to make corrections and get back to where we were at the very beginning of the year. So, finding really specific ways of drawing attention to the positives helps.

Teachers also observed that recognition and encouragement were crucial in fostering student engagement. Mary explained, “I feel like I do get a little bit more buy-in from my students when I’m pointing out positive behaviors and encouraging those behaviors. It makes it meaningful for them.” Sarah reflected on a time when a small token of reinforcement was strategically used to completely change a student’s behavior during a tough moment:

It was just one of those moments when he was in the red zone and near the point of no return, and he came back from that just within a couple of minutes because of one little ticket telling him he was doing something right.

Participants also emphasized the strategic use of positive reinforcement to promote desired behaviors and gradually develop intrinsic motivation. Teachers explained that offering strong incentives initially could engage students’ interest and build momentum, while reinforcement could be reduced as behaviors become consistent and internalized. Grace mentioned positive reinforcement through schoolwide celebrations and weekly prizes in her classroom:

I think the first one (schoolwide celebration) should be big to hook them a little bit.

That's what I do with prizes on Friday during the year. I'll spend a lot of money at first, and then it just dwindles off here, and I throw it back in there. It works to move towards intrinsic motivation too.

Similarly, Hannah explained how she carefully used positive reinforcement to promote desired behaviors:

I provide positive reinforcement in big doses when a new and desirable behavior is being exhibited. As that behavior becomes more stable, you can gradually decrease the reinforcement once it has become generalized.

While many teachers highlighted the benefits of rewards and celebrations in motivating student behavior, some questioned whether such incentives were necessary. Morgan offered a different perspective, challenging the emphasis on external reinforcement:

I don't think that the PBIS parties have accomplished what they set out for them to accomplish. They've become very tedious and nitpicky and almost irrelevant to behavior. Why do we need a party for this? Coming to school and doing the right thing should be the expectation for everybody, and we're just here to help. How does a party help a child make better decisions?

Teachers emphasized that positive reinforcement was a key strategy for promoting desired behaviors, engagement, and relationship-building. Many described using recognition, tokens, or celebrations to capture students' attention, reinforce new behaviors, and gradually foster intrinsic motivation. At the same time, some educators questioned the reliance on external rewards, noting that behavioral expectations should be understood as standards rather than contingent upon incentives. These contrasting perspectives highlighted the tension teachers navigate between

motivating students and maintaining consistent accountability, a challenge explored further in Theme 2's discussion of "maintaining accountability and consequences."

Fostering Student Engagement and Investment. By tailoring PBIS strategies to individual students, teachers can foster meaningful engagement and help students take ownership of their behavior. Morgan shared an example of how she used PBIS strategies to engage a former student who had previously struggled with behavior and required a check-in/check-out system:

So last year, a student came to me and he was previously on a check in/check out behavior chart but truly struggling. I started with the PBIS foundations of just building a relationship with him and figuring out his pushes and pulls and the fact that the child loved dinosaurs and just knowing that he was going to be able to have free time with things like a video of a dinosaur that dances for you... just having that background with him, just putting positive first, and pointing out what he was doing well. The negatives kind of went away by finding his strengths and building on that versus what he was not doing well. Those things were still there, but that's not what we focused on. So, I think by October or November, we went off of a check in/ check out behavior chart. We weren't on anything. We were just cruising. I was excited for him, because he saw his growth. He's like, 'I don't need that thing anymore.' I just said, 'I don't know, that's your decision. Like, you tell me if you need that.' And we decided together he didn't. So just watching him be proud of himself.

Teachers also reflected on the idea that the relationships built during informal, non-academic moments often have a powerful impact on student engagement and behavior during instructional time. Kate emphasized the importance of those efforts, "What you see from them during

instructional time, the focus and respect, all of that is probably because you've poured so much into them during those non-academic times. They're invested because they know you care."

Hannah highlighted how providing students with simple, meaningful choices could promote engagement and a sense of ownership in the classroom:

I always provide choices that do not affect the learning environment for others and things that have to be done anyway. For example, I ask certain students if they want the lights on or off. I let them choose where they would like to sit and the type of pencil they would like to write with.

While many teachers noted the benefits of relationship-building and positive reinforcement, some acknowledged that not all students respond consistently or become fully invested in classroom expectations and acknowledgement systems. Claire described:

Unfortunately, some students just turn their nose up at tickets, Dojo points, Starburst, and bounce houses. It's like they weigh their options and realize their bad choices are more rewarding at the time. It takes a lot more work to get those students invested. We have even given students surveys called forced choice reinforcers to try to determine what incentives motivate them. We've also asked those students to help plan the next celebration, hoping they would develop a sense of ownership and excitement, and want to work hard to attend.

Teachers suggested that tailoring PBIS strategies to individual students, building relationships during non-academic moments, and offering meaningful choices could foster engagement, ownership, and positive behavior. However, they also acknowledged that some students remained resistant to traditional reinforcement systems, requiring additional effort, creativity, and opportunities for ownership to motivate their participation.

Minimizing Negative Interactions. Teachers highlighted the importance of minimizing public discipline and shifting toward more discreet, empathetic approaches to behavior management. Moving away from visible punishments and negative attention helps preserve students' dignity, encourages reflection, and reduces opportunities for escalation. While reflecting on past practices, Kate contrasted PBIS approaches with older methods that focused on public correction and punishment:

Before PBIS, there were a lot of clip charts in the building. I'm not a fan of those. There was a lot more pointing out the negative and punishments like losing recess. Instead of reflecting and talking to the kid, they were embarrassed and ashamed in public because a lot of those conversations happened in front of their classmates. I know sometimes that still happens with some teachers, but we've come a long way.

Sarah shared how observing private, subtle discipline during her practicum influenced her own approach:

Neither one of the two teachers that I did my practicum with before becoming a full-time teacher at the school did out-of-loud discipline. It was always very private. You had to really be paying attention to know that student was even getting in trouble. It didn't embarrass the child or make the child act out. They (the students) were able to stop what they were doing without having to be scolded or made fun of by other kids in the class. I think that's where it really touched my heart, just watching it be handled discreetly.

Hannah described using discreet tracking to provide individualized feedback and reflect on her own teaching practices:

I keep a list of student names. I place checks beside names to reinforce behavior that I want to be generalized. When redirects are provided, I make specific notes of that so that

I can target it explicitly with the student. It also allows me to challenge myself on my own triggers and reflect on if I have taught what “on task” or “fully engaged” means for a certain assignment.

Claire highlighted the impact of public discipline on students’ emotional regulation and emphasized the need for empathy among staff:

It’s been nice to move away from public discipline as a school. Who wants to be called out in front of the class for making a bad choice? It only brings attention to negative behaviors, which is what some of those students are yearning for anyway. It also makes overstimulated and dysregulated students more upset, which is the opposite of what we hope to achieve. I’ve tried to get some of our more hesitant adults to empathize with students by asking them if they’d like to be called out in faculty meetings for talking or over the intercom for being late or not having their stuff, but it’s still hard for some to see the connection when they’re desperate to stop the undesired behavior regardless of what the repercussions may be.

Overall, teachers stressed that discreet and empathetic discipline supported students’ dignity, encouraged self-reflection, and prevented the escalation of negative behaviors. By focusing on individualized feedback, private corrections, and staff empathy, teachers could promote more positive and productive classroom environments while moving away from punitive, public methods.

This theme addressed RQ1 (benefits of PBIS implementation) by demonstrating that teachers viewed PBIS as a relationship-centered approach that built trust, encouraged engagement, and reduced negative interactions. Teachers explained how consistent support, approachability, and clear expectations made students feel safe and valued, which in turn

promoted participation and investment in learning. Even with occasional student disengagement or resistance, the overall impact was a more positive classroom environment, stronger teacher-student relationships, and fewer disruptions. Participants also noted that private redirection and proactive routines helped them manage challenging behaviors without escalating conflict, thereby preserving student dignity and allowing learning to proceed. These findings suggested that PBIS enhanced social-emotional development and academic involvement by promoting consistent, trust-based interactions across the classroom.

Theme 2: Balancing Tensions and Challenges in PBIS Implementation

Teachers appreciated the structure PBIS provided but reported challenges in balancing their instructional autonomy, managing incentives and consequences, and maintaining student motivation over time. Table 8 presents subthemes, key codes, exemplar quotes, and counterexamples related to the theme *Balancing Tensions and Challenges*, highlighting the complexities teachers face in implementing PBIS consistently and equitably.

Table 8

Theme 2 Evidence Table

Subtheme	Key Codes	Exemplar Quotes	Counterexample
Navigating Shared Autonomy	“teacher discretion,” “flexibility,” “black and white vs. gray”	“We have other students who may have displayed very challenging behaviors for a considerable amount of time, but they are still allowed to go.”	
Acknowledging All Students	“equity,” “consistency,” “student perception”	“Makes me feel so bad for those kids for sure that deserve those things without having to be asked to do them.”	

Subtheme	Key Codes	Exemplar Quotes	Counterexample
Maintaining Accountability and Consequences	“follow-through,” “consistent consequences” “needs to sting”	“You have to make it sting. Nothing around here stings anymore.”	“Not every misbehavior requires a consequence; some just need a conversation”
Sustaining Motivation	“effective rewards,” “disengagement,” “recurring issues”	“Still trying to reach those same kids that keep showing up on the list every year.”	

The analysis identified four subthemes that illustrated the challenges teachers experienced. *Navigating Shared Autonomy* highlighted tensions between teacher discretion and uniform application of PBIS practices. *Acknowledging All Students* emphasized the need for equity and consistency, ensuring that all students feel recognized and supported. *Maintaining Accountability and Consequences* focused on balancing consistent follow-through with flexibility, noting that not all misbehavior requires formal consequences. *Sustaining Motivation* reflected ongoing efforts to maintain a positive mindset despite challenges such as student disengagement and inconsistent implementation.

Navigating Shared Autonomy. Teachers described a tension between wanting professional autonomy in implementing PBIS and navigating judgments about student behavior or colleagues’ decisions.

Kate highlighted the challenges that could arise when PBIS implementation relied heavily on numerical metrics, emphasizing the importance of teacher autonomy in effectively supporting students:

I think when we start putting numbers on things, that makes it difficult for the classroom teacher. When you have to give out so many Dojo points or when you have to do this certain percentage, that’s when PBIS can be a little challenging for the classroom teacher.

We could do it without it. It's kind of like knowing where your kids are socially, emotionally, without it always having to be on a paper quiz. I think we all feel differently about it, which is why a little bit of autonomy goes a long way. It matters with teachers when you let them have a little bit of autonomy over how they're going to collect data for PBIS.

Morgan expressed concerns about rigid PBIS policies that limited teacher autonomy, noting that uniform requirements for celebrations could create tension and reduce morale:

When you have to have 80% positive points for a celebration, having this clear-cut requirement without the teacher autonomy or professional discretion creates negative morale because teachers are different and our classrooms are too different to have such a blanket policy. It's hard to play in the same ballgame when we all have different equipment.

However, she also reflected on the challenges of balancing accountability and fairness, highlighting how differing classroom expectations could lead to judgment and frustration among staff:

How many times are we like, 'what is that kid doing at that party?' We all saw that kid walking down the hallway and he doesn't deserve to be there. Then, instantly, you judge the teacher because she let him come. Next, you're judging leadership because they let him come. He may have shown growth, but we don't all have the same expectations and the same definition of success, so it's hard to find a middle ground.

In other words, when the rules for recognition are unclear or decisions seem inconsistent, teachers can feel that it is unfair, which makes them less likely to fully buy into PBIS. This example illustrates how minor inconsistencies can impact both motivation and day-to-day

implementation of the PBIS framework. Lauren described the tension between wanting the autonomy to make professional judgments in her classroom while recognizing the challenges of trusting that others will apply the same standards consistently:

The challenge for me personally was that I would see kids getting to go to the behavior celebration who were not showing positive behavior in other classrooms, and then I would be holding my students accountable. I felt like the bad guy because I was following the rules and making sure they met the requirements. I've definitely been on both sides of it, though, when they've really shown some improvement so I let them go or I didn't give them the full time to sit out.

Teachers highlighted a notable tension in PBIS implementation between the desire for professional autonomy and the challenges of ensuring fairness across classrooms. While autonomy allows teachers to tailor strategies, make judgments based on students' social-emotional needs, and maintain morale, rigid policies and inconsistent expectations across staff can create frustration and judgment. Educators like Kate, Morgan, and Lauren described navigating this balance, noting the difficulty of trusting that others could apply the same standards while still holding their own students accountable.

Acknowledging All Students. Teachers identified a challenge in PBIS implementation concerning equitable recognition. Students who consistently demonstrated positive behavior often received less acknowledgment than those showing occasional improvements, while those with average behavior may neither receive rewards nor face consequences. This highlighted the need to balance recognition in a way that celebrates both consistent effort and observable growth, ensuring all students feel valued and motivated. Mary reflected on the difficulty of ensuring that consistently well-behaved students were noticed:

I think that I struggle the most with students who are always doing the right thing... making sure they're getting acknowledged too, because it's hard to catch them doing the right things when they always are. Unfortunately, they don't get recognized as much, which isn't fair, but they're just kind of used to it.

Lauren emphasized the imbalance in recognition between consistently well-behaved students and those with occasional positive behavior:

I feel like the kids who always behave get less acknowledgement than the kids that behave sometimes. It's really sad that they are doing the right thing constantly, but I'm having to spend all my time dealing with the kids who have behavior challenges.

Grace highlighted the disparity in rewards, noting that students who consistently met expectations often received less meaningful acknowledgment:

I didn't think that was right because you decide to behave one day or two segments and you get Chick-fil-A, but this kid over here is doing the right thing on a consistent basis, and they don't get that. They just get whatever classroom treat we're giving like Dum Dums or pieces of candy.

Kate also noted that the small groups and trips to the office that were regularly used in behavior interventions often viewed as rewards by their peers:

It's tough to explain to some kids who always do the right thing why they're not going to these small groups or pull-outs to the office and coming back with a treat. I don't think it sends the right message to the kid who had the undesired behavior, and I don't think it sends the right message to the kid who always makes the good choices and does the right thing.

Hannah offered a simple solution for immediately rewarding students for positive behavior choices:

I offer five minutes of free time for students who have had zero redirects during class. It takes transition time that would already be lost during the day and makes it something that students have to earn. It doesn't cost any money, it's fast, and it immediately reinforces student choices.

As a brief, no-cost, and immediate reinforcement strategy, it was generally effective; however, it also required teaching clear procedures to ensure smooth and calm transitions from one task to the next, particularly to prevent disruptions during the reward period.

Overall, teachers emphasized that equitable recognition in PBIS was a persistent challenge, as students who consistently demonstrated positive behavior often received less acknowledgment than those showing occasional improvement. Educators like Mary, Lauren, and Grace noted that this imbalance could feel unfair and overlook the contributions of reliable students. Strategies such as offering brief free time for students who meet expectations and increasing the frequency of group rewards illustrate practical ways to acknowledge consistent positive behavior, ensuring all students feel valued and motivated.

Maintaining Accountability and Consequences. Teachers reflected on the role of accountability within PBIS, highlighting concerns that the emphasis on positive reinforcement may sometimes overshadow consistent consequences for misbehavior. While PBIS was designed to promote positive choices, several participants noted that without appropriate follow-through, problematic behaviors could persist, and the system may fail to hold students fully accountable. Grace expressed concern that PBIS sometimes emphasized rewards over meaningful consequences, allowing recurring behavior issues to persist, "I think we've been mostly focused

on rewarding kids that there's no true consequences and they know that. We're not fixing the problem because if we were, the same kids wouldn't be on the list every year." This highlights a small subset of students who repeatedly require office-managed interventions, pointing to challenges with implementation of fidelity and the need for better-matched supports. Without consistent consequences alongside reinforcement, these students continue to cycle through the same behaviors.

Mary reflected on the challenges of holding students fully accountable within PBIS:

I think that sometimes kids who struggle to make good choices, sometimes I feel like PBIS doesn't always hold kids as accountable. Sometimes the goals don't make sense. We're looking for right choices 50% of the time or 80% of the time when our goal really should be 100%. Obviously, it's going to look a little different for everybody, but still we should have that expectation.

Lauren shared her concern that an overemphasis on promoting positive behavior may have inadvertently reduced the consistent use of consequences, "I feel like we have kind of started coming away from consequences by saying we'll do more positive behavior, and it just started to not be used appropriately."

Morgan acknowledged misconceptions about PBIS and emphasized the need to address persistent challenges while clarifying the framework's true purpose and implementation:

I'm not just handing out gummy bears when kids get in trouble, but we have a problem we need to fix because there's a reason that PBIS has that reputation or connotation. Maybe that's what people have seen from us, or maybe we didn't do a good job of relaying to our stakeholders what it truly is and what it looks like at our school.

Kate offered a balanced perspective, emphasizing the importance of pairing thoughtful conversations with appropriately matched consequences, while noting that this approach was not consistently applied across classrooms or grade levels:

Instead of immediately jumping to consequences when a student makes a mistake, just start with a conversation. Yes, there's a consequence for your behavior, but it's not necessarily a punishment. A lot of times it's a natural consequence. I strongly feel that when you make a bad choice or you do something that is not shining your best light, the consequence should match. We don't see that in every classroom or every grade level.

Teachers highlighted that while PBIS emphasized positive reinforcement, maintaining consistent and meaningful accountability was essential to its effectiveness. Participants noted that overemphasis on rewards could allow problematic behaviors to persist and may reduce the perceived importance of consequences. Educators emphasized the need for fair, proportional, and consistently applied consequences, combined with opportunities for reflection and dialogue. Balancing positive reinforcement with accountability helps ensure students understand expectations, learn from mistakes, and fosters a more equitable and effective behavior management system.

Sustaining Motivation. Teachers reflected on the challenges of maintaining a positive mindset while implementing PBIS, particularly when faced with persistent misbehavior or difficult classroom dynamics. Participants described how fatigue, lack of support, and the demands of managing multiple students' behaviors could make it difficult to consistently focus on positive reinforcement. Sarah shared her experience of encountering escalating misbehavior in her classroom and the challenge of maintaining a positive focus:

At the end of my first-year teaching, I found myself falling away from it (PBIS). I found myself not doing the positive reinforcement as much because there was so much negativity going on in my room. One student who was a problem for a few months turned into five difficult students because they saw him getting attention and rewards for negative behavior. It's hard to stay in that positive mindset when it gets that difficult, but I was able to refocus, and I decided that I was not going to let the negativity affect all the positives. We did some really special, fun learning at the end of the year and made sure that those students were able to experience all the fun that they deserved.

Lauren reflected on the emotional toll of implementing PBIS without adequate support for managing misbehavior:

I tried for the first several years to follow it (PBIS) pretty good, but I think I got so exhausted from not getting support for misbehavior. I think I just got to the point where it was draining, and I didn't want to fight against it.

Morgan emphasized the role of teacher mindset, noting that maintaining positivity can influence how easily PBIS strategies were embraced. She mentioned that "Accepting something like PBIS is easier for those of us who have more of a positive demeanor versus those who have more of a gotcha demeanor. It's probably a more difficult mindset for them to adapt to."

This suggested that teacher mindset functions as a contextual condition that shaped both fidelity and consistency in PBIS implementation, influencing how strategies were applied and experienced by students. When teachers approach PBIS with a positive, proactive stance, they are more likely to implement strategies consistently and supportively. Claire described strategies for sustaining motivation year by year, focusing on foundational practices and small victories with challenging students:

Each year is different. There's always a new group of students with different challenges and needs. When the day-to-day practices seem difficult or there are students who just don't seem to care, I try to focus on the foundational things like meaningful relationships and clear expectations. It's also one of those situations where you have to kind of fake it until you make it. Sometimes you might not feel super positive, but you have to go in each day with a new plan and new energy. It helps you keep going, and the students see your determination. Also, focusing on the small victories with difficult students really helps you to remember why every effort matters.

Teachers emphasized that maintaining a positive mindset was a crucial yet difficult part of PBIS implementation. Factors like increasing misbehavior, lack of support, and individual teacher attitudes could make it hard to consistently focus on positive reinforcement. Educators highlighted strategies for staying motivated, such as shifting focus to student strengths, celebrating small wins, and approaching each day with fresh energy and clear expectations. These practices helped ensure that positive behavior interventions stay effective, even when facing classroom challenges.

This theme aligned with RQ2 (challenges in implementation) by highlighting the tensions teachers encountered with shared autonomy, fairness, maintaining accountability and consequences, and sustaining motivation. While PBIS offered structure and clear expectations, teachers described practical challenges that required them to continuously balance fidelity to the framework with flexibility to meet individual student needs. They reported difficulties in ensuring rewards and consequences felt equitable, adapting strategies for diverse learners, and keeping students consistently engaged, particularly when behavior improvements were gradual or when students became less responsive to incentives. These experiences illustrated the dynamic

and sometimes stressful nature of PBIS implementation, emphasizing that sustaining both teacher and student commitment required ongoing reflection, creativity, and support.

Theme 3: Informing Instruction Through PBIS Practices

Teachers used PBIS to enhance instruction by encouraging student reflection, developing social-emotional skills, fostering a positive and predictable classroom environment, and implementing proactive classroom management strategies. The focus here is on how participants have reported these practices in action, while evaluative claims and implications for practice are reserved for Chapter 5. Table 9 presents subthemes, key codes, exemplar quotes, and counterexamples related to the theme *Informing Instruction*, illustrating how PBIS practices shaped teachers’ instructional strategies and classroom management approaches.

Table 9

Theme 3 Evidence Table

Subtheme	Key Codes	Exemplar Quotes	Counterexample
Promoting Student Reflection	“self-assessment,” “ownership,” “behavior review”	<i>“We reflect on choices at the end of the day to see what we could do differently.”</i>	
Using Common Language and Expectations	“consistency,” “clear rules,” “shared understanding”	<i>“When everyone uses the same language, students know exactly what’s expected.”</i>	
Applying Proactive versus Reactive Approaches	“anticipating issues,” “preventing disruption,” “pre-teaching routines”	<i>“I try to prevent problems before they start rather than just reacting.”</i>	
Modeling and Teaching Social-Emotional Skills	“self-regulation,” “problem-solving,” “conflict resolution”	<i>“I show them how I stop and take a breath before reacting.”</i>	<i>“Some students still struggle to manage strong emotions.”</i>

The analysis identified four subthemes demonstrating the impact of PBIS on instructional practice. *Promoting Student Reflection* emphasized the importance of encouraging self-

assessment and ownership of one's behavior. *Using Common Language and Expectations* highlighted the importance of consistency and shared understanding to clarify expectations for students. *Applying Proactive versus Reactive Approaches* focused on anticipating and preventing behavioral issues rather than responding to them after they occur. *Modeling and Teaching Social-Emotional Skills* illustrated how teachers guided students in self-regulation, problem-solving, and conflict resolution, while recognizing that some students still struggled to manage strong emotions.

Promoting Student Reflection. Teachers discussed the role of student reflection and restorative dialogue within PBIS, emphasizing how these practices encouraged accountability, problem-solving, and self-awareness. Participants described strategies ranging from structured tools to informal conversations, highlighting the importance of balancing reflection with proper support and timing. Morgan recalled how PBIS practices evolved over time, moving away from immediate referrals and toward opportunities for reflection:

When we first started, there wasn't a place for reflection. It was just straight to office referrals. I think there were some minor behaviors that should have been teacher-managed. We knew that was something that we had to grow and we did.

Kate discussed how intentional use of reflection and restorative dialogue supported young students in developing problem-solving skills and self-awareness:

I would say I think we have a strong handle on reflection in first grade just because of the age group. You reflect until you can't reflect anymore. There's a whole lot of reflection going on. We talk about everything, but maybe actually getting kids to talk to one another about how some things make them feel. If you don't do that in your classroom, you tend to have a year of a lot of tattle-tailing. And if you have more of those restorative circles,

you see kids become independent with their problem-solving. They don't even need you anymore. They're like going to the kids saying, 'Hey, when you did this, it made me feel like blank.' And, 'I really would like for you to include me,' and telling them what they need to help solve the problem.

Sarah highlighted the use of a structured reflection system that provided students with a visible way to track their behavior and growth:

We do this system where each child has a block on a sheet of paper, and they get marks and checks, and you want the checks to outweigh the negative marks. The reason I think it works so well is that you're able to have something concrete that the kids can look at, and they can see their behavior, and it gives them something to work towards the next day. You can sit and have a conversation with them and ask how they did. It's really great to have those conversations and let them reflect and ask questions about it. They've got the data and they're watching it and trying to do better.

This approach works because the visibility of progress combined with specific feedback fosters student ownership of behavior, though it is less effective for students who are not motivated by the data or the rewards and consequences attached. Grace emphasized the importance of timely reflection, noting that meaningful conversations should occur immediately after incidents:

I think it's important to make sure you have those specific conversations after an incident and not waiting until the last minute for reflections. Just treating every situation as a really meaningful experience so students know they can't keep doing the same thing.

Claire described how she incorporated emotional regulation and student voice into the reflection process:

I am constantly having conversations with students about their behavior when they make a poor choice, but I always give them space to calm down and regulate first. If they're still upset or dysregulated, nothing you say to them is going to matter. I ask them to tell me what happened in their words, but I also validate their feelings. We discuss how they should react in the future in similar situations, and then we decide what the consequence should be. It gives them a voice and puts them in control of deciding how to move forward.

Collectively, teachers emphasized that reflection was a central component of PBIS, helping students process their actions, understand their impact on others, and develop strategies for improvement. Whether through structured systems or one-on-one conversations, reflection was described as most effective when it was timely, student-centered, and paired with opportunities for regulation and dialogue. These practices not only promoted accountability but also empowered students to take ownership of their choices and growth.

Using Common Language and Expectations. Teachers highlighted the value of PBIS in establishing clear expectations and a common language across classrooms and grade levels. They emphasized how shared systems, matrices, and rubrics help both educators and students maintain consistency, reduce anxiety, and create an environment where expectations are predictable and easy for students to follow. Mary appreciated the structure and clarity PBIS provided through established expectations and plans:

One of the things that I do like about PBIS is having very specific expectations and kind of knowing, okay, this is the plan for when these behaviors are not met or when acknowledging positive behaviors isn't working. I like that piece of the common language, expectations, and having a plan.

Grace reflected on the value of the PBIS matrix and acronyms, noting how they made expectations easy to remember and apply consistently:

I think our matrix is good. Our acronyms are good because we're looking for those things and they're easy enough for us to remember that we don't have to think twice about what things mean. Having the common language really helps.

Morgan emphasized the importance of consistent tools like matrices, acronyms, and rubrics, which ensured both teachers and students were aligned:

I like the matrices where it's very clearly defined for what I can expect in my classroom from students and for students. I also like having the common acronyms. They help so we're all speaking the same language to students, and we can hold them all to the same expectation. I like the common rubrics for voice level, because I can say level zero and you can say level zero, and we're on the same page.

Kate connected PBIS expectations to students' need for structure, pointing out how clear language reduced anxiety and supports positive behavior:

Kids like boundaries, they like structure, and they also like the grey area. They like clear expectations; they are us. You know why? Because you feel anxious when you don't know how to meet certain people's expectations. Kids act out when they feel anxious, but they don't have to feel anxious at all if we just focus on the common language and clear expectations of PBIS.

Together, these perspectives highlighted the central role of a common language and clear expectations in effective PBIS implementation. Teachers agreed that shared systems like matrices, acronyms, and rubrics reduced confusion, provided consistency, and supported both students and staff in navigating behavior expectations. By ensuring everyone operated within the

same framework, PBIS fostered a more predictable and supportive school environment where students felt secure and teachers could focus on meaningful instruction.

Applying Proactive Versus Reactive Approaches. Teachers emphasized the proactive role of instructional practices in supporting PBIS implementation and preventing behavioral challenges. By tailoring instruction, establishing clear expectations, and incorporating consistent routines, educators shared how intentional strategies create structured, positive learning environments that minimize disruptions and maximize student success. Morgan highlighted the importance of strong, engaging instruction as the foundation for positive classroom behavior, stressing the value of being proactive and responsive to students' needs:

I think engaging, strong instruction is where behavior starts and ends. You've got to know your kids. If you've got an active class, you have to make sure you have some kinesthetic activities lined up for them so they can be successful. Tailoring your instruction to the learning styles of your students is going to prevent behavior problems from the get-go. Being proactive rather than reactive, and then scaffolding, because if you overload them and stress them out, they are going to have issues.

Mary discussed the value of using PBIS language from the behavior matrix as part of instruction, noting how this practice clarified expectations before students begin activities:

Using the language of our matrix really helps. For example, we use that language when introducing a new center and talk about what it looks like to be a good teammate there.

We also discuss what it looks like when we're reading together and doing other procedures before we do them, so students know what is expected before we start.

Claire described her use of pre-corrects and structured routines to maintain a positive classroom environment, emphasizing how preparation and consistency prevented disruptive behaviors:

I use a lot of pre-corrects in my classroom. It can be something as simple as taking the time to stop and tell the students what it should look like when they line up before they actually do it. I also use the same approach before we walk into the hall, so they know what is expected. I try to keep a good grasp on things like volume level and transitions, so I don't have to stop and diffuse chaos because I've had control of the dynamics the entire time. Visual schedules, predictable routines, and well-planned seating arrangements are also really helpful.

Across cases, pre-corrects and routines consistently appeared, especially before transitions in the classroom and when preparing students to move throughout the building, indicating a shared proactive repertoire that led to fewer public corrections and smoother classroom management. Kate explained how small adaptations, such as using sign language and hand signals, supported smoother classroom communication and reduced unnecessary interruptions:

We use a lot of sign language in our classroom. That helps with the communication piece. I may be busy with a small group, but you can still ask me if you need to go to the bathroom. You don't have to raise your hand and wait for me to call on you, and I don't have to stop what I'm doing to answer.

Collectively, teachers emphasized that proactive instructional practices were essential to PBIS success. By integrating engaging lessons, using common PBIS language, applying pre-corrects, and establishing predictable routines, educators created learning environments that prevent many behavior issues before they arise. Practical strategies such as visual schedules, kinesthetic activities, and nonverbal communication further demonstrate how instructional planning not only supports academic success but also reinforces positive behavior in meaningful, consistent ways.

Modeling and Teaching Social-Emotional Skills. Teachers emphasized that social-emotional learning (SEL) was an essential component of PBIS, helping students build empathy, regulate emotions, and connect their behavior to the impact it has on others. Participants described the importance of explicitly teaching these skills while also modeling them consistently in daily interactions. Sarah highlighted the value of SEL in fostering empathy and reflection, noting that modeling positive behaviors was just as important as teaching them:

I think teaching social-emotional skills is important because it encourages them to think about how things make them feel and challenges them to have empathy. It also gives them a chance to think about how their behavior is affecting others. Also, it's important to model it. You can't expect kids to come in and be nice if you're not going to do the same.

Claire explained how integrating emotional regulation strategies and character education into daily routines helped students connect SEL skills to real-life situations:

We talk about our emotions and discuss specific ways to regulate them constantly in our classroom. I also make sure to discuss my own emotions with my students and tell them when I'm using a breathing strategy to get myself back into the green zone. I think it's more meaningful that way. If you just discuss things in isolation, it's not applicable for them. Also, I think it really helps us to have monthly character traits that we focus on and use those traits to select our MPV (student of the month). It forces us to discuss the word regularly and point it out in real time when students are exemplifying something like empathy or compassion.

Hannah emphasized the importance of embedding SEL throughout the school day and explicitly teaching skills so that students could generalize them across settings:

I focus on SEL all day long, and I make sure it's explicitly taught because it leads them to generalize the skills across settings. We don't just review academic expectations, but we also discuss what good students look like, how they interact with others, and ways they make sure they're giving their best effort.

Kate underscored the need for both integration and dedicated time for SEL, noting that intentional instruction in the morning can prevent disruptions later in the day:

SEL is woven throughout our instructional day, but there also needs to be a specific time where we can actually just have a conversation about specific skills and explicitly teach self-awareness and self-management. We need to greet each other, and we need to have time to share. If you don't take the time to teach it in the morning, you're going to have to give up instructional time during the day, either for them to share or to address social issues.

This theme addressed RQ2 and RQ1 by illustrating how PBIS informs instructional practice. Teachers reported using visuals, such as the schoolwide PBIS matrix (see Figure 7), common language, and routines to proactively manage behavior, embed social-emotional skills, and maintain consistency. Benefits included clearer expectations and student reflection; however, some challenges persisted for students who struggled to apply these skills independently.

Figure 7

Anonymized PBIS Matrix

BE A TEAM PLAYER IN THE HALL

T TRUSTWORTHY	GO STRAIGHT TO YOUR DESTINATION KEEP HANDS AND FEET TO YOURSELF
E EMPATHETIC	BE AWARE OF OTHERS' SPACE VOICE LEVEL ZERO TO AVOID DISRUPTIONS TAKE CARE OF WORK DISPLAYS AND OUR BUILDING
A+ ATTITUDE	FOLLOW DIRECTIONS PROMPTLY SHOW RESPECT FOR OTHERS
M MOTIVATED	MOVE WITH PURPOSE TAKE INITIATIVE- FOLLOW RULES WITHOUT REMINDERS

Note. Teachers referenced this matrix when describing shared language (e.g., “voice level zero”), which appears in Theme 3 and Theme 4.

Theme 4: Shaping School Culture

PBIS fostered a more positive and collaborative school culture by encouraging shared expectations and teamwork, while teachers navigated the tension between receiving administrative support and maintaining their own classroom autonomy. Table 10 presents subthemes, key codes, exemplar quotes, and counterexamples related to the theme “*Shaping School Culture,*” highlighting how teachers’ practices and perceptions of PBIS influence both classroom and school-wide environments.

Table 10*Theme 4 Evidence Table*

Subtheme	Key Codes	Exemplar Quotes	Counterexample
Embracing Schoolwide Themes	“consistency,” “shared vision,” “common language”	<i>“I loved our songs and chants that we did to help the kids remember.”</i>	
Collaborating with Colleagues	“teamwork,” “peer support,” “toolbox”	<i>“Everybody had a toolbox of tricks that they could use in their classroom... and I thought our team did a great job of sharing those”</i>	
Building Classroom Communities	“belonging,” “relationships,” “cohesion”	<i>“Make sure YOU are part of that community”</i>	
Relying on Administrator Support and Guidance	“handling disruptions,” “support with parents,” “office-managed behavior”	<i>“Finally, we had the support when we couldn’t teach anymore.”</i>	<i>“Sometimes they send them back with no consequences.”</i>

The analysis identified four subthemes illustrating teachers’ contributions to school culture. *Embracing Schoolwide Themes* emphasized consistency, shared vision, and the use of common language and routines to reinforce schoolwide values. *Collaborating with Colleagues* highlighted teamwork and sharing strategies to support one another’s classrooms. *Building Classroom Communities* focused on fostering belonging, relationships, and cohesion among students. *Relying on Administrator Support and Guidance* demonstrated how leadership provided resources, handled disruptions, and supported teachers, while noting occasional gaps in follow-through.

Embracing Schoolwide Themes. Teachers described how schoolwide themes and celebrations within PBIS create a sense of unity, motivation, and excitement among both students and staff. These shared experiences not only reinforce behavioral expectations but also

foster community, belonging, and pride in the school environment. Mary highlighted the importance of consistency and collective commitment, noting how the TEAM acronym emphasized collaboration and shared goals:

Especially this year when we're doing the TEAM acronym, we're all in this together. It's about all of us having a plan and knowing that this is what we're pushing. This is our goal and we want everybody to kind of have the same outlook of what a classroom should look and feel like, and we can work together and encourage one another.

Lauren pointed to the engaging activities and recognition practices that made PBIS meaningful for students, especially the songs, chants, and MVP celebrations:

I've loved our songs and chants that we've done to help the kids remember, and the vocabulary words that we have pulled. I love the parties and the concept of all of it. I think it has been really helpful to the kids. They've grabbed on to things like MVP (student of the month), and they love seeing their picture and their name being called.

Claire emphasized the power of themes in creating excitement and buy-in:

I love a good theme, so that's definitely one of my favorite things about the way we implement PBIS in our building. In the past, when our acronym was STAR, I decorated my entire classroom in a Hollywood theme, and my students even had matching t-shirts. I think things like that really help to get students excited and invested. This year, our TEAM theme has also been really fun, from the staff jerseys to the MVPs for student of the month, all of the sports graphics throughout the building, and our ongoing conversations about being a good teammate and a team player. It really encourages them to constantly think about how their behavior affects others, which supports our goal of developing kind, thoughtful citizens.

Together, these perspectives show how PBIS celebrations, themes, and recognition systems build a strong sense of school culture. Teachers emphasized that when students felt part of something bigger, whether through chants, parties, or the TEAM framework, they were more engaged and motivated to meet expectations. These shared experiences reinforced positive behavior while cultivating unity, pride, and a focus on character development.

Collaborating with Colleagues. Teachers emphasized that strong relationships with colleagues were critical for fostering a supportive and collaborative work environment. Building trust and maintaining positive connections helped teams navigate the many demands of teaching while keeping morale high. As Mary explained:

Relationships are also important for me with teammates. Just knowing that you have somebody that you can trust and that you can count on. There's so many things that we have to do as teachers, and I like to be that team player and try to help as much as I can so that it keeps morale boosted.

Some participants described actively supporting colleagues by sharing strategies and modeling positive practices, fostering a culture of collaboration and encouragement. As Morgan shared:

I try to help by encouraging teachers and helping them plan out how they can be proactive. Also, modeling for teachers even in the hallway by proxy. Just having those amazing stories and strategically sharing them in earshot sometimes, and celebrating the small victories with others in hopes that they'll pick up on that too.

Teachers often described collaboration as a valuable aspect of PBIS, noting that colleagues openly exchanged strategies and supported one another's classroom practices. Kate explained her experience with collaboration on the PBIS leadership team, "It was just like this plethora of

knowledge. Everybody had a toolbox of tricks that they could use in their classroom, and I thought our team did a great job of sharing those with each other.”

However, participants also acknowledged that collaboration was not always easy. Differing attitudes toward PBIS sometimes created tension, although these situations occasionally led to positive changes in practice. As Kate reflected:

I will say when some people on the team are negative or don't agree with PBIS, maybe because of past experiences, it can kind of get toxic and you have to figure out what to do in that situation. Other times, it helps with those teachers, because you notice that person not yelling as much or maybe using kid-friendly language in the classroom or more prizes and positive interactions.

This highlights how dissent can take two forms: productive dissent, which can promote reflection and incremental change, versus erosive negativity, which undermines implementation. Leadership responses play a key role in mediating this difference by supporting constructive dialogue and addressing patterns that could otherwise disrupt the school's PBIS climate. In addition to navigating collaboration within teams, participants also noted that differing philosophical views of PBIS sometimes complicated implementation. Hannah explained that not all teachers embraced the framework in the same way:

Some believe in PBIS, while others see it as enabling negative behavior choices. Those teachers will say things like, ‘Well, we didn't have it when we were in school, and we turned out just fine. It's hard not to stop and be candid in those moments about how they may not really be just fine after all.

Overall, participants highlighted that strong relationships and collaboration among colleagues were central to effective PBIS implementation. Teachers described trusting and

supportive connections as essential for maintaining morale, sharing strategies, and modeling positive practices, which fostered a culture of encouragement and collective problem-solving. At the same time, collaboration was not without challenges. Differing attitudes toward PBIS, past experiences, and philosophical disagreements sometimes created tension or moments of negativity within teams. However, participants also noted that these situations could prompt reflection and gradual positive changes in classroom practice. Together, these perspectives illustrate that while teacher collaboration can significantly enhance PBIS implementation, it requires ongoing effort, relationship-building, and adaptability to navigate both supportive and challenging dynamics.

Building Classroom Communities. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of cultivating a strong classroom community, particularly at the start of the school year. They highlighted strategies that fostered connection, engagement, and student ownership, showing that investing time in relationships not only supports learning but also promotes positive behavior. Morgan described the value of intentionally participating in early classroom routines to establish community and model engagement:

It's important to have that time in the beginning of the year to create a classroom community, but also make sure that you are a part of it. We're teachers and we're tired, but those first couple of weeks when you have to eat lunch with your kids, embrace it for what it is. If you have a kid who's assigned reflective laps, walk with them and make the most of that time.

Claire noted that even routines that initially seemed inconvenient could provide valuable opportunities to build relationships:

At first, I was frustrated that we had to keep our students for so long during dismissal this year because I'm used to planning during that time, but I quickly realized I was learning about them on a personal level, and they were getting to know one another better as we filled the time with informal conversations.

Teachers also emphasized that a strong classroom community positively influenced student motivation and behavior. Hannah explained, "Building a classroom community really helps with behavior, because it leads to more intrinsic motivation. They realize they have an important role and they want to do better for their classroom family."

Participants highlighted strategies that gave students a voice and encouraged peer recognition, strengthening a sense of camaraderie. Lauren shared:

Even with students of the month, we do class votes. Whoever gets the most votes wins. That lets you know for sure that students are just as much involved with it as you are, because they see good things that others are doing and want to celebrate them. It also honors their voice and encourages camaraderie.

Across these examples, participants emphasized that building classroom community requires intentional engagement, consistent interaction, and opportunities for student voice. Teachers recognized that investing in relationships early in the year and leveraging everyday routines allowed students to feel valued, develop intrinsic motivation, and strengthen peer connections. Strategies such as shared meals, reflective laps, informal conversations, morning meetings, and class-wide recognition practices helped cultivate a supportive environment where both teachers and students actively contributed to a positive classroom culture.

Administrator Support and Guidance. Participants highlighted the role of administrative support in shaping both teacher experiences and school culture. Teachers

described how administrators' responsiveness, fairness, and follow-through influenced staff morale, classroom management, and perceptions of PBIS implementation. Kate shared how administrators who actively listened and made visible efforts to implement teacher input could positively influence the school culture:

With admin, if you listen to teachers and try to implement what they want, you're never going to make everybody happy. However, if you try to make changes and let them know you're listening, at least they're seeing that you're trying to make those changes to better fit the needs of kids and putting students first. That definitely impacts the culture in a positive way.

Mary also emphasized the importance of feeling supported by administrators when addressing student behavior, noting that trust and follow-through were critical:

Having administrators that you feel like are supporting you, and when you reach out for help with a student you feel like they have your back before the students and aren't making excuses, I definitely feel like that helps. Having those real conversations and feeling like they really get it, and they're going to make sure and follow through with consequences.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that concerns about fairness and consistency could create tension, particularly when expectations were unclear or staff did not feel supported. Mary explained:

We almost sound like the kids sometimes when we are concerned with fairness instead of looking at behavior and individual needs. It's not going to be cookie-cutter or cut and dry. Sometimes teachers expect things to happen when they send kids to get help, and I don't know that they always feel like the admin has their back.

Teachers described how perceived inconsistencies in administrative support could directly impact staff morale and teachers' willingness to enforce classroom expectations. Lauren cautioned:

Sometimes I think it can affect staff morale when teachers feel like administrators are not holding all the kids accountable the same way. It's kind of like nothing's been done about immediate consequences anyway, from home or the office, so why even bother with it in the classroom?

This suggests a spillover effect: when teachers perceive weak administrative follow-through, they may be less willing to consistently enforce expectations, which can lead to classroom-level inconsistencies in behavior management. In contrast, some participants noted that this perception sometimes meant they ended up handling more behaviors directly in the classroom, taking on greater responsibility and added stress to maintain order and support student behavior.

Overall, participants emphasized that administrative support was crucial for fostering a positive school culture and promoting effective PBIS implementation. Teachers appreciated administrators who listened, tried to incorporate teacher input, and consistently followed through on behavioral expectations. Conversely, perceived inconsistencies or lack of support could harm staff morale and make classroom management more challenging. These perspectives highlight that strong, responsive, and transparent administrative practices are vital for maintaining trust, supporting teachers' efforts, and building a culture that prioritizes student needs.

This theme addressed RQ1 and RQ2 by showing how PBIS influenced schoolwide culture. Teachers reported that shared expectations, collaborative practices, and administrative support strengthened cohesion and promoted positive norms. However, they also shared that

challenges occurred when support, consistency, or adherence to discipline policies and procedures faltered. Despite these obstacles, PBIS was perceived as having a meaningful and lasting impact on the school’s overall culture.

Theme 5: Negotiating Professional Identity and Perspectives on Behavior

PBIS shaped teachers’ professional identity by influencing their approach to behavior management, fostering a balance between discipline and grace, promoting reflection on their practice, and extending these strategies to personal interactions and relationships. In the following sections, I illustrate these identity shifts through participants’ language, their stance toward consequences, and examples of how strategies were transferred to parenting or other personal contexts. Table 11 presents subthemes, key codes, and exemplar quotes related to the theme *Negotiating Professional Identity*, highlighting how teachers’ experiences with PBIS influenced their professional beliefs, practices, and growth

.Table 11

Theme 5 Evidence Table

Subtheme	Key Codes	Exemplar Quotes	Counterexample
Evolving Views and Professional Development	“growth,” “learning new strategies,” “shifting mindset”	<i>“Seeing behavior as a puzzle.”</i>	
Balancing Grace and Discipline	“compassion,” “firm boundaries,” “equity”	<i>“We try to save them all, but we’re not miracle workers. Everybody needs discipline.”</i>	
Addressing Student Disengagement	“re-engaging students,” “persistent challenges,” “tailoring approach”	<i>“We have to find the source of the misbehavior and choose an intervention that will help the student be successful.”</i>	
Reflecting on Personal and Professional Growth	“self-awareness,” “seeing behavior differently” “confidence”	<i>“I try to always look for the positives now. You’re not helping anything by just</i>	

Subtheme	Key Codes	Exemplar Quotes	Counterexample
		<i>pointing out what everyone is doing wrong”</i>	

The analysis revealed four subthemes reflecting how teachers navigated their professional identities. *Evolving Views and Professional Development* illustrated teachers’ growth and shifting mindsets, including seeing behavior as a puzzle. *Balancing Grace and Discipline* highlighted efforts to maintain compassion while enforcing firm boundaries and equity. *Addressing Student Disengagement* emphasized strategies to re-engage students and tailor interventions to individual needs. *Reflecting on Personal and Professional Growth* focused on developing self-awareness, confidence, and a positive perspective toward behavior management.

Evolving Views and Professional Development. Teachers described how participation in PBIS training and professional development influenced their understanding of student behavior and classroom management. Through ongoing learning, educators shifted from reactive, consequence-focused approaches to more reflective, proactive, and student-centered practices. They emphasized viewing behavior as a form of communication, seeking to understand the underlying needs or challenges behind student actions, and adjusting strategies to support individual growth. Kate reflected on how her involvement with the PBIS team shaped her understanding of student behavior:

I think the main thing that I learned about and did more research about after becoming part of the PBIS team was that behavior is communication. A kid is not acting this way because they're frustrated with you, or because they're angry with you, or because they don't like school. There's typically something else they're trying to communicate or that they've been through, and I'm trying to get to the why. And so, every kid became like a puzzle. Not that you were trying to fix or that you were trying to solve, but that you were

just trying to figure out, hey, why are they doing this? Or what can I do to help them with this because they're struggling.

This reframing corresponded with changes in practice across cases. Teachers described paying closer attention to what triggered student behaviors, intentionally using regulation time to help students calm and regain focus, and holding restorative conversations that encouraged students to reflect on their actions, consider others' perspectives, and problem-solve ways to improve. Morgan emphasized that effective behavior management extended beyond points or clip systems, highlighting the critical role of relationships and daily routines in supporting student success:

I learned pretty early on that moving a clip or taking a point isn't going to accomplish what you need. That might be the data for your behavior management system, but it all starts with the relationships and how you respond and the things you have in place on a daily basis that set your kids up to be successful. Having procedures and making everything predictable is going to set them up as much as you can. If you're doing your part as an adult, they're going to have an easier time doing their part as the kid.

Lauren highlighted the she had experienced the powerful impact of building positive relationships:

The biggest thing I've gotten out of it (PBIS) is that when students see you care, they will work for you no matter what. It all goes back to the positive relationship. They don't want to get in trouble. The same goes for adults. When I see you liking what I'm doing, talking to me nicely, I want to work harder because you're acknowledging my existence and building relationships with me.

Participants consistently emphasized that PBIS shaped their understanding of student behavior by framing it as a form of communication rather than simply a set of rule violations. Across participants' reflections, PBIS professional development and experiences encouraged teachers to adopt a proactive, reflective, and empathetic approach to behavior, ultimately fostering stronger connections with students and more effective classroom practices.

Balancing Grace and Discipline. Participants reflected on the delicate balance between providing grace and maintaining consistent discipline in the classroom, often describing an inner struggle as they navigated these varying approaches. Teachers expressed the tension between wanting to support and nurture students while also holding them accountable, recognizing that both elements are essential for fostering self-regulation and positive behavior. One strategy that exemplifies this balance, “conversation first, natural consequence second” appeared in several classroom examples, where teachers first engaged students in reflection or discussion before applying a consequence. Students were often involved in selecting the consequence, making it more meaningful and reinforcing their sense of responsibility and ownership over their behavior. Kate noted that addressing behavior sometimes requires direct conversations instead of consequences:

Sometimes we just need to talk about it. It may not be that you miss any of your recess or that you're not going to the next behavior celebration or whatever, but we just need to work through it. We're also not going to get a toy or ring pop or bag of Doritos and then get to do what everyone else is doing.

Claire reflected on the challenge of providing grace while preparing students for future classroom environments:

I offer so much grace in my classroom that sometimes I worry it could be too much. I know my focus on strong relationships and the way I run my classroom helps difficult students be successful, but it's hard to tell if I'm setting them up for success when they leave me. What if the next teacher isn't as understanding or doesn't model the respect they want to receive? How is that student going to respond to them? Have I given them the tools they need to be successful in those situations?

Grace emphasized the need for discipline to have meaningful consequences, recognizing that strong guidance in early grades could prevent long-term negative outcomes:

I think about some of the kids we've taught that we've seen in different newspapers and websites that have gone to the big house already. We couldn't save them all. We're not miracle workers, but it needs to start in the lower grades. Everybody needs to discipline, and I think discipline needs to be changed. Not that we need to bring back the paddle or anything like that. I'm just saying it needs to sting. It needs to sting here and it needs to sting at home.

Hannah highlighted that discipline should be consistent and emotionally neutral, ensuring fairness and reinforcing positive choices. She articulated, "I think we have to be careful when it comes to grace. We need to have consistent consequences and make discipline non-emotional instead of putting our feelings into it."

Lauren also noted that restoring accountability, both in schools and society, was essential for effective classroom management and teacher retention:

I feel like we've gotten away from natural consequences and holding everyone accountable. Even as a society, not just our school. It's happening all around us, and at

some point, we have to take it back if we want education to turn around. The majority of reasons why teachers leave is because they can't control their classrooms.

Addressing Student Disengagement. Participants identified reaching students who repeatedly exhibit challenging behaviors as one of the most significant obstacles in implementing PBIS effectively. Teachers described the difficulties of engaging these students, maintaining consistency, and sustaining their own motivation to continue. This highlights the ongoing effort and commitment required to promote positive behavior in the classroom. Grace shared her frustration with the fact that certain students consistently appear on behavior intervention or non-attendee lists for celebrations: "We're still trying to reach those same kids that keep showing up on the list every year."

Teachers also described their efforts to recognize those demonstrating positive behaviors in hopes that it would encourage others to make similar choices. Lauren shared:

It's hard when you have more behavior issues in your classroom. You really try to focus on the positive behaviors of those other students to try to get them on board. If there's so many of them, and they don't get on board, it makes it very trying.

Participants also reflected on the motivational challenges posed by students who were resistant to PBIS strategies. Claire noted that attention-seeking behaviors often undermined efforts:

I would say one of the biggest challenges is trying to reach the students who just don't want any part of PBIS. They don't seem to care about the rewards, big or small, and they don't really care about the consequences either. They like the attention from their peers when they act out, so that feels like a reward to them. Walking in every day and

committing to trying again or trying something new is really hard sometimes when you just want to be like, ‘get it together’ or just give up on the positive and go another route.

Some teachers emphasized the need for specific interventions for challenging students. Mary shared how structured behavior plans and consistent accountability were used to address persistent negative behaviors.

There are just students who seem to not care whether they’re making the right choice or not. Being able to truly hold them accountable for negative behaviors is another struggle that I feel we have sometimes. Typically, we have to work out a behavior plan and try to see if we can find something that is motivating, some kind of incentive, and be consistent about holding them accountable for whatever the expectation is that they’re working on specifically.

Reflecting on Personal and Professional Growth. Teachers described how ongoing engagement with PBIS not only shaped their classroom practices but also influenced their personal and professional growth over time. They reflected on how their views of student behavior evolved as they gained experience, shifting from a focus on managing misbehavior to understanding underlying needs and reinforcing positive choices. This growth also extended beyond the classroom, as several teachers noted applying PBIS principles in their personal lives, such as intentionally pointing out positive behaviors at home and focusing on strengths rather than shortcomings with their children and spouses. Kate emphasized the importance of acknowledging each student’s unique strengths, particularly for those who did not fit conventional expectations:

When you have a kid, who doesn’t necessarily fit in the box and he’s not a neurotypical kind of guy, you have to find ways to make them see their positives and make sure you

let them know you see what they're doing well academically, socially, and behaviorally because they're told all the time in other places what they're not doing correctly. That insight made me carry it over into the classroom. You may not be the best reader in the class, but look at all these things you can do. It's there for every kid, and good teachers don't have to look hard to find it.

Sarah reflected on how consistently recognizing positive behaviors at school influenced her perspective as a parent:

I think it's easy to focus on the negative things, and I think it helped me grow as a mother and a teacher to see those positive things pointed out all the time at school. I started thinking about it as a mother, and reflecting on how I can so easily point out to my own children the things they're not doing wrong instead of the good things they are doing. I thought I was helping them make the right choice, but I should have been pointing out the right things all the time and just helping them grow in the areas they needed to.

Morgan shared a powerful story about how her own experience as a mom of an average, often over-looked student has impacted her efforts as a teacher:

My own personal child is that kid who isn't going to get in trouble, but he's also not going to stand out for his amazing behavior. He's not the teacher pleaser. He's going to do exactly what's expected, but he's a boy, so he's not perfect. Sometimes he will be like, 'I don't have my points. I'm not a good kid. I'm not a good student.' He thinks he's on Santa's naughty list because he hasn't gotten a team ticket yet. When students start viewing themselves as good or bad based on these standards, I have a problem with that. We're communicating that they didn't get a point or reward because we didn't see them, which is a separate issue. I notice it more in my own classroom now, so I make sure to

find a way to do as many group rewards as possible so everybody feels seen and validated.

This theme addressed RQ1 and RQ2 by showing that PBIS influenced teacher identity, prompting personal reflections, professional growth, and more balanced approaches to behavior management. While some students remained disengaged, the framework encouraged teachers to recognize their own strengths and areas for improvement, navigate professional challenges, and refine their strategies with greater confidence, self-awareness, and insight into both classroom and personal interactions.

Across themes, teachers emphasized that relationships served as the central thread in their PBIS experiences, shaping both engagement and behavior outcomes. Autonomy and fairness served as key mediators, influencing how teachers interpreted and applied PBIS strategies, navigated tensions around consistency, and balanced grace with accountability. Proactive instruction and shared language served as the primary mechanisms, providing concrete tools such as pre-corrections, visual schedules, and behavior matrices, which enabled teachers to guide student behavior and promote reflection. The administrative climate created a significant contextual backdrop, as perceptions of leadership support, follow-through, and responsiveness had a substantial impact on teacher motivation, fidelity, and willingness to consistently implement strategies. Over time, these factors led to notable shifts in professional identity, with teachers describing increased reflection on their practice, a reframing of behavior as communication, and the extension of PBIS principles to personal interactions and relationships. Together, these findings showed how the interplay of relational focus, structural supports, and context influenced both the benefits and challenges of PBIS implementation, directly addressing

RQ1 and RQ2. In Chapter 5, I interpret these findings in light of existing literature and explore their implications for practice, policy, and ongoing professional development.

Chapter Summary

Across the five themes, participants' voices revealed the complexity of implementing PBIS in a sustained and meaningful way. Teachers described how nurturing relationships and using positive reinforcement (Theme 1) lay the foundation for engagement, while also acknowledging the tensions and challenges that come with balancing autonomy, fairness, accountability, and motivation (Theme 2). They shared how PBIS practices inform instruction, not only through proactive strategies and common language, but also by encouraging reflection and reinforcing positive behaviors (Theme 3). Teachers further emphasized how the framework has shaped their broader school culture, strengthening collaboration, consistency, and support from colleagues and administrators (Theme 4). Finally, they reflected on their evolving professional identities, highlighting the ways PBIS has reshaped their perspectives on behavior management, compassion, and growth as educators (Theme 5).

Collectively, these themes address the study's research questions by illuminating how teachers perceive, experience, and implement PBIS in their classrooms and within the school community. The findings underscored three key takeaways: (1) the central role of relationships in shaping student engagement, (2) the importance of consistency and collaboration for sustaining PBIS practices, and (3) the ongoing process of teacher reflection and identity development in navigating challenges. Importantly, teachers stressed that meaningful implementation required regular adaptation of practices and procedures to fit the needs of students and staff, calling for deeper reflection and responsiveness rather than reliance on a checklist approach. These insights provide the foundation for the next chapter, where the

findings are interpreted in relation to the existing literature and considered for their implications on practice, policy, and future research.

Chapter V

Discussion

This basic interpretive qualitative study aimed to explore elementary school teachers' perceptions and experiences with implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in a rural southeastern Georgia elementary school. Although PBIS is widely recognized as a schoolwide framework designed to promote positive student behavior, decrease office discipline referrals, and improve school climate, less is known about how teachers who have used the framework for several years view its impact on their professional practice and identity. Understanding these perspectives is essential for guiding future implementation efforts, supporting teachers' professional growth, and enhancing the sustainability of PBIS initiatives.

The study was guided by two research questions: (1) How do teachers make sense of the benefits and challenges they encounter in sustaining PBIS practices? and (2) How do teachers describe the influence of PBIS on their instructional practices, school culture, and professional identity over time? Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with a purposeful sample of elementary teachers who had been engaged in PBIS practices within the school for several years. Participant responses were analyzed using inductive coding and reflexive thematic analysis, supported by reflexive journaling, member checking, and peer debriefing to enhance credibility and trustworthiness.

Findings revealed that PBIS shaped teachers' professional practices in ways that extended beyond behavior management. Teachers emphasized the value of nurturing

relationships with students, balancing tensions and challenges associated with implementation, and using PBIS strategies to inform and refine instruction. The framework was also described as shaping the overall school culture, while simultaneously prompting teachers to reflect on and negotiate aspects of their professional identity. Although participants acknowledged challenges, such as inconsistent implementation across staff and varying levels of student responsiveness, most described PBIS as a tool that provided structure, consistency, and opportunities for personal growth as educators.

This study contributes to the existing literature by illustrating ways teachers engage with PBIS implementation in their daily practice. Instead of relying solely on broad perceptions or survey results, the data provide detailed insights into how teachers experience PBIS and interpret those experiences. The findings also demonstrate how educators adapt the framework to meet the needs of both teachers and students in their schools. Specifically, this study emphasizes the connections between behavior frameworks, teaching practices, and teacher identity, offering important implications for future research and practical application.

Themes

Before conducting a detailed interpretation of the findings, it is helpful to outline how the themes were constructed to address the study's research questions and how they relate to the study's theoretical framework. Table 12 below presents a framework linking each theme to the relevant research question it primarily addresses. While some themes were specific to a single question, others overlapped across research questions, highlighting the interconnectedness of teachers' experiences with PBIS implementation and its impact on instructional practice, professional identity, and school culture. For example, the theme of nurturing relationships aligns with interpretivism, which emphasizes that knowledge and understanding are co-constructed

through social interaction, reflection, and collaboration between teachers and students. The theory of behaviorism is also addressed through participants’ use of positive reinforcement and consequences to improve behavior outcomes. Similarly, the theme of shared autonomy aligns with implementation science, which highlights how contextual factors, professional judgment, and adaptive strategies influence the fidelity, sustainability, and effectiveness of PBIS implementation in school settings. This framework sets the stage for the following discussion, illustrating how each theme contributes to answering the core questions that guided this study while grounding the findings in theories of behaviorism, interpretivism, and implementation science.

Table 12

Crosswalk of Themes and Research Questions

Theme	Subthemes	Research Questions (RQ)
Theme 1: Nurturing Relationships to Support Positive Outcomes	Building Trust and Connection	RQ 1: Benefits
	Leveraging Positive Reinforcement	RQ 2: Influence on Instructional Practices and School Culture
	Fostering Student Engagement and Investment	
	Minimizing Negative Interactions	
Theme 2: Balancing Tensions and Challenges in PBIS Implementation	Navigating Shared Autonomy	RQ 1: Challenges
	Acknowledging All Students	RQ 2: Influence on Instructional Practices, School Culture, and Professional Identity
	Maintaining Accountability and Consequences	
	Sustaining Teacher Motivation	

Theme 3: Informing Instruction Through PBIS Practices	Promoting Student Reflection	RQ 1: Benefits
	Using Common Language and Expectations	RQ 2: Influence on Instructional Practices
	Applying Proactive Versus Reactive Approaches	
	Modeling and Teaching Social-Emotional Skills	
Theme 4: Shaping School Culture	Embracing Schoolwide Themes	RQ 1: Benefits and Challenges
	Collaborating with Colleagues	RQ 2: Influence on School Culture
	Building Classroom Communities	
	Relying on Administrator Support and Guidance	
Theme 5: Negotiating Professional Identity and Perspectives on Behavior	Evolving Views and Professional Development	RQ 1: Benefits and Challenges
	Balancing Grace and Discipline	RQ 2: Influence on Professional Identity
	Addressing Student Disengagement	
	Reflecting on Personal and Professional Growth	

Theme 1: Nurturing Relationships to Support Positive Outcomes

A central finding of this study highlighted the pivotal role of nurturing relationships in supporting positive outcomes for students and teachers within the PBIS framework. Teachers in this study consistently described trust, care, and authentic connections as essential to their practice, reinforcing prior research that emphasizes the relational dimensions of PBIS implementation (Ascetta, 2021; Ashley, 2015; Marion, 2024). Research has shown that when

teachers build strong relationships, students experience greater engagement, improved behavior, and enhanced academic outcomes (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Pinnock, 2020). Moreover, scholars argue that effective implementation of PBIS is strengthened by relational trust, which enables teachers to balance structured expectations with responsive, student-centered approaches (Ascetta, 2021; Pinnock, 2020; Roberts-Clawson, 2017). The findings from this study extended this literature by illustrating how relationship-building not only supported PBIS fidelity but also provided a foundation for teachers' professional identity and classroom management strategies.

This theme relates to Research Question 1 by showing how teachers interpreted the benefits and challenges of PBIS implementation in fostering positive teacher–student relationships, and to Research Question 2 by demonstrating how teachers managed relationship-building as part of their ongoing practice. These relational practices also influenced teachers' evolving professional identities as they reflected on balancing care, consistency, and modeling desired behaviors in their roles. PBIS thus impacted interactions with students, parents, and colleagues, as well as teachers' understanding of themselves as reflective, relational professionals.

Building Trust and Connection. Teachers at Azalea Springs Elementary emphasized that authentic trust and connection formed the foundation for PBIS implementation. Sarah shared her experience with her son's teachers at her current school, "The teachers that called and said positive things first before they told me negative things... it softens your heart and makes you feel like they really care about your child." This, and similar findings, align with prior research, which indicates that teacher–student and family connections support engagement and promote meaningful behavior change (Ash et al., 2024; Sugai & Horner, 2020). Recent studies also highlight that teachers perceive building relational trust as an essential part of the PBIS

framework (Ascetta, 2021; Marion, 2024; Pinnock, 2020). At Azalea Springs, teachers utilized informal moments, such as during lunch, recess, and classroom transitions, to foster stronger relationships with students. They shared how conversations about their weekend plans, sports schedules, and hobbies allowed them to gain insight into students' interests and lives outside of the classroom, fostering trust, rapport, and a sense of being valued and understood.

Leveraging Positive Reinforcement. Participants described positive reinforcement as an effective tool for promoting a supportive classroom environment. Grace explained, "I'm going to go over to a student who's doing the right thing and really praise that. Typically, the others will follow and do what they're supposed to." She mentioned that she preferred celebrating students who were doing the right thing rather than pointing out those who did not. Overall, participants saw consistent positive reinforcement to encourage positive behavior, collaboration, and a sense of belonging, aligning with research showing that PBIS recognition systems boost motivation and behavior when used fairly (Petrasek et al., 2022; Sugai & Horner, 2020). Several teachers also emphasized the importance of balancing tangible rewards with verbal praise to foster intrinsic motivation. Additionally, each participant seemed to have different systems for rewarding students, such as candy, free time, or privileges. Research suggests that reinforcement is most effective when tailored to the specific context; educators appreciate flexibility in delivering praise and rewards, while students report greater motivation when these reinforcements are personalized to their interests (Lourenco, 2021; Petrasek et al., 2022).

Fostering Student Engagement and Investment. Teachers described purposeful practices to boost student engagement, often going beyond standard behavior expectations to include students' interests and voices. Sarah described how she approached prizes and incentives in her classroom to encourage student engagement: "Each year, I try to have really cool prizes

and things that they're interested in to use as a positive reinforcement." Participants also utilized chants, songs, and student-centered routines to foster inclusive learning environments, such as having students lead morning meetings, design classroom reward systems, or select discussion topics. They also mentioned that students with behavior challenges were often invited to help plan school-wide celebrations, design bulletin boards, or suggest ideas for classroom incentives in hopes of increasing ownership and involvement. Additionally, several teachers also shared that students in their classrooms were encouraged to vote for personalized rewards, such as "Student of the Month." This aligns with research indicating that PBIS can enhance student engagement when combined with instructional strategies that make learning more meaningful (MacSuga-Gage et al., 2012; Ryan & Baker, 2019; Tucker et al., 2022). Similarly, studies on teacher perceptions suggest that PBIS is most effective when it actively involves students in reinforcing expectations and promotes shared ownership of the classroom culture (Zolkowski, 2024).

Minimizing Negative Interactions. Finally, teachers emphasized that nurturing relationships helped minimize punitive approaches and reduce negative interactions with students. Claire described one student with significant behavioral challenges, explaining how patience, consistent check-ins, and individualized supports, such as providing structured choices, offering verbal encouragement, and allowing short movement breaks, gradually built trust and improved outcomes. Other teachers shared similar strategies, including holding brief one-on-one conversations during recess, using calm redirection during transitions, and offering positive reinforcement immediately following expected behaviors to prevent escalation. Such narratives align with research demonstrating that PBIS reduces exclusionary discipline and fosters proactive, positive teacher responses (Horner et al., 2017; Center on PBIS, 2025a). Teacher perception studies further confirm that educators value PBIS for providing alternatives to

reactive discipline, though they also note that administrative support, ongoing coaching, and collaborative problem-solving are critical to sustaining these practices (Scott, 2018; Sterling, 2024; Stewart, 2024).

Theme 2: Balancing Tensions and Challenges in PBIS Implementation

While PBIS frameworks provided clear guidance and structured expectations, teachers at Azalea Springs Elementary highlighted that implementing these practices in real classrooms often involved navigating tensions and challenges. Prior studies confirm that while PBIS can improve school climate and behavioral outcomes, the structured nature of the framework may at times conflict with the complexities of classroom life and diverse student needs (Horner et al., 2017; Macsuga-Gage et al., 2012). Teachers in this study described these challenges as balancing shared autonomy, ensuring equitable acknowledgement, maintaining accountability, and sustaining motivation over time, echoing research that emphasizes the importance of teacher judgment and adaptation for successful PBIS implementation (McIntosh et al., 2014). These findings illustrate how tensions emerge between the fidelity of implementation and the responsiveness required in day-to-day teaching, a dynamic also identified in implementation science literature (Fixsen et al., 2005; Sugai & Horner, 2020).

This theme connects to Research Question 1 by highlighting how teachers interpret and make sense of the obstacles and complexities of PBIS implementation. It aligns with Research Question 2 by showing how teachers responded to these tensions, adapting strategies to fit the realities of their classrooms. Through this process, teachers not only navigated practical challenges but also developed a deeper understanding of their professional identity as problem-solvers and reflective practitioners who balance fidelity with flexibility.

Navigating Shared Autonomy. Participants emphasized the importance of adapting their behavior management strategies to better meet the needs of their students. They also valued having the autonomy and support from administration to determine consequences and to make final decisions about students' participation in schoolwide behavior celebrations. Morgan reflected on how she perceived these experiences: "I appreciate administrators giving us the professional discretion and authority to make decisions for our kids that we know are right." While nearly all participants mentioned the need for autonomy, some also highlighted the tensions that could develop between staff members when students were not all being held to the same standard. Lauren described how she felt after choosing not to send some of her students to a behavior celebration and watching students from other classes attend, whom she did not necessarily think deserved to go: "I just think it made me feel like I was the bad guy." This aligns with prior research suggesting that teacher judgment and adaptations are critical for contextual relevance, even when they create tensions with system-wide consistency (McIntosh et al., 2014; Molloy et al., 2013; Scaletta & Tejero Hughes, 2020). Effective PBIS implementation requires supporting teacher autonomy while ensuring that adaptations remain aligned with evidence-based practices (Sugai & Horner, 2020).

Acknowledging All Students. Teachers described the challenge of making sure all students felt recognized for their efforts and successes, especially those who do not naturally stand out for exceptional choices or often show negative behaviors. Several participants also mentioned that students with behavior plans often received significantly more attention and rewards as teachers and administrators worked to promote positive behavior and support student goal-setting and reflection. Some even warned that other students in their classes started to show negative behaviors because they wanted to join small groups or use the incentive charts that their

classmates with behavior plans used. Kate shared her frustration with how students interpreted these processes: “I don’t think it send the right message to the who had the undesired behavior, and I definitely don’t think it sends the right message to the kid doing the right thing.”

Additionally, others said they struggled with inconsistent recognition during busy seasons or days filled with hectic and chaotic schedules. Digital systems like Class Dojo also posed a challenge for some participants because they did not want to interrupt their instruction to give students points on the platform. Research shows that inconsistent recognition can weaken motivation and engagement, highlighting the need for deliberate and inclusive strategies to acknowledge student progress (Petrasek et al., 2022; Ryan & Baker, 2019). These findings also reveal a unique challenge for educators that should be explored more, as several participants reported feeling torn between increasing recognition to influence behavior change and focusing their attention on students who consistently do the right thing, in hopes that it will encourage others to follow suit.

Maintaining Accountability and Consequences. Teachers discussed the challenge of balancing fairness and consistency while holding students accountable. Sarah reflected, “The positive reinforcement is great, but if there’s no consequences, they have the same repeated offenses.” Other participants echoed this tension, noting that while they wanted to avoid punitive practices, they also needed clear structures to prevent repeated disruptions. For example, one teacher explained how she used reflection sheets and follow-up conferences after repeated off-task behavior so students could understand their choices and plan for improvement. Another described using restorative conversations to address conflicts between peers, encouraging students to express the impact of their actions and suggest solutions. Others mentioned tiered approaches, such as loss of classroom privileges followed by opportunities to “earn back” trust

through positive contributions, or inviting students who struggled to take on leadership roles in classroom routines as a form of accountability combined with support. Research shows that maintaining consistent consequences while keeping relational trust intact is vital for effective PBIS implementation (Molloy et al., 2013; Simonsen & Myers, 2015; Sugai & Horner, 2020). Recent teacher perception studies also highlight that educators are attentive to how accountability measures influence student engagement, emphasizing that consequences should be applied in ways that feel fair, transparent, and supportive to all students (Salinas-Cavazos, 2020; Scott, 2018; Sterling, 2024).

Sustaining Teacher Motivation. Teachers discussed the ongoing challenge of maintaining motivation to implement PBIS consistently throughout the school year. While some aspects of decreasing motivation were linked to busy schedules and extra duties, participants also shared that their motivation was influenced by overall classroom behavior, interactions with colleagues, limited administrative support, and little interest from students with significant behavior challenges. Grace explained, “Sometimes I just give up and handle things in my classroom because I feel like nothing will change if I send that student out anyway.” Research shows that teacher buy-in and ongoing motivation are crucial for the long-term success of PBIS practices (Matthews et al., 2014; Macsuga-Gage et al., 2012). More recent studies of teacher perceptions also reveal that administrative support, collaborative planning, and recognizing teachers’ efforts boost motivation and lower burnout, which, in turn, helps ensure consistent implementation of behavioral frameworks (Salinas-Cavazos, 2020; Scaletta & Tejero Hughes, 2020; Scott, 2018; Sterling, 2024; Stewart, 2024). However, further research is needed to examine how teacher motivation fluctuates across different school contexts and grade levels, and to identify strategies that most effectively sustain long-term engagement with PBIS practices.

Theme 3: Informing Instruction Through PBIS Practices

Teachers at Azalea Springs Elementary described ways PBIS informed instructional practices, helping them make intentional decisions about classroom management and student learning. By promoting reflection, using consistent language, emphasizing proactive strategies, and modeling social-emotional skills, PBIS extended beyond behavior management into daily teaching practices. The subthemes connect to research demonstrating that PBIS is not just a behavior framework but can inform pedagogy (McIntosh et al., 2014). Embedding behavioral expectations into instruction supports both social-emotional development and academic engagement.

This theme aligns with Research Question 1 by demonstrating how teachers made meaning of PBIS as influencing both behavior and instructional practices, weighing the benefits and limitations of integrating the framework into daily teaching. It also connects to Research Question 2 by showing how teachers applied these insights to guide instruction, linking behavioral expectations with academic engagement. In doing so, PBIS contributed to teachers' evolving professional identities as adaptive educators who intentionally connect instructional strategies with relational and behavioral supports.

Promoting Student Reflection. Teachers highlighted that reflection opportunities helped students internalize expectations and link behavior with learning. For example, Hannah explained the importance of giving students time to process their feelings: "Students need the opportunity to sit in their emotions when they have not performed at the expected level. Too often, we rush in to save them before they can reflect on how to improve next time." Likewise, Claire shared that her class held end-of-day check-ins where students rated themselves on following the school's PBIS expectations, which she found fostered honesty and accountability.

Participants also mentioned integrating student reflection into interventions like behavior contracts and check-in/check-out. Regular reflection and goal-setting were among the most frequently cited strategies for helping students with behavior challenges succeed, and they played a key role in social-emotional learning related to self-awareness and self-management skills. Lastly, students were encouraged to reflect on past experiences with PBIS practices and procedures through the student advisory committee. This feedback was used to modify efforts based on student needs and interests.

Research shows that reflective practices encourage student engagement and self-regulation, supporting both behavioral and academic results (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Macsuga-Gage et al., 2012; Tucker et al., 2022). Teacher perception studies also indicate that educators see reflection as boosting student ownership of behavior and strengthening teacher–student relationships (Madden, 2025; Petrasek et al., 2022; Zagona et al., 2025). By integrating reflection into daily routines, teachers reinforced PBIS principles while providing students with opportunities to actively reflect, unpack, and modify their behavior.

Using Common Language and Expectations. Participants described the importance of consistency in language and expectations across classrooms to reinforce student understanding and compliance. Claire explained,

It really helps to be able to tie everything back to specific traits. If I want students to be trustworthy, then I'm going to phrase my pre-corrects and feedback that way. "Be trustworthy with your Chromebook by staying on the right website," or "Thank you for being trustworthy in the hall. You went straight to your destination."

Research indicates that a common language and consistent expectations enhance student engagement and reduce behavioral disruptions (Macsuga-Gage et al., 2012; McIntosh et al.,

2014). However, participants shared that common expectations could often be a sticking point among staff members. For example, the hallway expectation is that everyone travels on a level zero. However, some teachers may have a higher tolerance for hallway chatter or may choose not to address it. This could frustrate those who feel the noise distracts their students or others who believe that seeing other noisy classes causes their students to feel like the expectation is not worth following.

Recent studies of teacher perceptions also show that clear, schoolwide expectations boost teachers' confidence in implementation and make students feel safe and supported (Michael et al., 2023; Petrusek et al., 2022). However, maintaining a consistent use of common language and expectations has also been identified as a weakness, causing frustration for many teachers in schools that implement PBIS (McDaniel et al., 2017; Scott, 2018; Stewart, 2024). Nonetheless, recent research has connected the consistent use of shared expectations to student engagement and overall success with the PBIS framework (Lawrence et al., 2022; McDaniel et al., 2017; Stewart, 2024). Therefore, more research is needed to explore how school teams develop processes and procedures to support the consistent use of common language and expectations among staff.

Applying Proactive Versus Reactive Approaches. Teachers described actively teaching desired behaviors and preventing misbehavior instead of only responding to infractions. Mary noted, "Before I start centers, I'm going to go over what our behavior should look like during centers and have students show examples and non-examples." Participants also mentioned using proactive strategies, such as greeting students at the door each morning and during transitions, offering precorrections to guide students on what they should not do before a new activity begins, teaching and reviewing routines and procedures daily, and creating processes and

procedures that support students' needs and reduce distractions. Several teachers also said that proximity was key to maintaining structure in the classroom and during transitions. They described standing in specific spots in line and positioning themselves near certain students as ways to increase accountability and encourage good choices.

Research indicates that proactive approaches reduce negative behaviors and increase instructional time, aligning with core PBIS principles (Horner et al., 2017; Tucker et al., 2022). Anticipating challenges and developing strategies for avoiding negative behaviors also increases the likelihood of positive interactions among students and staff, which helps with fostering meaningful relationships. Limiting negative interactions through proactive approaches also provides the conditions for a positive school climate (Lawrence et al., 2022). Teacher perception studies confirm that educators value proactive strategies for maintaining classroom flow and enhancing student engagement, noting that reactive approaches can undermine both relationships and learning (Scaletta & Tejero Hughes, 2020). Additionally, many educators believe that pre-teaching expectations and providing individualized behavior supports help to limit reactive discipline, which in turn reduces the likelihood of exclusion of students with behavior challenges (Zagona et al., 2025).

Teaching and Modeling Social-Emotional Skills. Participants highlighted the integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) into PBIS, emphasizing modeling of self-regulation, empathy, and perspective-taking. Claire shared, "I don't just tell them 'use kind words.' Instead, I model asking for help, admitting my mistakes, and calming myself down when I get frustrated so they see what that looks like in real time." Participants shared that SEL became a big focus of their PBIS team's efforts after COVID, because they realized that many students needed additional support with their emotions once everyone returned to the school

building. They developed lessons for teachers to include in their morning meetings, created Zones of Regulation posters, and participated in relationship-mapping activities to ensure that every student in the building had at least one trusted adult to whom they could turn in a time of need. Although initial efforts were successful, SEL eventually took a backseat to new learning standards and competing initiatives. While several teachers reported integrating SEL into daily lessons and activities, others mentioned that they are only able to incorporate it into a brief morning meeting block.

Research shows that embedding SEL within PBIS frameworks supports prosocial behavior, emotional regulation, and positive school climate (Lawrence et al., 2022; Petrusek et al., 2022). Recent teacher perception studies suggest that modeling SEL enhances student understanding and engagement while reinforcing relational trust (Michael et al., 2023). Teachers have also reported that regularly teaching and modeling SEL skills is essential to the success of students with significant behavioral challenges (Sterling, 2024; Zagona et al., 2025). However, further research is needed to explore how schools can create time within their schedules for explicit SEL instruction alongside academic demands.

Theme 4: Shaping School Culture

Teachers at Azalea Springs Elementary emphasized that PBIS not only shaped student behavior but also influenced the broader school culture. Participants described a climate that increasingly valued collaboration, shared expectations, and a sense of community, all reinforced through consistent administrator support. This finding reflects research showing that PBIS can positively impact school-wide climate by fostering consistency, improving relationships, and promoting shared responsibility among staff (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Horner et al., 2017).

Scholars further note that a supportive culture is both a driver and an outcome of PBIS

implementation, as strong school culture enhances teacher morale, collective efficacy, and commitment to sustaining practices (McIntosh et al., 2014; Macsuga-Gage et al., 2012). Additionally, ongoing professional development, shared leadership, administrator support and enforcement of expectations have all been identified as critical factors in cultivating a positive culture and ensuring fidelity of implementation (Scaletta & Tejero Hughes, 2020; Sugai & Horner, 2020). The findings from this study align with and extend this literature by illustrating how PBIS practices became embedded into the fabric of school culture, reinforcing both professional collaboration and student engagement.

This theme addresses Research Question 1 by showing how teachers interpreted the broader impact of PBIS on school culture, reflecting on both its benefits and the challenges of establishing consistent, shared practices across staff. It relates to Research Question 2 by illustrating how teachers engaged with and contributed to this collective culture, which in turn shaped their instructional practices and professional identity. Teachers described how PBIS fostered collaboration, consistency, and shared language, reinforcing their sense of belonging and responsibility as part of a unified professional community.

Embracing Schoolwide Themes. Teachers explained how PBIS has helped establish shared values and expectations that shape their daily routines. Hannah said, “Everything ties back to, ‘are you helping your TEAM?’” Participants observed that their revamped schoolwide theme had inspired team jerseys, banners, and visuals related to sports, with morning meetings now called TEAM huddles. Students earned TEAM tickets for positive behavior and recognized as students of the month during MVP ceremonies. Teachers noted that these initiatives strengthen school culture by promoting unity and shared goals, making expectations clear and meaningful. Engagement increased as teachers collaborated to promote consistent language,

routines, and rewards. Students felt motivated and connected through recognition and activities centered on sports, which they enjoyed beyond school. This unified approach fosters a positive, inclusive environment where students and staff feel a stronger sense of belonging and commitment to the school community.

Research shows that clear, concise schoolwide frameworks, often backed by themes, enhance consistency, foster collective efficacy, and boost student outcomes (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Horner et al., 2017). Staff in PBIS schools consider these frameworks and themes vital for promoting unity and collective efficacy among staff, as well as increasing student buy-in and motivation (Lawrence et al., 2022; McDaniel et al., 2017; Petrusek et al., 2022; Sterling, 2024). Teachers noted that consistent language, routines, and expectations across classrooms help students understand what is expected, reduce confusion, and strengthen school culture. Themes and shared frameworks also create a common vision that guides teacher decisions, supports collaboration on interventions, and enables staff to consistently reinforce behaviors. Moreover, research indicates that schoolwide recognition systems aligned with these themes further boost student engagement and foster community, demonstrating the importance of coordinated efforts in maintaining behavioral and academic success (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Horner et al., 2017; Petrusek et al., 2022).

Collaborating with Colleagues. Teachers at Azalea Springs Elementary emphasized the importance of collaboration in reinforcing expectations, sharing strategies, and encouraging one another through difficult situations. At the school, grade-level teams regularly met to discuss challenges with specific students, review behavioral data, share past experiences, and develop coordinated interventions. Sarah shared, “We plan together, share what’s working, and encourage one another. It feels like we’re all on the same team for the kids.” The school’s PBIS

leadership team also met monthly to discuss schoolwide behavior data, address student and teacher needs, and plan quarterly behavior celebrations. Current and former team members expressed that the meetings were both informative and centered on problem-solving, yet always began with a fun and inspiring welcome related to national observance days, such as National Have a Coke Day. This collaborative approach not only ensured consistency in expectations but also fostered a sense of unity and shared responsibility among staff.

Research highlights that collaboration enhances PBIS implementation, increases teacher satisfaction, and strengthens professional learning communities (McIntosh et al., 2014; Lawrence et al., 2022; Macsuga-Gage et al., 2012). Additional studies have indicated that meaningful collaboration also leads to increased confidence and a sense of shared accountability, which helps to sustain motivation and consistency in PBIS practices (Lawrence et al., 2022; Michael et al., 2023; Sterling, 2024; Stewart, 2024).

Building Classroom Communities. Teachers reported that PBIS encouraged a sense of community within classrooms, fostering a sense of belonging, trust, and shared responsibility among students. Sarah described, “It gives me such a fun way to pump up what goodness comes from being kind... telling them to think about empathy... thinking about how the way you behave affects others.” Participants shared that classroom routines, positive reinforcement, and collaborative activities helped students develop ownership over their behavior and encouraged peer support. For example, students worked together on classroom jobs, participated in group problem-solving tasks, and worked together to earn group rewards for reaching academic and behavioral goals. While the school’s master schedule included a time for daily class meetings, six teachers shared that they intentionally focused on community-building throughout their

instructional day, always pointing back to the schoolwide expectations and monthly character traits.

Research shows that strong classroom communities improve engagement, social-emotional development, and behavioral outcomes (Ashley, 2015; Berg, 2021; Brunson, 2023). Recent studies also suggest that when teachers perceive their classrooms as supportive and inclusive, PBIS strategies are more effective, and students are more likely to internalize behavioral expectations (Michael et al., 2023; Scott, 2018; Sterling, 2024; Zagona et al., 2025). By creating environments where students feel valued and responsible for one another, teachers can reinforce prosocial behaviors, strengthen relational trust, and cultivate a positive classroom climate that supports both learning and behavioral growth, thus supporting PBIS fidelity and sustainability.

Relying on Administrator Support and Guidance. Participants emphasized the crucial role of consistent administrative support in maintaining PBIS and promoting a positive school culture. At Azalea Springs, administrators are regularly engaged in discussions about student behavior and classroom procedures. They also attend monthly PBIS meetings, where they help interpret schoolwide data and provide insights and expertise from their perspective. Claire expressed the importance of administrator support: “It’s so important to have administrators who have your back. They may not walk in and save the day every time, but they’re willing to listen and develop strategies to help with difficult behaviors.” Research shows that administrative involvement is vital for fidelity, schoolwide alignment, and staff morale (McDaniel et al., 2017; Michael et al., 2023; Sterling, 2024; Sugai & Horner, 2020). While most participants expressed satisfaction with the support they received from administrators, some indicated that responses were not always as timely as they would like, while others felt that the consequences they

assigned were not always as significant or impactful as they would prefer. Because administrator support plays a pivotal role in PBIS fidelity and outcomes, future research could examine teachers' perceptions of administrative support and interactions within PBIS frameworks to better understand how leadership practices influence implementation fidelity, teacher confidence, and student outcomes.

Theme 5: Negotiating Professional Identity and Perspectives on Behavior

Teachers at Azalea Springs Elementary view PBIS not just as a student behavior framework but also as a driver for their personal and professional development. Participants indicated that engaging with PBIS encouraged them to analyze their teaching approaches, modify strategies to accommodate diverse learners, and evolve into more relational, reflective educators. Many reported that PBIS implementation enhanced their classroom management skills and boosted confidence in managing difficult behaviors. Others found that working with colleagues and observing successful PBIS strategies fostered a continuous learning mindset and ongoing professional growth. Additionally, some shared that their classroom experiences motivated them to be more attentive to recognizing positives at home, strengthening the connection between school practices and social-emotional development.

This theme addresses Research Question 1 by illustrating how teachers interpreted the benefits and challenges of PBIS in relation to student behavior, reflecting on how the framework influenced classroom management and interactions. Concerning Research Question 2, findings emphasized how teachers actively reflected on and adjusted their professional identities while implementing PBIS, balancing behavior management with mentorship, guidance, and modeling. PBIS thus served as a catalyst for professional growth, shaping both how teachers approached student behavior and how they understood and practiced their evolving professional identities.

Evolving Views and Professional Development. Teachers noted that engaging with PBIS prompted reflection on their teaching and behavioral strategies, contributing to their professional growth. Lauren shared, “Working with PBIS has made me reflect on how I handle behaviors. I stop and think about my reaction more than I used to.” Participants also reported a shift in their perspective on student behavior. While they once viewed actions as right or wrong and primarily focused on consequences, many now adopt a more nuanced perspective, seeing behavior as a complex puzzle and considering the underlying factors behind students’ choices. This new perspective has brought challenges, as teachers often struggle to balance consistency, fairness, and the individual needs of students while still upholding the PBIS framework. Nevertheless, all participants highlighted their deliberate efforts to emphasize and reinforce positive behaviors in their classrooms, attributing these changes to the PBIS framework and schoolwide initiatives. Research suggests that professional development aligned with PBIS strengthens teacher capacity, supports fidelity, and enhances student outcomes (McIntosh et al., 2014; Sugai & Horner, 2020). Recent studies further indicate that educators perceive ongoing professional learning as critical for adapting PBIS strategies effectively to meet diverse classroom needs (Lawrence et al., 2022; Michael et al., 2023; Petrusek et al., 2022).

Balancing Grace and Discipline. Participants highlighted the tension between maintaining behavioral expectations and exercising flexibility or understanding for individual student circumstances. Kate reflected, “It’s an entire day of minute-by-minute decisions based on what each student needs. I have to decide in that moment if a behavior warrants a conversation or a consequence.” Recent perception studies indicate that teachers value frameworks like PBIS because they provide structure while allowing professional judgment in applying consequences (Lawrence et al., 2022; McDaniel et al., 2017; Michael et al., 2023).

The findings of this study also revealed the internal struggle teachers faced when reflecting on balancing grace and discipline in their classrooms. Participants shared emotional reflections about their interactions with former students, expressing concern that overly lenient or inconsistent responses might inadvertently reinforce negative behaviors or fail to provide students with the necessary structure to succeed. Many participants worried that a lack of consequences at the elementary level had contributed to some students being placed in the district's alternative school or, in some cases, engaging in behaviors that could lead to future involvement with the criminal justice system. At the same time, teachers emphasized the importance of flexibility in responding to student behavior, recognizing that individual circumstances must be considered to foster positive relationships and support long-term growth. This tension between maintaining firm, consistent expectations and consequences and showing grace to meet students where they are reflects an ongoing challenge in balancing the goals of accountability, equity, and relational trust within PBIS implementation. Future research is needed to explore how teachers and administrators can navigate this balance in ways that both uphold PBIS fidelity and address the complex needs of diverse learners.

Addressing Student Disengagement. Teachers reported challenges in engaging students who were consistently disengaged or resistant to PBIS expectations. Grace explained, "Some kids couldn't care less about points or rewards. I have to find what motivates them personally and keep trying." Research indicates that PBIS strategies, when combined with individualized supports, can enhance engagement and decrease negative behaviors among at-risk students (MacSuga-Gage et al., 2012; Tucker et al., 2022). Additional studies have also revealed that educators view addressing disengagement as one of the most demanding aspects of PBIS, requiring creativity, persistence, and significant investment in relationships (Matthews et al.,

2014; Roberts-Clawson, 2017; Zagona et al., 2025). Teachers at Azalea Springs Elementary described this as their most significant obstacle to implementing PBIS. They shared that disengaged students are often the most difficult to connect with, and finding their interests and what motivates them is rarely easy. Participants noted that these students often required the most attention in their classrooms, which could lead to feelings of defeat when efforts to connect with them and inspire behavior change seem unsuccessful. While participants mentioned interventions such as mentorships and check-in/check-out or check-and-connect, these practices often insert another adult into the equation. Still, the challenge remains for classroom teachers to connect with these students and inspire change. Future research is needed to explore strategies and supports that enable classroom teachers to effectively engage persistently disengaged students while maintaining instructional flow and classroom balance.

Reflecting on Personal and Professional Growth. Finally, teachers described PBIS as a catalyst for self-reflection, prompting them to examine their practice, decision-making, and professional identity. Several participants shared how their experiences as teachers prompted them to reflect on their interactions with their personal children and vice versa. Taking the time to see classroom experiences through their own children's eyes also challenged them to be more intentional about fostering meaningful relationships and leveraging praise and reinforcement. One participant was ultimately inspired to pursue a career in teaching after seeing the impact meaningful relationships had on her son's overall outlook on school and academic success. Participants also expressed a newfound commitment to being more reflective of their daily instructional and relational efforts. Mary shared, "I go home every day and reflect on what I could have done differently or how I can try to reach that same student with fresh energy tomorrow." Research highlights that reflection embedded in PBIS supports professional identity

development, encourages adaptive teaching, and strengthens relational skills (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Sugai & Horner, 2020). Additional studies further indicate that educators recognize the reciprocal benefits of PBIS: it enhances student outcomes while fostering their own growth as reflective, relational professionals (Lawrence et al., 2022; Petrusek et al., 2022; Roberts-Clawson, 2017; Sterling, 2024).

The five themes identified in this study collectively illuminate the multifaceted ways PBIS influenced teacher experiences at Azalea Springs Elementary. Across themes, it is evident that PBIS shaped classroom practices, professional identity, and school culture while simultaneously presenting challenges that required ongoing negotiation. Teachers described the importance of nurturing relationships, balancing tensions and challenges, using PBIS to inform instruction, and fostering a positive, collaborative school climate. At the same time, the process prompted reflection, adaptation, and growth, influencing how educators perceived student behavior and their own roles in guiding it.

These findings demonstrate the interconnectedness of PBIS implementation: (a) relational practices supported engagement and motivation, (b) instructional adaptations reinforced behavior expectations, (c) cultural practices fostered consistency and collective ownership, and (d) professional identity development influenced the fidelity and creativity with which teachers enacted the framework. Collectively, the results address Research Question 1 by highlighting teachers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of PBIS, as well as the strategies used to navigate these tensions, adapt practices, and sustain motivation over time. They also address Research Question 2 by illustrating the influence of PBIS on instruction, culture, and professional identity.

Ultimately, this synthesis highlights that PBIS implementation is a dynamic, context-

dependent process in which teacher reflection, collaboration, and professional judgment are crucial for translating structured frameworks into meaningful, student-centered outcomes. As Claire explained, “PBIS provides the structure and common language, but it’s what we do day to day to teach behavior, encourage students, and build a community that makes all the difference.” These insights provide a foundation for considering implications for practice, professional development, and future research in the following sections. Continued investigation into how contextual factors, teacher motivation, and implementation fidelity interact will be critical for optimizing PBIS effectiveness across diverse school settings.

Implications for Practice

This study emphasizes several practical takeaways for educators and administrators implementing PBIS in elementary schools. First, establishing strong relationships should be a priority, as teachers consistently highlighted the significance of trust, connection, and engagement in fostering positive student outcomes. For example, teachers mentioned using morning check-ins, personalized greetings, and one-on-one conferences to understand students’ needs and build rapport. Schools can support this by offering professional development focused on relationship-building strategies like active listening, restorative practices, and culturally responsive communication. Structured opportunities such as mentoring programs or peer observation cycles can help teachers practice these skills alongside PBIS efforts, ensuring behavior expectations are reinforced through strong, student-centered relationships. Additional practices, including incorporating student choice in rewards, celebrating individual achievements, and using reflective conversations to connect behavior with learning, should also be considered. Moreover, supporting teacher autonomy within PBIS is crucial. Teachers often modify reward systems to better motivate students, adjust routines to meet individual needs, or

select proactive strategies that align with their teaching styles while following schoolwide expectations. Balancing fidelity to schoolwide PBIS with classroom-level adaptations requires empowering teachers to exercise professional judgment, such as choosing tiered interventions for persistent behavior issues or tailoring reinforcement schedules and reward criteria—while maintaining core PBIS principles. This approach fosters both consistency and flexibility, allowing educators to respond effectively to their students' diverse needs without jeopardizing the integrity of the overall PBIS framework.

Developing equitable acknowledgment systems is essential to sustaining student motivation and engagement. For example, schools might rotate recognition strategies such as verbal praise, schoolwide student shout-outs, classroom points, or token economies, provide multiple avenues for acknowledgment like public recognition, private notes, or digital badges, and regularly evaluate the fairness and effectiveness of reward systems by reviewing participation data and student feedback. Integrating PBIS into instruction can further enhance both academic and behavioral outcomes. Teachers reported embedding PBIS expectations into lessons, for instance, incorporating “trustworthy” and “motivated” language into reading or math activities, explaining character actions and behaviors through the lens of social-emotional learning, modeling expected behaviors during transitions, and using behavioral data to differentiate supports and guide instruction. Additionally, professional development should address concrete strategies for weaving PBIS into classroom routines, such as creating morning meetings that reinforce schoolwide expectations, designing lesson plans that incorporate behavioral objectives, and facilitating reflective practice through peer observations and collaborative problem-solving sessions.

Fostering a collaborative school culture is another key factor in sustaining PBIS. The framework's influence on school climate highlights the importance of shared language, collective ownership, and consistent practices among staff. For example, teachers reported using common behavioral language during classroom instruction, co-developing lesson plans, and participating in regular team meetings to discuss student progress and share strategies. Administrators can enhance implementation by encouraging collaborative planning sessions and providing protected time for these sessions to occur. Additionally, they can celebrate schoolwide successes, such as PBIS assemblies or recognition boards, and reinforce PBIS principles in daily interactions through modeling and consistent feedback. Finally, supporting professional reflection and identity development can increase teachers' engagement with PBIS. Structured opportunities, including peer observations, coaching sessions on classroom management, and guided self-reflection journals, enable educators to refine their strategies, align their practices with professional values, and sustain long-term engagement with the framework.

Limitations and Future Research

Like all qualitative research, this study has its limitations. Since the focus is on a single rural elementary school in southeast Georgia, the results may not be applicable to urban, suburban, or secondary schools. The small, intentionally chosen sample could have included participants with more positive or negative opinions about PBIS, potentially missing a wider range of perspectives. Moreover, the participant group was limited to female educators. To overcome these limitations, future studies should involve a more diverse range of schools and viewpoints, especially including male educators and teachers from urban and secondary schools who might be less supportive or more uncertain about implementing the framework effectively. Additionally, although the current study included one participant with limited PBIS experience,

future research should explore how teachers interpret the framework during early implementation stages to identify key processes and practices.

The study highlights several avenues for future research to help educators better understand PBIS implementation in elementary schools. Longitudinal studies could track how teachers' professional identities develop over several years of PBIS, including how reflective practices influence instructional and behavioral outcomes (Madden, 2025; Marion, 2024; Roberts-Clawson, 2017; Simonsen & Myers, 2015; Sterling, 2024; Sugai & Horner, 2020; Zolkowski, 2024). Research on equity and varied impacts might explore how PBIS affects diverse student groups, emphasizing fairness in rewards, access to support, and addressing their specific behavioral and social-emotional needs (Freeman et al., 2016; McIntosh et al., 2014; Zagona et al., 2025). Additional studies could examine teacher decision-making and autonomy, such as balancing fidelity with flexibility and the influence of school leadership (Coffey & Horner, 2012; Stewart, 2024). Future work might also assess how PBIS strategies integrate with academic instruction and impact student engagement and learning (Algozzine et al., 2019; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Tucker et al., 2022; Zolkowski, 2024). Investigating PBIS's role in shaping school culture, including collaboration, shared ownership, and staff motivation, could provide insights for sustaining implementation (Bradshaw et al., 2010; McIntosh et al., 2014; Sterling, 2024). Further research should explore effective professional development approaches that foster teachers' reflective practices, growth, and professional identities (Madden, 2025; Simonsen & Myers, 2015; Sterling, 2024; Sugai & Horner, 2020). Finally, identifying strategies to reduce student disengagement, particularly among those less responsive to standard incentives, through differentiated reinforcement, personalized support, and methods promoting intrinsic motivation is crucial, all while maintaining school-wide behavioral expectations for

lasting success and sustainability (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Marion, 2024; Roberts-Clawson, 2017; Sugai & Horner, 2020; Tucker et al., 2022; Zagona et al., 2025).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of how PBIS influences teacher experiences, instructional methods, school culture, and professional identity at Azalea Springs Elementary. Across the five themes, teachers emphasized the importance of relationships, proactive teaching, shared responsibility, reflective practice, and professional development, while also addressing challenges related to fidelity, equity, and student engagement. The findings support and expand current research by highlighting the relational, cultural, and reflective elements of PBIS implementation, demonstrating that successful outcomes rely not only on procedural fidelity but also on teacher autonomy, collaboration, and identity negotiation. Recommendations for practice and future research underscore the need to support teachers through ongoing professional development, promote inclusive and equitable strategies, and integrate PBIS with academic and social-emotional learning. Overall, this study enhances understanding of PBIS as both a behavioral framework and a dynamic influence on teaching practices and school culture, offering insights to guide effective implementation and sustainability in elementary schools.

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Appendix A:

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Purpose:

To explore how teachers make meaning of their experiences with long-term PBIS implementation and how they interpret its influence on their daily work, school and classroom environments, and professional roles.

Introduction and Consent:

Thank you for meeting with me today. This interview explores your perspectives and experiences with implementing the PBIS framework at your school. This research is part of a larger study focused on understanding how educators experience, interpret, and engage with the PBIS framework in their daily work. Participation is voluntary, and you can skip any question or stop the interview at any time.

Do you have any questions before we begin? Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Section 1: Introduction and Rapport-Building

Question #	Main Question with Probes	Prompts/ Elicitations	Purpose/ Alignment
1	Can you tell me a little about your current role and how long you have been teaching at your current school?	“What drew you to this school?” “How has your role evolved over time?”	Rapport-building/ Context
2	What grade(s) and subject(s) do you currently teach?	“Have you taught other grades or subjects here?”	Rapport-building/ Context
3	How did you first learn about PBIS at your current school?	“Did you receive formal training?” “Who introduced you to it?”	Rapport- building/ Context
4	What were your first impressions when PBIS was introduced?	“Did you feel optimistic, skeptical, or neutral?” “Can you describe a specific moment or interaction?”	Rapport-building/ Context

Section 2: Experiences with PBIS- Benefits and Challenges

5	What have you found most helpful or positive about PBIS in your classroom or the school overall?	“Can you give a specific example?”	RQ1- Benefits
6	Can you describe a time when PBIS made a noticeable difference for a student or group of students?	“How did you know it was effective?” “What feelings did it evoke for you or the students?”	RQ1- Benefits (deeper reflection)
7	What has been challenging about implementing PBIS for several years?	“Can you describe a specific difficulty?” “How did it affect your teaching?” “What strategies have you used to address those challenges?”	RQ1- Challenges
8	Can you describe a time when PBIS did not work as intended or seemed difficult to maintain?	“What factors contributed to the difficulty?” “What feelings did that evoke for you?” “What did you learn from that experience?”	RQ1- Challenges (deeper reflection)
9	How have you and/or your colleagues adapted when those challenges arose?	“What strategies worked best?” “Were there collaborative solutions?” “What role, if any, did leadership play in those adaptations?”	RQ1- Challenges (strategies)

Reflexivity Cue: Are there any areas where your own teaching experiences align or differ from the participant’s? If so, how might that influence your analysis or interpretation?

Section 3: Influence on instructional strategies, school culture, and professional growth.

10	How has PBIS influenced the way you plan or deliver instruction?	<p>“Can you describe a specific lesson or example?”</p> <p>“How do you decide which PBIS strategies to use and when?”</p>	RQ2- Instructional Strategies
11	Have you made changes to your classroom management or teaching strategies because of PBIS? If so, how?	<p>“Which strategies were most effective?”</p> <p>“Were there any unexpected outcomes?”</p>	RQ2- Instructional Strategies
12	<p>For participants who have experienced all stages of implementation:</p> <p>How would you describe your school’s culture before PBIS and now after several years of implementation?</p> <p>All participants:</p> <p>In your opinion, are there certain aspects of PBIS that impact your school’s culture?</p>	<p>“Can you give examples of changes in staff collaboration, student behavior, or routines?”</p> <p>“Which aspects of PBIS do you feel had the greatest influence?”</p>	RQ2- School Culture
13	In what ways has PBIS influenced relationships among staff, students, families, and/or community members?	<p>“Have you noticed shifts in communication or engagement?”</p> <p>“Can you share a specific interaction?”</p>	RQ2- School Culture
14	Has participating in PBIS affected your own professional growth as an educator?	<p>“Have you gained new skills or confidence?”</p> <p>“How has it influenced your teaching philosophy?”</p>	RQ2- Professional Growth

15	Have your views on student behavior or discipline changed because of PBIS?	<p>“Can you describe specific instances where your approach changed?”</p> <p>“What prompted that change?”</p>	RQ2- Professional Growth
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Reflexivity Cue: Be mindful of how your own experiences or interpretations of the impact of PBIS may affect your follow-up prompts. Record observations as needed.

Section 4: Deeper Reflection and Meaning-Making

16	Based on your experiences with PBIS over several years, does anything stick out as a significant change you’ve seen related to PBIS?	<p>“What makes that stand out to you?”</p> <p>“How did it affect students, staff, or school culture?”</p>	Both RQs- Synthesis
17	If PBIS were removed from the school, what do you believe would happen?	<p>“Which areas would be most affected?”</p> <p>“How would students and staff respond?”</p>	Both RQs- Hypothetical
18	Can you tell me about an experience that shaped how you understand your role as a teacher, and whether PBIS was connected to that realization in any way?	<p>“What made this experience memorable?”</p> <p>“How did it influence your daily teaching?”</p>	RQ2- Professional Growth

Reflexivity Cue: Note how participants’ responses may resonate with your own. How might that impact your analysis and interpretation?

Section 5: Closing and Additional Insights

19	Is there anything else about your experience with PBIS that we haven’t discussed but you think is essential to share?	“Are there any additional stories or experiences that stand out to you?”	Both RQs- Summary
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20	If you were speaking to a new teacher about PBIS, what advice would you give?	<p>“What would you share as most important?”</p> <p>“Are there things you would do differently given your experience?”</p>	Both RQs-Reflection
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Reflexivity Cue: Document how the final comments may support or contradict your own beliefs and reflections. How might that impact your analysis and interpretation?

Member Checking: (Paraphrase/ Summarize Main Data)

1. Summarize
 - a. Overall reflections
 - b. Benefits and challenges
 - c. Influence of PBIS on:
 - i. Instructional Strategies
 - ii. School Culture
 - iii. Professional Growth
 - d. Ask for confirmation and/or clarification.

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

If you're a certified teacher with several years of experience implementing the PBIS framework...

WE'D LOVE TO HEAR YOUR STORY!

This study aims to explore the unique experiences and perspectives of teachers who have been actively involved in the implementation of PBIS for multiple years. Your insights will help deepen the understanding of the benefits and challenges of PBIS, as well as address how long-term PBIS impacts school culture, teaching practices, and professional experiences.



WHAT'S INVOLVED?

- ✓ One-on-One Interview (45-80 mins)
- ✓ Sharing your personal experiences and reflections about PBIS.
- ✓ Voluntary participation- Withdraw at any time!

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED:

SEND AN EMAIL TO:
CHASULLIVAN@VALDOSTA.EDU

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Chasity N. Sullivan at chasullivan@valdosta.edu. This study (04626-2025) has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

Appendix C:

Return Email

Subject Line: Elementary Teachers: Interested in sharing your experiences with long-term PBIS implementation?

Thank you for your interest in my doctoral study, “Beyond the Blueprint: Exploring Elementary Teachers’ Experiences with Long-Term PBIS Implementation.” To qualify for this study, you must:

- be an elementary school teacher
- work in the school and district selected for research
- have at least two years of experience teaching at your current school

I want to learn more about individual teachers’ experiences with implementing PBIS in the same school for several years. I’m interested in the benefits and challenges that may be associated with sustaining PBIS practices, as well as how you perceive the impact of PBIS on your instructional practices, school culture, and professional identity over time. If you would like to participate, we will meet in person for approximately 45-80 minutes at a time that is convenient for you to discuss your experiences with implementing PBIS in your current school. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Your name, school and district name, and any other personal information will be kept confidential during this study through the use of a pseudonym. It will not be shared with professors, colleagues, administration, or any other person at any time. Some benefits of the study may include:

- sharing your perspective and experiences with the PBIS framework
- informing future practice and inspiring other educators

Please review the above qualifications, and if you are still interested in participating in my doctoral study, follow the link below to complete a short demographic survey. If you are selected to participate, I will contact you via email to schedule a time for your interview.

Participant Survey

Thank you for your interest in my study.
Chasity N. Sullivan, Ed.D. Candidate
chasullivan@valdosta.edu
770.789.7608

*Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to **Chasity N. Sullivan** at chasullivan@valdosta.edu. This study (04626-2025) has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.*

Appendix D:

Qualtrics Survey



You are being asked to participate in a survey as part of a research study entitled "Beyond the Blueprint: Exploring Elementary Teachers' Experiences with Long-Term PBIS Implementation", which is being conducted by Chasity N. Sullivan, a doctoral candidate at Valdosta State University. The purpose of the study is to share the unique experiences and perspectives of teachers who have used the PBIS framework in the same school for several years. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about how individual teachers experience PBIS and how those experiences shape their understanding of the benefits, challenges, and overall impact of PBIS. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately 5 minutes to complete. This survey is confidential. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to take the survey, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. Participants must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your completion of the survey serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 or older. You may print a copy of this statement for your records. Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Chasity N. Sullivan at chasullivan@valdosta.edu. This study (04626-2025) has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at [229-253-2947](tel:229-253-2947) or irb@valdosta.edu.

Name (first and last):

Best contact email:

Best contact number:

Are you a certified teacher?

- Yes
 No

How many years have you actively participated in PBIS implementation at your current school?

- Less than 1 year
 - 1-2 years
 - 3-5 years
 - More than 5 years
-

What grade level do you currently teach?

- PREK
 - Kindergarten
 - First Grade
 - Second Grade
 - Third Grade
 - Fourth Grade
 - Fifth Grade
-

What additional grades (if any) have you taught at your current school?

- PREK
- Kindergarten
- First Grade
- Second Grade
- Third Grade
- Fourth Grade
- Fifth Grade

Which of the following roles have you held at your current school related to PBIS implementation?

- Classroom teacher
 - Member of the PBIS leadership team
 - PBIS Coach
-

How would you describe your teaching experience overall?

- 1-5 years
 - 6-10 years
 - 11-15 years
 - 16-20 years
 - More than 20 years
-

What is your preferred method of contact if selected for an interview?

- Phone
 - Email
 - Either
-

By submitting this form, you agree to be contacted by the researcher for possible participation in this study. Your participation in the screening process is voluntary.

- I agree
- I do not agree

Appendix E:
Congratulatory Email

Subject Line: Congratulations!

Congratulations! You have been selected to participate in the study “Beyond the Blueprint: Exploring Elementary Teachers’ Experiences with Long-Term PBIS Implementation.”

I am excited to collaborate with you and learn more about your unique perspectives and experiences using the PBIS framework in your current school. I am usually available any time after 4 pm Monday through Friday, and I can also arrange to meet with you during the weekend if that is more feasible for your schedule. Your interview will last approximately 45-80 minutes, so please keep that in mind when selecting the best date and time for your schedule.

Thank you for your willingness to contribute to this study!

Chasity N. Sullivan, Ed.D. Candidate
chasullivan@valdosta.edu
770.789.7608

*Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to **Chasity N. Sullivan** at **chasullivan@valdosta.edu**. This study (04626-2025) has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.*

Appendix F:

IRB Approval Form



***Institutional Review Board (IRB)
for the Protection of Human Research Participants***

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04626-2025

Responsible Researcher(s): Chasity Sullivan

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Taralynn Hartsell

Dissertation Research Member: Dr. Megan Mitchell

Project Title: *Beyond the Blueprint: Exploring Elementary Teachers' Experiences with Long-Term PBIS Implementation.*

Institutional Review Board Determination:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2**. If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research study.

Additional Information & Guidance:

- *Personally identifiable information (PII) collected for participant selection purposes is permitted, provided the PII is deleted from the survey platform and files used to store the selection criteria (PII). The selection data is not to be stored, shared, or presented.*
 - *IRB protocol number (IRB-04626-2025) must be included at the end of consent statements, correspondence, recruitment documents, etc.*
 - *Per exempt protocol guidelines, it is permissible to record interviews to create an accurate transcript to be utilized for documentation or analysis. Once the transcript has been constructed, recorded interviews must be deleted from all devices, including electronic files used to store recordings. This measure is in place to uphold confidentiality and ensure that the information contained in the recording is adequately protected.*
 - *To comply with consent guidelines, video recordings must capture the researcher reading the consent statement aloud, ensuring the participant's understanding and willingness to participate. Each transcript must document the researcher's reading of the consent statement and the participants' consent. A copy of the consent statement must be provided to participants.*
 - *To ensure confidentiality, pseudonym lists must be kept in a separate secure file from corresponding names, email addresses, etc.*
 - *Upon completion of the research study, all data must be securely maintained (e.g., locked file cabinet, password-protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*
- Proposed modifications must be submitted to the IRB Administrator at tmwright@valdosta.edu for review and approval before implementation is permitted.*

Elizabeth W. Olphie

Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator

08.06.2025

Date

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.

Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-259-5045.