Navigating Evidence-Based Interventions in Urban Schools: Practitioner Perspectives and Systemic Barriers

Scott L. Graves Jr., PhD

Introduction

- School psychologists in urban settings are uniquely positioned to support student social-emotional learning and mental health, yet face a complex landscape of competing demands, limited resources, and shifting institutional priorities. While evidence-based interventions offer structured frameworks for supporting student wellbeing.

- A growing body of research raises important questions about the utility of widely endorsed evidence-based practices.
  - Studies examining prominent clearinghouses and intervention research have found significant gaps in the inclusion and representation of Black children and youth, particularly in the domains of social-emotional learning, self-regulation, and mental health treatment (Graves et al., 2021).

- This presentation expands on previous research with new qualitative interview data to examine how psychologists define mental health and navigate the selection, adaptation, and delivery of *evidence-based* interventions.

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OPEN ACCESS

A Systematic Review of Treatments for Depression for Young Black Girls and Women

Saphia Shariff | Ebony Mundy | Rayna Hutcherson | Aly Stults | Imani Reynolds | Scott L. Graves

Department of Educational Studies, School Psychology, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA

Correspondence: Saphia Shariff (shariff.23@osu.edu)

Received: 1 March 2025 | **Revised:** 3 October 2025 | **Accepted:** 30 October 2025

Keywords: Black | depression | female | treatment | youth

ABSTRACT

Suicide rates among Black women and girls have been rising, with depression being a major precursor to suicide attempts. Implementing evidence-based treatments for depression could significantly help in reducing these suicide rates. As such, the aim of the study was to review treatment effects of depression intervention on young Black girls and women (YBGW) across treatment settings. Studies that used Randomized Controlled Trials (RCT) to reduce depressive symptomatology in Black girls and women ages 12–29 were eligible for inclusion. Following the review of 715 abstracts and 68 full-text articles, 12 studies were ultimately selected. The RCT articles were then organized into four categories based on the intervention methods used in the study. Notably, only two studies specifically targeted YBGW, and only one provided treatment effect sizes for this group. The remaining RCTs did not include data specific to YBGW, limiting the ability to draw robust conclusions regarding treatment effects on depression. Despite these limitation, the study highlights the critical need for targeted depression interventions to address the rising suicide rates among Black women and girls.

The alarming increase in depression among Black youth is a major public health concern. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA] major depressive episodes increased from 9% to 14% for Black or African American youth between 2015 and 2021 (SAMHSA 2022). With young Black girls and women (YBGW) experiencing both gendered and racial discrimination, the impact on mental health can be quite drastic. Various studies have highlighted that Black women experience more severe and chronic forms of depression compared to other demographic groups (Bailey et al. 2009; Williams et al. 2007), however they are also less likely to receive or seek adequate mental health treatment (Nelson et al. 2020). This gap in mental health treatment is particularly alarming for YBGW who are overrepresented in depressed populations but underrepresented in those receiving mental health services and treatment (Woods-Giscombe et al. 2016).

The unique challenges faced by YBGW; stemming from both racial and gender discrimination may exacerbate their mental health struggles. Despite this, there seems to be a lack of adequate mental health treatment for YBGW. Existing research has explored the effectiveness of adolescent and young Black male depression treatment in prior reviews (Lindsey et al. 2018; David-Ferdon and Kaslow 2008); however, it is still unknown how well these interventions work to mitigate symptoms for YBGW.

To help alleviate this study gap the purpose of this study is to examine depression treatments for YBGW. Our study mirrors the age range (12–29) used in a previous study by Lindsey et al. (2018), which examined depression treatment for young Black males within the same age bracket. By replicating this study with a focus on YBGW, we aim to explore whether similar treatment interventions that were effective for young Black

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2025 The Author(s). *Mental Health Science* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC.

Evidence-Based for Whom? Depression Treatments for Black Girls and Women

Purpose of Study:

- To systematically review randomized controlled trials (RCTs) evaluating depression treatments for young Black girls and women (ages 12–29)

Context & Need:

- Depression is a major precursor to suicide among Black girls and women
- Rates of depression among Black youth have increased from 9% to 14% (2015–2021)
- Despite higher severity, Black women are less likely to receive adequate treatment

Critical Gap:

- Interventions are labeled “evidence-based”
- But it is unclear whether they are effective for Black girls and women specifically

A Strong Test of the Evidence Base

Design:

- Systematic review using PRISMA framework
- Databases: EbscoHost, Scopus, Web of Science
- Timeframe: 2003–2023

Screening Process:

- 715 abstracts reviewed
- 68 full-text articles examined
- Final sample: 12 RCT studies

Intervention Categories Identified:

- Youth-Centered Behavioral Treatments (YBT)
- Pharmacological + Behavioral (YPBT)
- Family-Centered Treatments (FCBT)
- Primary Care Quality Interventions (QDTPC)

The Illusion of Evidence-Based Practice

- **Major Finding:**
  - Only 2 studies specifically targeted Black girls and women
  - Only 1 study reported effect sizes for this group

- **Across Studies:**
  - Many included Black participants but:
    - Did not disaggregate by race and gender
    - Reported only aggregate outcomes
  - Result: Impossible to determine true effectiveness

- **Interpretation:**
  - Interventions show overall effectiveness (11%–35% reduction in symptoms)
  - But effectiveness for Black girls = largely unknown

This raises a critical question:

- How are practitioners expected to implement evidence-based interventions when the evidence does not reflect their students?

New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development WILEY

REVIEW ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Examining the Applicability of the What Works Clearinghouse's "Preparing Young Children for School" Practice Guide to Black Children

Rayna Hutcherson | Aly Stults | Tisha Owusua | Scott L. Graves

Department of Educational Studies, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA

Correspondence: Rayna Hutcherson (hutcherson.15@osu.edu)

Received: 17 February 2025 | **Revised:** 1 December 2025 | **Accepted:** 20 January 2026

Academic Editor: Nikhat Kaura

Keywords: Black children | early childhood | evidence-based practice | preschool | What Works Clearinghouse

ABSTRACT

Early childhood professionals are responsible for selecting empirically validated, culturally responsive interventions and recommendations. Therefore, it is important to raise awareness about promoting multicultural competence in preschool settings. The purpose of this paper is to examine the research evidence for the inclusion of Black children in the research studies that were used to develop these practical recommendations for preschool educators, as summarized by the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC). A systematic review was conducted of the original practice-guide analysis, focusing on studies that met WWC standards and provided evidence supporting the guide's recommendations. Out of 49 articles reviewed, approximately 43% included fewer than 25% Black children, 6% included no Black children, and 18% did not report race and ethnicity data. The analysis revealed a notable variance in the inclusion of Black children, highlighting a gap in early childhood and school psychology literature regarding the cultural relevance of recommendations for preparing young children for school. In addition to identifying gaps in intervention inclusion, this study offers actionable strategies for improving the cultural responsiveness of early childhood interventions. Implications for stakeholders include the need for disaggregated data, demographic reporting, and greater representation of diverse populations in early learning recommendations. Implications for research and practice will be discussed, including the validity of WWC studies and the relevance of these recommendations for young Black children.

Impact Statement

This paper examines the inclusion of Black American children in research that informs interventions and supports for preschool educators. Without reporting race and ethnicity data, it is challenging to assess the access, quality, and cultural relevance of interventions for preparing young Black children for kindergarten. This study explores implications for early childhood researchers and school psychologists.

1. Introduction

The access and quality of a child's early childhood education (ECE) can have a significant effect on their development, school readiness, and overall well-being. Young children with strong social–emotional and executive function skills, for example, may foster positive relationships and deal with problems more effectively [1, 2]. Similarly, exposing and creating opportunities for young children to develop early mathematics and literacy

ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/practiceguides

Check out our infographic on how teachers can use WWC Practice Guides to inform classroom practices.

Check out our infographics on levels of evidence in **Elementary** and **Secondary** Practice Guides.

All of the WWC Practice Guides are listed below in chronological order, by date of release.



Teacher-Delivered Behavioral Interventions in Grades K-5

Released: December 2024



Preparing Young Children for School

Released: August 2022



Providing Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 4–9

Released: March 2022



Effective Advising for Postsecondary Students

Released: October 2021



Designing and Delivering Career Pathways at Community Colleges

Released: March 2021



Assisting Students Struggling with Mathematics: Intervention in the Elementary Grades

Released: March 2021



Using Technology to Support Postsecondary Student Learning

Released: May 2019



Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools

Released: September 2017



Strategies for Postsecondary Students in Developmental Education–A Practice Guide for College and University Administrators, Advisors, and Faculty

Released: November 2016



Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively

Released: November 2016
(Revised December 2019)



Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade

Released: July 2016
(Revised December 2019)



Teaching Strategies for Improving Algebra Knowledge in Middle and High School Students

Released: April 2015
(Revised January 2019)



Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in



Teaching Math to Young Children



Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers

The Authority of Evidence-Based Recommendations

- **The WWC Influence:** The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) is a nationally recognized authority that identifies effective interventions and informs state-level funding and policy decisions.

- **The Practice Guide:** The study examined the "Preparing Young Children for School" guide, which provides seven core recommendations for preschool educators.

- **The Question:** Does the research used to develop these "strong" recommendations actually include Black children?

- **Methodology:** A systematic review of all 49 empirical articles cited by the WWC as meeting rigorous standards for this specific practice guide.

The Representation and Reporting Gap

- **The Two-Thirds Problem:** Approximately 67% of the studies reviewed either included fewer than 25% Black children, included no Black children, or failed to report race/ethnicity data entirely.

- **Colorblind Research:** 18% of the articles used to build national preschool recommendations did not mention the race or ethnicity of participants.

- **Domain-Specific Invisibility:** * Self-Regulation: 75% of studies had fewer than 25% Black children, and half did not report race.

    - **Social-Emotional Learning (SEL**): No studies in this domain included a majority-Black sample.
    - **Language & Math:** More than half of the studies in these domains included fewer than 25% Black participants.

Implications for Urban School Equity

- **The Assumption of Universality:** WWC recommendations appear universal but are structurally limited in their demonstrated applicability to Black children.
- **Zero Cultural Adaptation:** Notably, none of the interventions reviewed within the practice guide domains were culturally adapted or specific to Black populations.
- **Systemic Consequences:** Without representative data, interventions may be less effective for Black children who already face significant school readiness gaps and higher rates of exclusionary discipline.
- **Call for Action:** Stakeholders must question the cultural validity of evidence-based labels and demand demographic transparency to ensure equity in early childhood services.

Redefining Roles: Urban School Psychologists' Views on Mental Health



Lexi Myers, EdS
Ebony Mundy, EdS
Scott Graves Jr., PhD

Background: Urban Schools

Hard to define: Schools are shaped by social, cultural, and economic factors that impact students' experiences (Gadsden & Dixon-Román, 2017). Milner (2012) categorized urban communities into three types: urban intensive, urban emergent, and urban characteristic.

In comparison to suburban, town, and rural schools, urban schools have the highest

- student ethnic/racial tension
- student bullying
- widespread disorder in the classroom
- Provide the most mental health assessment, but the second lowest rate of mental health treatment

Background: School psychology in urban schools

- Recognized as a specialization within the field requiring context-specific competencies to address the complex needs of students in densely populated and resource-strapped communities.

- Traditional training models often fail to adequately prepare practitioners for the high levels of student diversity, poverty, and systemic dysfunction commonly found in these settings.

- American Psychological Association's Task Force on Urban Psychology (2005) conceptual framework: positioned urban contexts as unique sociocultural environments rather than simply geographic locations.

Prior research on Urban School Psychology

- Graves and colleagues (2014): Urban school psychologists are frequently assigned excessively large caseloads, sometimes exceeding 2,000 students, and are heavily focused on special education compliance tasks.

- Safer-Lichtenstein et al. (2019): Urbanicity, shapes diagnostic practices and referral patterns. System-level inequities and local norms influence even standardized decision-making processes, reinforcing the need for context-sensitive and equity-oriented approaches within urban school psychology.

Current Study: Purpose

1. To center the perspectives of school psychologists as frontline mental health providers in urban school systems
2. To examine how trauma, systemic inequities, and resource constraints shape mental health service delivery in urban schools
3. To identify structural barriers that limit preventative and therapeutic mental health interventions
4. To inform contextually responsive training, practice, and policy in urban school psychology

Research Questions:

1. How do school psychologists working in an urban school district conceptualize student mental health needs?

2. How do school psychologists describe their roles in identifying and addressing student mental health concerns within urban school settings?

3. What systemic and structural barriers do school psychologists perceive as constraining mental health service delivery in urban schools?

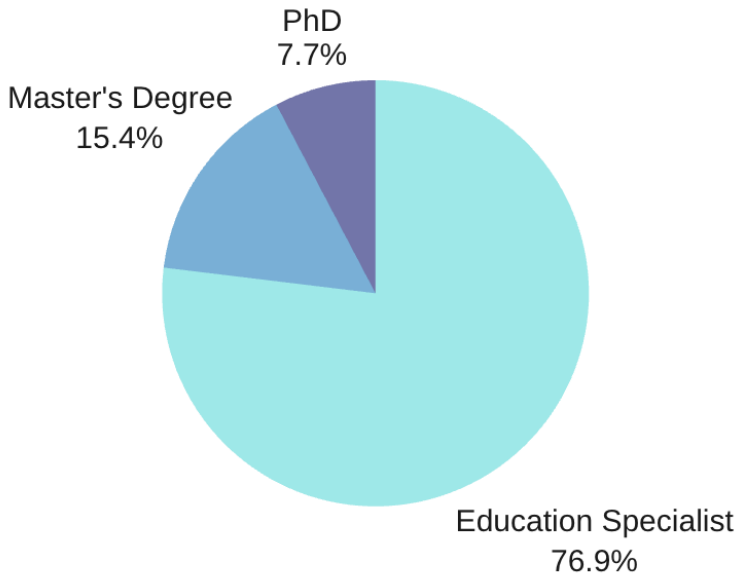
4. How do school psychologists perceive the adequacy of their graduate training in preparing them to meet the mental health needs of students in urban contexts?

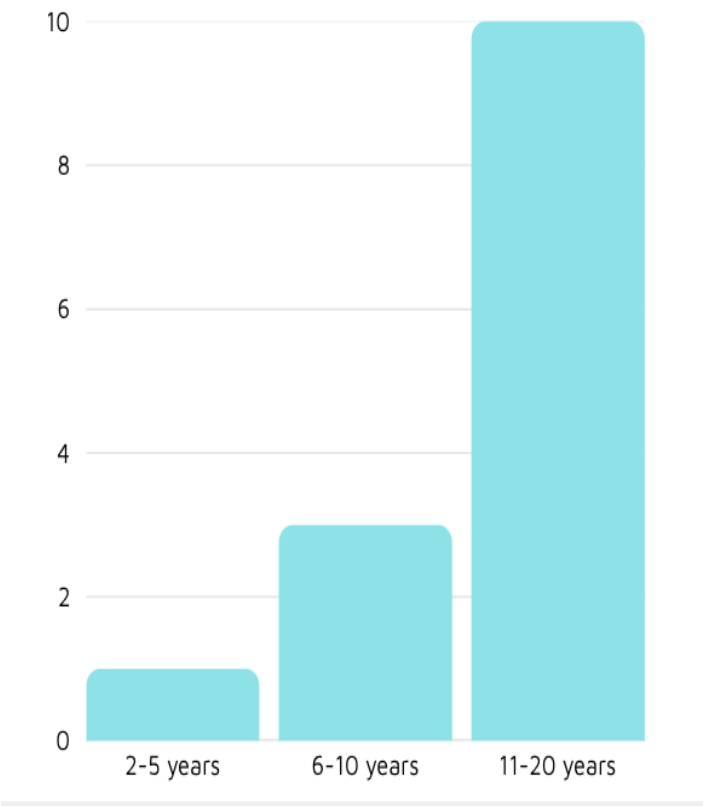
Participants

- 13 School Psychologists in a large, urban midwestern district
- 100% identified as female

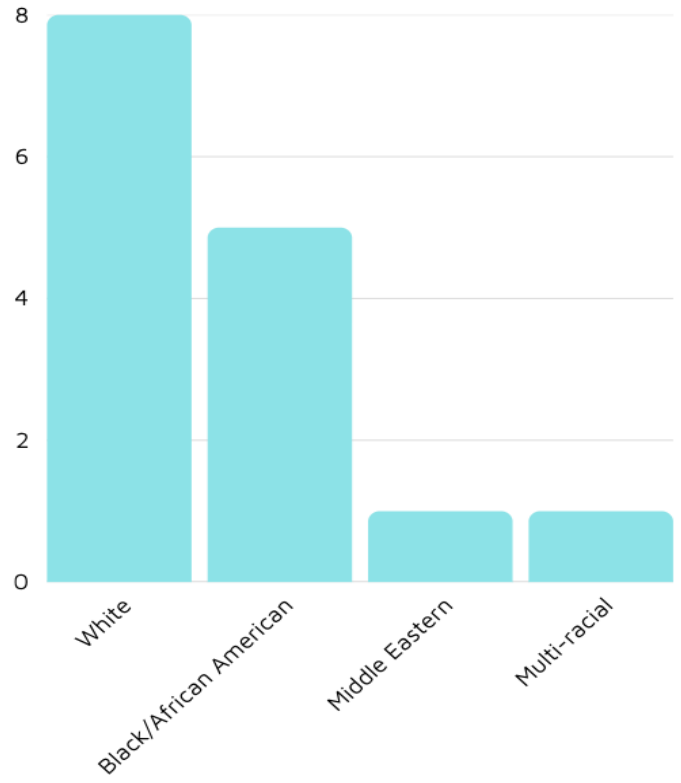
Education

Professional Experience





Race/Ethnicity



Data Collection & Analysis

Semi-structured interviews (45–65 minutes)

Open-ended questions on mental health needs, barriers, and training

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019)

Team-based coding with reflexivity and analytic memoing

Creation of themes

RESULTS

Theme 1: Student Trauma and Safety

Definition: Exposure to trauma (e.g., community violence, loss, incarceration of family members, instability, poverty-related stress), and perceived or actual lack of safety in students' homes, neighborhoods, and schools.

Sub-themes:

- Community violence and grief
- Ripple effects of systemic poverty and inequity

"We have to address the social, emotional, and community barriers because if kids don't feel safe, they don't feel regulated, and they don't have their basic needs met. Algebra, math, or reading, is not going to be in the forefront of their mind. They're worried about "Am I going to get food tonight? Am I going to be safe tonight when I go home?"

Theme 2: Systemic Barriers

Definition: Structural and institutional conditions that constrain school psychologists' ability to provide effective, sustained mental health services in urban schools

Sub-themes:

- Access to services
- Role constraint
- Bureaucratic and policy-level constraints

"We finally get a clinician started with a student, and then the family moves or the therapist changes. It's a revolving door."

Theme 3: Cultural mismatch and communication gaps

Definition: Differences between the cultural backgrounds, lived experiences, and belief systems of students and families and the norms, expectations, communication styles, and disciplinary practices embedded within school systems and professionals.

Sub-themes:

- Communication gaps between schools and families
- Trust and barriers to relationships

"I just wanted the child in school and she [the parent] dropped probably 30 'F bombs' on me because I was just trying to figure out how to get her child to school. She told me she was done kissing my *** and I just kept saying, "I'm just trying to help you and I'm trying to figure out how to get your son to school so that he can learn."

Theme 4: Training and preparation gaps

Definition: A discrepancy between what graduate programs teach school psychologists and what practitioners actually need to competently support student mental health in urban school contexts

Sub-themes:

- Limited preparation for mental health work in urban schools
- Need for more real-world, hands-on experience
- Need for realism and role socialization

"More of that hands-on experience, not just a practicum in a well-resourced school. They need to see the chaos a little bit."

Revisiting the Research Questions

Question 1: How do school psychologists working in an urban school district conceptualize student mental health needs?

- School psychologists conceptualized student mental health primarily through a trauma and chronic stress lens
- Emphasized community violence, grief, poverty, and systemic inequities as central drivers of students' emotional and behavioral functioning
- Mental health concerns were viewed as contextually embedded and cumulative, rather than as individual pathology
- Participants frequently noting that trauma-related dysregulation was misinterpreted as defiance, ADHD, or disability.

Question 2: How do school psychologists describe their roles in identifying and addressing student mental health concerns within urban school settings?

- Participants described their roles as largely reactive and crisis-oriented

- Although school psychologists viewed themselves as capable of supporting mental health through consultation, counseling, and systems-level work, their actual practice was constrained by limited time in buildings, high caseloads, and role fragmentation

- Prioritization of immediate crises over long-term intervention.

Question 3: What systemic and structural barriers do school psychologists perceive as constraining mental health service delivery in urban schools?

- Limited access to external mental health services
- High staff turnover
- Insurance and transportation barriers
- Inconsistent community partnerships
- Bureaucratic constraints/ lack of autonomy
- These collectively restricted prevention efforts, professional development, and coordinated mental health care.

Question 4: How do school psychologists perceive the adequacy of their graduate training in preparing them to meet the mental health needs of students in urban contexts?

- Participants overwhelmingly perceived their graduate training as insufficient for the realities of urban school-based mental health work

- Described coursework as overly theoretical and disconnected from practice.

- Emphasized the need for earlier and more immersive field experiences, explicit training in trauma-informed and culturally responsive practice, preparation for systemic constraints and compliance demands, and greater emphasis on role socialization, self-care, and professional boundaries.

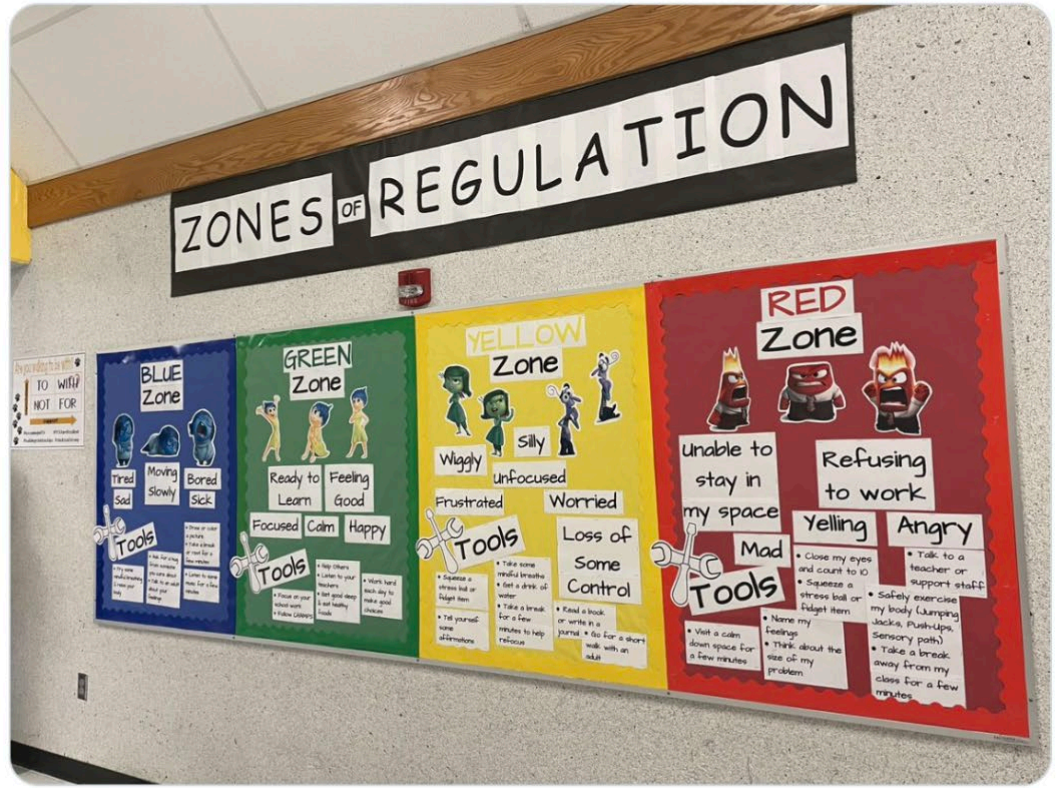
So, lets focus on an intervention that help to solve some of the problems that practitioners identified

U.S. Department of Education
@usedgov

When schools provide mental health support for students:

📚 Academic outcomes improve
⬇️ Discipline referrals are reduced
👨‍🎓 Both attendance & graduation rates increase

Here's how schools can support students' mental well-being:
safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research... #MondayMotivation



8:25 AM · Nov 27, 2023 · **9,130** Views

HAMMILL INSTITUTE ON DISABILITIES

The Journal of Special Education
2024, Vol. 57(4) 219–229
© Hammill Institute on Disabilities 2023
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/00224669231170202
journalofspecialeducation.sagepub.com
Sage

A Research Review of the Zones of Regulation Program

Brian K. Mason, MS[1,2], Justin B. Leaf, PhD[1,3], and Peter F. Gerhardt, EdD[1,4]

Abstract

The Zones of Regulation is a widely implemented program for social-emotional regulation, including for students with autism. To date, there is very little empirical evidence to show efficacy for the Zones of Regulation. According to standards published by the American Psychological Association, National Standards Project, and National Clearinghouse of Autism Evidence and Practice, the Zones of Regulation does not meet the standards for an evidence-based practice. The authors provide suggestions in support of additional empirical study of Zones of Regulation.

Keywords

autism, zones of regulation, evidence-based

Behavioral disruption in school often presents a challenge to educators in terms of general classroom management (Ducharme & Schecter, 2011). Disruptive behaviors such as horseplay, swearing, bullying, harassment, refusal, defiance, and fighting are issues that can negatively impact the efficacy of teachers in their delivery of instruction and can have a negative impact on the learning of other students in the class (Conklin & Jairam, 2021; Osher et al., 2010; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). There is a range of proactive and consequence-based approaches that teachers have used to address behavioral disruption. Common approaches include, but are not limited to, school-wide initiatives such as Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) (Bear et al., 2015; Horner et al., 2010; Ogulmus & Vuran, 2016). A recent review of the literature by Conradi et al. (2022) examined the application of PBIS in elementary and secondary school settings. Implementation of the Good Behavior Game, which although has been primarily examined in elementary, has also been evaluated in secondary school settings (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2016; Flower et al., 2014). Use of punitive approaches such as in-school and out-of-school suspensions (Blomberg, 2003; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Osher et al., 2010) have been evaluated with students from primary through senior grades. Finally, meta-analyses of self-regulation programs (Durlak et al., 2011; Silkenbeumer et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2017) have also indicated that this as a widely used strategy for students in the primary to senior grades.

Another common approach identified in the literature to address problematic behavior in schools is the provision of direct social-emotional instruction for students (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Wiglesworth et al., 2016). Research in social-emotional learning (SEL) has shown support for universal strategies targeting the SEL skills that will enhance a student's school experience (Greenberg et al., 2003). According to Elias et al. (1997), SEL is the acquisition of "core competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspective of others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations constructively" (as cited in Durlak et al., 2011, p. 406). While it may be reasonable to expect dedicated classroom time to develop these competencies, studies have shown that a failure to address development of SEL skills can lead to poor academic, personal, and social outcomes (Bear et al., 2015; Durlak et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2015). SEL skills are generally considered important for children to acquire and are particularly desirable within a classroom as these skills appear to form the necessary foundation for student and teacher success (Durlak et al., 2011; Homel & Edwards, 2018).

Self-regulation can be defined as an individual's ability to control their emotions, inhibit impulses for inappropriate actions, adjust their level of activity, engage appropriately

[1]Endicott College, Beverly, MA, USA
[2]Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
[3]Autism Partnership Foundation, Seal Beach, CA, USA
[4]Epic School

Corresponding Author:
Brian K. Mason, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, 20 Education Court, Hamilton, ON L9A 0B9, Canada.
E-mail: bmason@hwdsb.on.ca

What is Zones of Regulation

- The **Zones of Regulation** curriculum is a cognitive-behavioral program designed to help children develop emotional self-regulation skills (Kuypers, 2013).

- It is typically delivered by teachers or trained school professionals through structured lessons that include explicit instruction, role-play, and practice activities aimed at promoting real-world application.

- The program consists of 18 lessons, each lasting 30–60 minutes, and can be implemented in individual or small-group formats

- The curriculum is organized into three components:
  - (1) helping students recognize and label emotions using a color-coded system
  - (2) teaching strategies to regulate emotional and physiological responses
  - (3) guiding students on when and how to apply these strategies effectively in different situations.

Method

- This study employed a qualitative design using convenience sampling to recruit participants. School psychologists practicing within an urban school district were eligible for inclusion if they had direct experience implementing the Zones of Regulation curriculum.

- Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' perspectives on evidence-based intervention selection, implementation, and outcomes within urban school settings.

- Data collection is ongoing. Findings presented here reflect preliminary analysis based on three interviews completed to date. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across participant responses.

Preliminary Results

Theme 1: Time Is the Primary Barrier

- All three participants independently identified lack of instructional time as the single greatest challenge to implementing SEL interventions. Teachers are reluctant to release students during the school day, and rigid academic schedules leave little room for programming. One participant noted that a recent shift in Board of Education priorities — away from a "whole child" focus — has further reduced access to instructional time for SEL.

- *"The biggest challenge is getting the time to be able to do it."*

— Participant 1

- *"The biggest barrier for me is time... teachers won't give me the time to take them out of class."*

— Participant 2

Theme 2: The OSU Grant as a Critical Enabler

- Before the grant, participants reported limited resources, minimal formal programming, and no structured avenue for peer learning. The grant transformed what was possible — providing funding, certified training, updated materials, and a framework for collegial communication among school psychologists.

- *"I have resources available to me because of the grant that I normally wouldn't have."* — Participant 3

- *"The grant has been able to provide some of that for Zones of Regulation and Bounce Back."* — Participant 1

Theme 3: Cultural Adaptation Is Essential

- All three participants modified Zones of Regulation materials to better reflect their diverse student populations. The original curriculum was described as outdated and lacking racial and cultural representation. Adaptations included selecting culturally relevant books and video clips, updating visual materials to include diverse imagery, and creating entirely new reproducibles featuring children of color.

- *"We recreated everything... it was not appropriate for an urban district."*

— Participant 3

- *"We try to use materials that are a little bit more reflective of our student population."*

— Participant 1

Theme 4: Collaboration Is Limited but Valued

- Despite working in the same district, participants reported little formal collaboration with other school psychologists on SEL implementation. Most work was conducted independently or alongside OSU graduate students. The grant created a rare structured space for peer sharing, which participants described as meaningful.

- *"No, that would be a nice thing to do."* — Participant 2, when asked if she collaborates with colleagues on interventions

- *"Because of the grant, there's been some more communication... to kind of align what we're doing."* — Participant 1

Theme 5: Measuring Outcomes Is Challenging

- All three participants expressed difficulty capturing the impact of their interventions through formal measures. Existing questionnaires were described as insufficiently sensitive to the changes participants observed in students. Each was experimenting with different approaches, including teacher rating scales, session-level check-ins, and one-on-one data collection.

- *"I do see changes in the kids. I hear them using the vocabulary, I see them using the tools. I just want to find a better way to capture the changes I see."* — Participant 2

Theme 6: Advocacy and Buy-In Are Essential

- Teacher support — built over years in the same building — was a key factor in successful implementation. Administrative priorities directly shaped what was possible. Participants emphasized that school psychologists must actively advocate for SEL programs, particularly as academic pressures push these initiatives to the margins.

- *"As school psychologists, we need to be involved in that advocacy process to keep those types of programs in place — we're one of the only groups of people who is advocating for that."* — Participant 1

- *"If you don't have everyone using that same language, it's not really gonna generalize."* — Participant 2

Modifications

Updating Visual Representation

- All three participants noted that the original Zones of Regulation materials featured almost exclusively white children, which felt alienating for their student populations. They addressed this in different ways. P1 began using updated materials from the Zones of Regulation website that now include more diverse imagery.
- P3 went further: she and her practicum student recreated the materials entirely from scratch, building a custom storybook and reproducibles featuring children of color that reflected the specific students in their groups (African American and Hispanic boys).
- P2 noted that her newer edition of the curriculum book now includes images of girls wearing hijabs, which she found meaningful for her population.

Tailoring Lesson Content and Scenarios

- P1 described adjusting the scenarios discussed within lessons to reflect what her students had actually been exposed to, including community violence and generational poverty, rather than using the default examples in the curriculum.
- She also selected books and video clips that her students could see themselves in, even when those weren't the ones recommended by the curriculum.

Modifications cont.

Adopting a Communal, Team-Based Approach

- HJ took a philosophically different angle, drawing on the book *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood* to inform how she frames group sessions.
- Rather than leading from the front, she builds a shared vision with students at the start of every group. Having them collaboratively create the group rules and norms. She described this as giving students genuine buy-in and voice, which she saw as particularly important for her urban population.

Picking and Choosing Rather Than Following the Book

- Both P2 and P3 explicitly said they don't follow the curriculum straight through. They select lessons based on what they know about their students' specific needs and responses, adjusting as they go.
- P2 noted this makes students more engaged. P3 said running a whole second-grade class through the full curriculum once taught her it works far better as a targeted small-group intervention.

- The throughline across all three is that they treated Zones of Regulation as a flexible framework rather than a fixed program
  - Adapting the visuals, the language, the examples, and even the philosophy of delivery to match their students' lived experiences and cultural contexts.

Modifications cont.

Supplementing with Complementary Tools

- P2 also integrated PAX tools alongside Zones of Regulation to address something she felt the curriculum lacked: clear behavior management strategies for when groups get rowdy.

- P2 similarly pulled in techniques from a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy professional development session and wove them into her Bounce Back groups, treating the curriculum as a starting point rather than a rigid script.

Conclusion: Rethinking Evidence-Based Practice in Urban Schools

- **The Myth of Universality**: Many interventions are labeled *Evidence-based* despite being tested on samples that do not reflect the diversity of urban school populations.

- **Systemic Reporting Gaps**: In early childhood research, approximately two-thirds of studies used to set national standards either underrepresent Black children or fail to report racial demographics entirely.

- **Framework Limits:** Prioritize internal validity over external validity and equity.

- **Ethical Responsibility**: School stakeholders and researchers must move beyond standard protocols and seek guidance for implementation in diverse, real-world settings