

# Moving Beyond the Function of Behavior: Working with Students who Engage in Escape/Avoidance

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# Introduction

For almost two decades, educators have been required to develop a behavioral intervention plan (BIP) for any student with an educational disability whose behavior interferes with his/her learning or that of other students. The BIP is to be informed by a functional assessment of the student's behavior (FBA).

Escape and/or avoidance has been identified as a common function for many challenging behaviors displayed by students with autism (e.g., Koegel, Koegel, Frea & Smith, 1995), emotional and behavioral disorders (e.g., Gunter et al., 1993), intellectual disabilities (e.g., Cipiani, 1998), learning disabilities (e.g., Reich & Gutierrez, 1979), and mental health disorders (Noch & Prinstein, 2004). The nature of the challenging behaviors supported through the function of escape and avoidance can range from social withdrawal, stereotypy, elopement, tantrums, self-injurious behavior, and aggression (Cipiani, 1998).

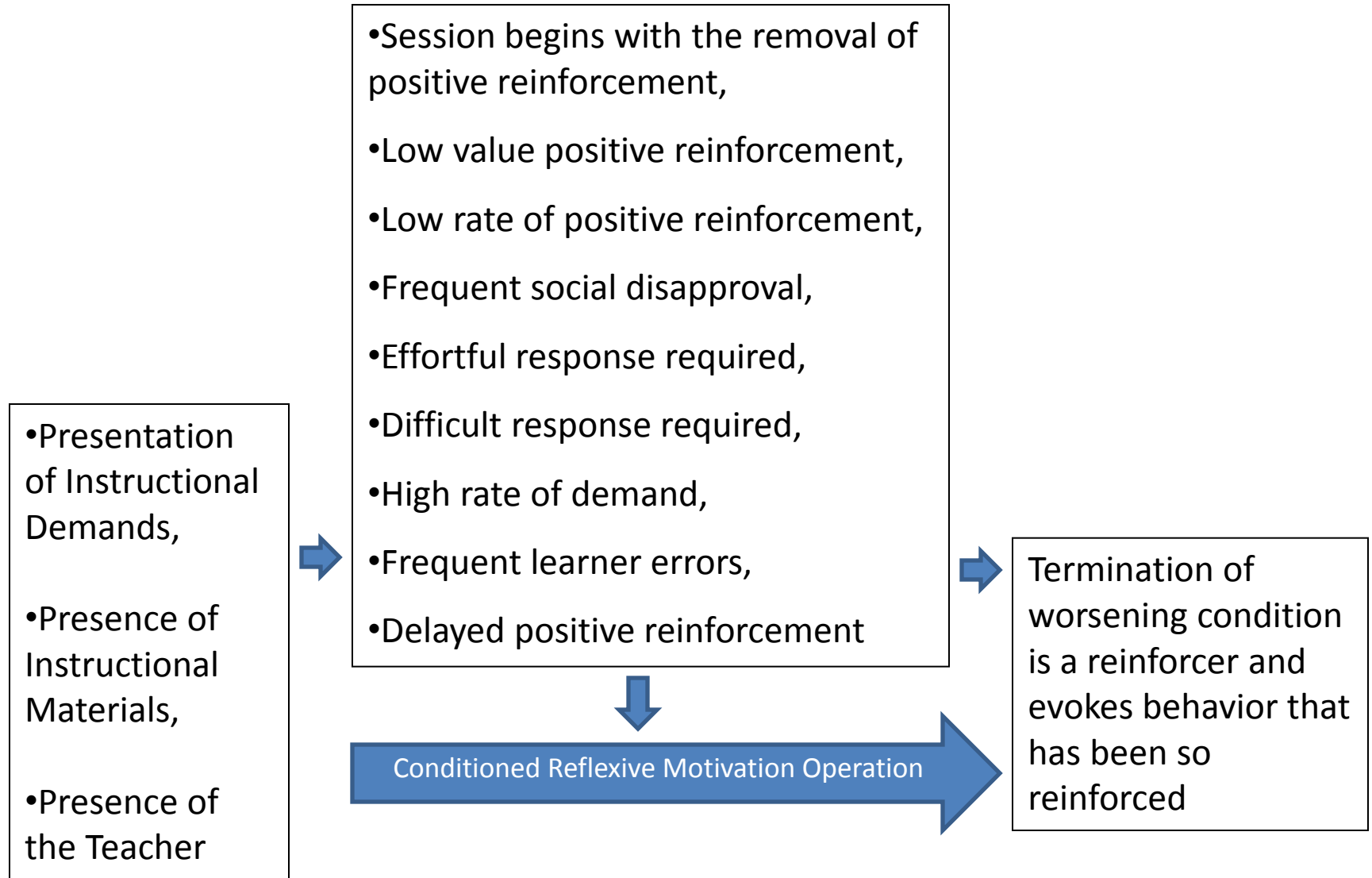
Many educators employ extinction strategies (interventions that withhold positive or negative reinforcement of escape behavior). Typically, teachers fear that any effort to modify the task demand or other contingencies surrounding the demand may serve to negatively reinforce the student's effort to escape or avoid. Thus, their efforts concentrate on the function of escape and attempt to block any effort the student displays to avoid or escape. As a result, many students simply escalate their undesired behavior or engage in even more disruptive, destructive or dangerous behavior (escalate to a crisis).

While escape and avoidance can clearly serve as the function of a challenging behavior, humans do not have a basic need to escape. Rather, escape and avoidance constitute a primal response if key basic needs are threatened. The most common needs that appear to trigger escape and avoidance are safety, self-esteem/competence, and autonomy (Fox et al., 2014). Thus, efforts to effectively address these behaviors must target the unmet basic needs underlying the escape/avoidance response. When we have a better conceptual understanding of the role escape and avoidance play for the individual, we can more effectively address the behavior. Teachers need more than a “a bag of tricks’ as the source for their procedures to reduce these behaviors (Baer, Wolf, & Risley, 1968).

Michael (1993, 2004, 2007) proposed that much escape and avoidance behavior might serve as a ***conditioned reflexive motivation operation*** (CMO-R). A CMO-R is any environmental event that ultimately increases the value of conditioned negative reinforcement and therefore evokes any behavior that has led to a reduction in the current aversive condition. Within this context, instructional demands act as aversive stimuli and therefore evoke problem behavior that has in the past led to the removal of the demands (See Figure 1).

Michael concluded that in most cases the CMO-R could be abolished by altering the instructional practices so that “instruction results in less failure, more frequent social and other forms of reinforcement, and other general improvements in the demand situation to the point at which it may not function as a demand but rather as an opportunity” (Michael, 2000, p. 409).

Figure 1. Escape/avoidance gets established as a conditioned reflexive motivation operation •



The role of the CMO-R has been explored in an increasing number of studies (Iwata, et al. 2000). The CMO-R has been implicated directly as an independent variable that affects the occurrence of problem behavior in several studies (Crockett & Hagopian, 2006; DeLeon, Neidert, Anders, & Rodriguez-Catter, 2001; Ebanks & Fischer, 2003; Lalli et al., 1999; McComas, Hoch, Paone, & El-Roy, 2000).

Despite the fact that numerous interventions have been empirically demonstrated to effectively address challenging behaviors serving the function of escape or avoidance [e.g., often under the heading of curricular revisions (Dunlap, Foster-Johnson, Clarke, Kern, & Childs, 1995; Dunlap & Kern, 1993,1996; Dunlap et al., 1993; Dunlap, Kern-Dunlap, Clarke, & Robbins, 1991; Kern, Childs, Dunlap, Clarke, & Falk, 1994; Kern & Dunlap, 1998) or antecedent interventions (Miltenberger, 2006)] , teachers have been reluctant to implement these strategies (even when explicitly trained in their use) (Addison & Lerman. 2009). When confronted with repeated problem behaviors all teachers in the Addison and Learner study ultimately failed to withhold potential reinforcers for the undesired behavior (even when the function of the escape and avoidance were explicitly taught.)

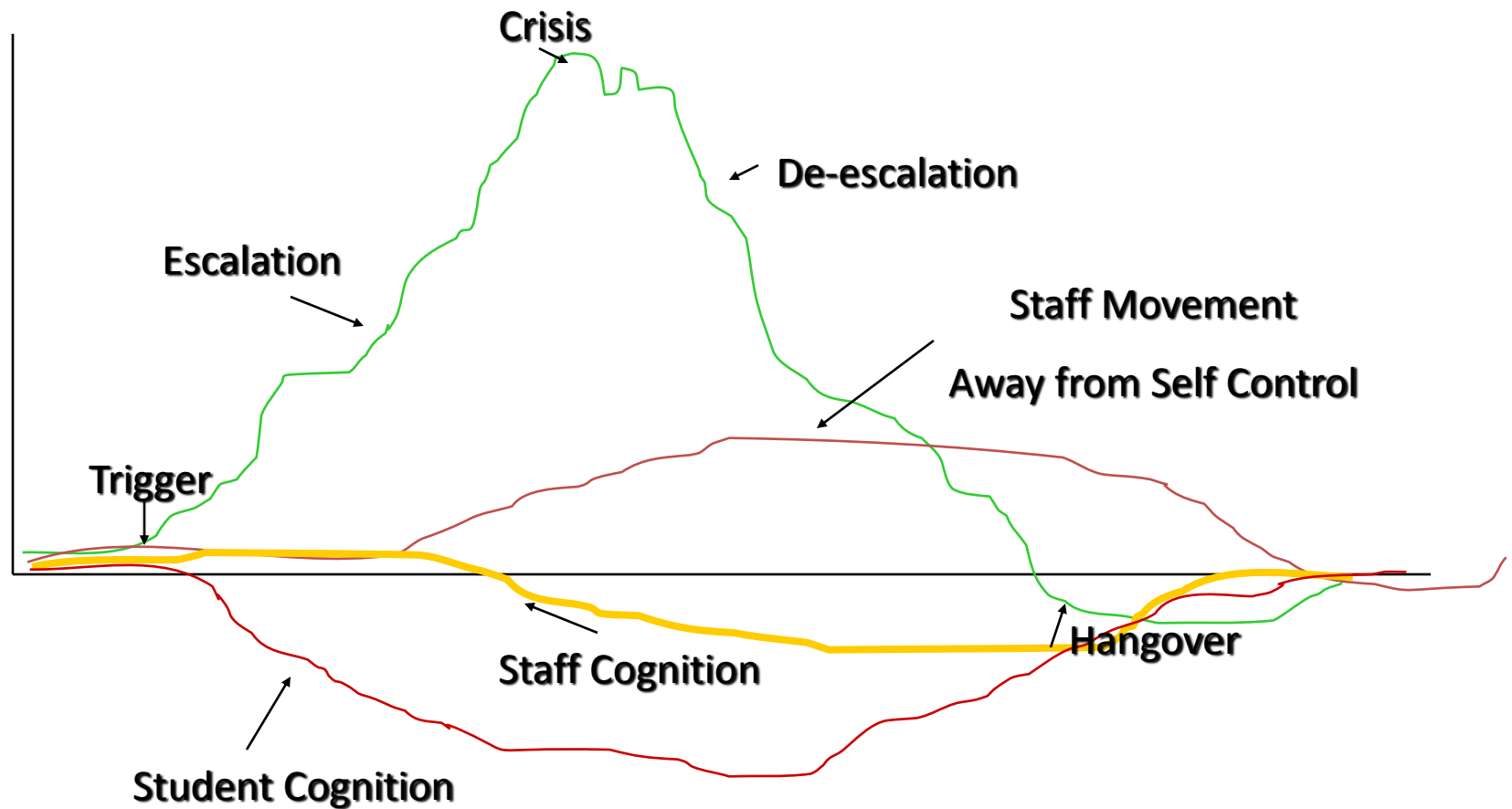
Teachers and others working with individuals posing challenging behaviors will respond emotionally to frequent and/or intense student behavior. The teacher may begin to engage in behavior that reinforces or even escalates the student behavior. Figure 2 presents the Cycle of Acting Out Behavior as proposed by Colvin, 2004

As a student's behavior escalates, he or she will experience a 'fight or flight reaction; in which blood is shunted from the brain and internal organs and pumped to the legs and arms to help prepare for a response to the threat. This results in a situation in which the student's cognitive abilities are depressed. The ability to process communication often is significantly impaired.

As the student's behavior escalates, the teacher too will experience a 'fight or flight ' reaction. The teacher will also demonstrate less effective information processing. Without a self control plan, teachers are likely to exacerbate the problem behavior. An active self-control plan can help minimize the teacher's emotional reaction to the student's behavior (Fox et al., 2014).

The present study explores the effect of providing teachers with instruction in skills to de-escalate challenging student behavior (Fox et al., 2014; Pro-Act Crisis Intervention Training). Of specific interest is the provision of an empathetic response and two clear and specific choices related to the assumed basic need being expressed by the student while attempting to promote task compliance (engagement in the assigned task or closely related task within the student's level of competence). Teachers were also provided instruction and practice in the development and implementation of a personal self-control plan. Both components of the intervention are thought to support Michael's recommendations to abolish or at least reduce the impact of escape behavior CMO-R.

Figure 2. The Cycle of Acting Out Behavior and the Impact of 'Fight or Flight' Reactions on the Part of the Student and the Teacher.



# Methods

- Subjects – The subjects were three students who displayed escape and/or avoidance behaviors. All three students had a history of school failure and their escape behavior was most often observed immediately upon the introduction of a task – supporting the view that these behaviors represented CMO-Rs.
- A functional assessment completed for each of the three students hypothesized the students were displaying their respective target behaviors as a function of escape and avoidance. Each was thought to be frustrated by the academic demands being placed upon them. Student 2 was especially sensitive to tasks that required reading.



	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3
Student			
Gender	Male	Male	Male
Ethnicity	White	African American	African American
Age	9 years	11 years	9 years
Disability	Emotional Disorder	Autism	Emotional Disorder
Target Behavior(s)	Withdrawal Elopement	Destruction of materials Aggression towards self or others	Aggression
Teacher	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3
Gender	Female	Female	Male
Education	B.A.	M. Ed.	M. Ed.
Years Experience	7	11	9

- Data were gathered by the teacher of record or by a paraprofessional assigned to the classroom. Teachers self-rated their implementation of target procedures each day.
- Operational definitions of target student behaviors:
  - Student 1:
    - Withdrawal – student refuses to work, speak, or look at the teacher or instructional materials when directed to do so. Behavior must exceed 30 seconds prior to recording an incident.
    - Elopement – student exits the assigned work space without first seeking and obtaining adult permission.
  - Student 2:
    - Destruction of materials – student crumples, tears or defaces instructional materials related to the task or within his grasp.
    - Aggression towards self or others – student will hit, kick, bite, slap or otherwise engage in behavior or make an attempt to engage in behavior that will harm himself or others.
  - Student 3:
    - Aggression – Student will attempt to hit, kick or otherwise strike out at others in a manner that could result in injury or harm.

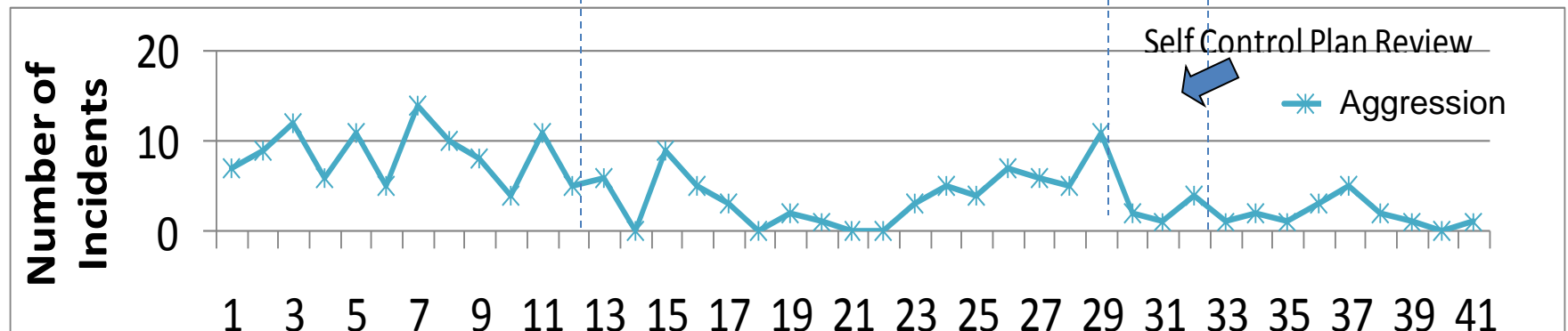
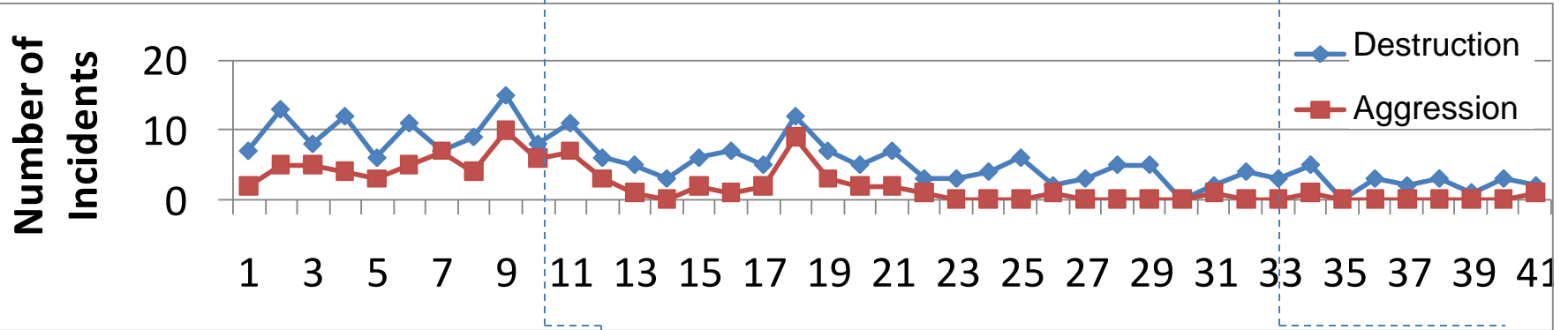
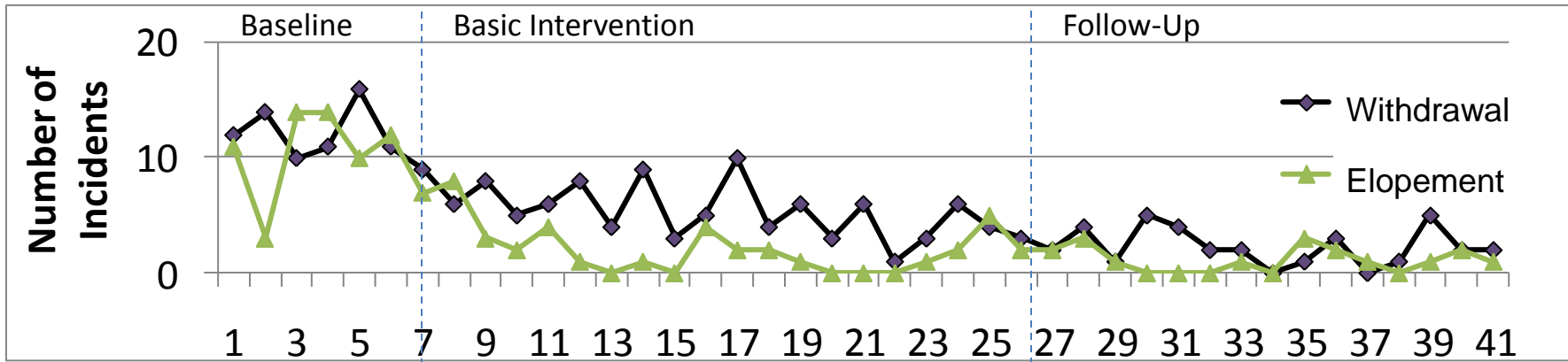
General education teachers participated in a total of 16 hours of intensive training (over 4 days) that explored topics such as professionalism, basic human needs, common motives for acting out behavior, triggers and alternatives, self-control, and appropriate de-escalation efforts matched to the level of dangerousness portrayed by the student. Of particular interest for this study was:

- the teacher’s implementation of a self-control plan, and
- the delivery of an empathetic support statement and two clear choices of a behavior designed to promote student safety, self-esteem/competence and/or autonomy related to the assigned task at hand.

A Multiple Baseline Across Students/Teachers was implemented to test the effectiveness of the Pro-ACT Crisis Intervention Training – with specific attention being provided to the use of:

- the teacher’s personal self-control plan, and
- the provision of an empathetic support statement and two clear positive choices designed to engage the student in the assigned task or a modification of the task to promote safety, self-esteem/ competence and/or autonomy.

# RESULTS:



# Discussion

- The intervention (Pro-ACT Crisis Intervention Training) proved effective in assisting three teachers to better address student escape and avoidance behaviors. Conceptualization of escape and avoidance as a CMO-R developed over time as the result of frustration, a history of failure, and reprimand promoted intervention based upon the threat to the students' basic need of self-esteem/competence.
- While all three students continued to display some escape/avoidance behaviors, teachers indicated that the intensity of challenging behaviors was significantly diminished.
  - Moreover, for Student 1 and Student 2, the more serious target behavior (aggression and elopement, respectfully) were reduced to a great degree – suggesting a reduction in crisis escalation.
- Based upon the data and Teacher 3 self-reports of his use of a self-control plan, a refresher training on the development and use of a self-control plan was implemented for three days beginning day 29. The student's (Student 3) aggression was reduced significantly following the implementation of the refresher program. This finding underscores the importance of our understanding that teacher behavior is impacted by student behavior and vice versa. Escape from child problem behavior may shape and maintain adult behavior that is potentially countertherapeutic.

# Limitations

- The ability to provide students with clear choices that effectively matched their ability thus providing effective and meaningful instruction was complicated by the school's policies for providing each student grade level instruction in specific curricular materials.
- Data collection relied upon teacher self-report for both target student behavior and the teacher's implementation of the key components of the intervention (implementation of a self-control plan and the provision of an empathetic support statement and 2 clear positive choices related to the assigned task).

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