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## Questioning the Rule: The Civic Implications of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) as a Pedagogy of Power

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Abstract:

What if America's students were taught that being a good citizen meant questioning rules before rule breakers? This capstone is a project in putting theory and practice into conversation with each other to understand the civic ideals endorsed by Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), a widely-celebrated, federally-funded behavioral management framework. Through political and critical theory, including work from Marxist, Black feminist, anti-capitalist, and anti-colonial educational theorists, I will re-describe PBIS to render it as new and subject its contribution to the building of American civic subjects and national character to critique. In a political discourse analysis detailing how power manifests subtly within the PBIS framework to influence students' perceptions of legality, justness, deservingness, community, and threats to its sanctity, I make three main points. First, I explain that PBIS is a highly disciplinary program which renders authority figures infallible and prohibits students from contributing to the establishment of community norms. Second, I explain that the foundational philosophy of PBIS—behavioral psychology—is a reductive approach to educating children that de-emphasizes moral and interpersonal relationships in favor of appealing to base desires with external rewards. Finally, I will illustrate how PBIS creates a dichotomy of the moral and deserving rule follower and the immoral and undeserving rule breaker to fuel a political economy of abidingness. I will conclude with a discussion of the parallels between the aforementioned and the attitudes which underpin American community and identity, particularly as related to anti-immigrant and anti-poverty sentiment. I hope this capstone provokes questions about a world in which students are taught to locate and resist unjust power—to put humanity above law.

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Yale University

**Questioning the Rule:  
The Civic Implications of Positive Behavioral Interventions and  
Supports (PBIS) as a Pedagogy of Power**

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A Senior Capstone Project in Education Studies

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### **Abstract**

What if America's students were taught that being a good citizen meant questioning rules before rule breakers? This capstone is a project in putting theory and practice into conversation with each other to understand the civic ideals endorsed by Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), a widely-celebrated, federally-funded behavioral management framework. Through political and critical theory, including work from Marxist, Black feminist, anti-capitalist, and anti-colonial educational theorists, I will re-describe PBIS to render it as new and subject its contribution to the building of American civic subjects and national character to critique. In a political discourse analysis detailing how power manifests subtly within the PBIS framework to influence students' perceptions of legality, justness, deservingness, community, and threats to its sanctity, I make three main points. First, I explain that PBIS is a highly disciplinary program which renders authority figures infallible and prohibits students from contributing to the establishment of community norms. Second, I explain that the foundational philosophy of PBIS— behavioral psychology— is a reductive approach to educating children that de-emphasizes moral and interpersonal relationships in favor of appealing to base desires with external rewards. Finally, I will illustrate how PBIS creates a dichotomy of the moral and deserving rule follower and the immoral and undeserving rule breaker to fuel a political economy of abidingness. I will conclude with a discussion of the parallels between the aforementioned and the attitudes which underpin American community and identity, particularly as related to anti-immigrant and anti-poverty sentiment. I hope this capstone provokes questions about a world in which students are taught to locate and resist unjust power— to put humanity above law.

### **Introduction**

As a rule-abiding and adoring student—an identity I carried from my K-12 public schooling to my time at Yale— I have enjoyed the privilege of having an educational experience free of disciplinary infractions and ripe with praise, certificates, and favoritism from teachers and administrators. Growing up, I never had any trouble abiding by and justifying the norms and rules to which my teachers expected me to adhere. I found myself surrounded by classmates who often pushed our teachers' class-disruption tolerances, either by choice or by circumstance. I always loved school and saw it as a chance to steer my own life and, quite frankly, excel and be recognized for it; and so I continued beyond what was required with a clean record at Yale University. Many of my less obedient peers dreaded schooling which, for more than a few, was the start of a long and storied record with law enforcement; and so they left their schooling

before or after graduating from high school. Dichotomies like this often made me feel like I was made to thrive in the American public education system, and that I did not deserve to.

## **Background**

### *The Rise of PBIS*

During the early 1990s, the U.S. saw a turning point in school discipline with the influx of zero-tolerance policies, police presence, and surveillance cameras, which effectively signaled the shift from “discretionary disciplinary framework” to “crime control paradigm.”<sup>1</sup> This paradigm shift seen in schools, now more than ever, clearly prescribes a relationship students should have with rules and the law: those who abide are successful— good and deserving; those who do not abide are failures— bad and threats. The decades-long shift toward more rigidly disciplinary schools birthed the sociological subfield of school criminalization studies, which “explores how school criminalization expresses, accommodates, and reinforces broader fears and political-economic changes.”<sup>2</sup> As a result, scholars and practitioners have begun to take a critical look at the implications of school criminalization and exclusionary discipline and found that it can send students a “push out” message, so as to say they are “unwelcome from school.”<sup>3</sup>

As an effort to circumvent the salient effects of exclusionary discipline, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) was adopted in the early 2000s after the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (1997) as a structure to “enhance academic and social behavior outcomes for all students.”<sup>4</sup> Rooted in behavioral psychology,

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<sup>1</sup> Hirschfield, Paul J., and Katarzyna Celinska. "Beyond Fear: Sociological Perspectives on the Criminalization of School Discipline." *Sociology Compass* 5.1 (2011): 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Anfinson, Allison, et al. "Disproportionate Minority Representation in Suspension and Expulsion in Minnesota Public Schools A report from the Minnesota Department of Education." *International Journal on School Disaffection* 7.2 (2010): 8.

<sup>4</sup> "Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports." *Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports*. OSEP Technical Assistance Center. 2019. Web.

PBIS is an integrative behavioral management framework which revolves around systems, data, and practices intended to produce outcomes of positive behavior through school-wide implementation. Since 1998, PBIS has been funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (SEP) and the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE).<sup>5</sup> Support for schools implementing PBIS is offered through the OSEP Technical Assistance Center, which has an entire branch of service dedicated to PBIS.

*What is PBIS?*

PBIS is a disciplinary framework designed to replace exclusionary discipline, like suspension and expulsion, with positive reinforcements in the form of external rewards for desirable behavior. PBIS provides educators with tools, reports, and training materials to observe and collect data on students' behavior so they can plan to either pre-empt negative behaviors before they occur or intervene when a student engages in them. PBIS controls student behavior by making rewards—praise, recognition, or incentives—more available for meeting clearly established classroom conduct expectations than for failing to meet them. PBIS rewards and incentives most frequently appear as in the form of token economies within which students are rewarded with “currency” for their good behavior that can be redeemed for privileges and items ranging from a movie day outside to shampoo and toothpaste from a school PBIS store. In addition to external rewards, compliance with rules is enforced by classroom social pressure and group rewards (i.e. if the whole class behaves, they will earn a reward) and a conflation of classroom rules with moral values. Ultimately, PBIS curates classroom environments in which the more closely students conform to and comply with classroom behavioral norms, the more rewards are available.

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<sup>5</sup> "Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports." *Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports*. OSEP Technical Assistance Center. 2019. Web.

PBIS presents itself as a philosophical shift away from *reacting to bad* behaviors and toward *promoting good* behaviors. The primary techniques of PBIS to optimize behavioral outcomes are behavior contracts, group contingencies, and token economies, all of which establish mutually acknowledged and agreed upon rules which students and teachers sign and promise to follow.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, PBIS curates classroom environments which make more rewards available for certain behaviors than for others. As a result, in the PBIS classroom, those “good” behaviors become more advantageous for students and their peers.

Despite a three-tiered behavioral prevention logic, PBIS is intentionally amorphous. The U.S. Department of Education has specifically indicated that PBIS refers to no specific program or curriculum and generally references “a multi-tiered behavioral framework” whose goal is to “improve behavioral and academic outcomes by improving school climate, preventing problem behavior, increasing learning time, promoting positive social skills, and delivering effective behavioral interventions and supports.”<sup>7</sup> Instead, PBIS offers schools a general framework and guiding principles which they can implement with context-specific nuances.

At the core of the philosophy of PBIS is its programmatic organization, which is defined as “groups of individuals whose collective behaviors are directed toward a common goal and maintained by a common outcome.”<sup>8</sup> PBIS considers classrooms, schools, and educational agencies as organizations which “must operate as effectively, efficiently, and relevantly to benefit each member,”<sup>9</sup> and thus delineates four defining features of an effective organization: common vision and values, common language, common experience, and quality leadership.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Brown, Casey. “How to Use PBIS Strategies in the Classroom.” *Classcraft*. 12 March 2019. Web.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Skinner, Burrhus Frederic. *Science and Human Behavior*. No. 92904. Simon and Schuster, 1965.

<sup>9</sup> Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. “Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Implementation Blueprint: Part 1— Foundations and Supporting Information.” Office of Special Education Programs. 18 October 2015. Web.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

## Method

Amidst a wide range of literature establishing the need for PBIS, the effect of exclusionary discipline and criminalization on students and schools, and the transformative potential of PBIS on student attitudinal, behavioral, and academic outcomes, scholarship has not yet explicitly examined how PBIS might contribute to the building of American civic subjects and national character. The gap in literature can be traced to how school discipline and the American nation are discussed. Scholars and academics, or those whose work is grounded in critical, social, and political theory, are not focused on PBIS because it is discursively designated a matter of practice. The opposite is true for educators, policymakers, and practitioners: those who implement PBIS do not apply theory to their work in the field because it is designated a matter of academia. However, when theory and practice fail to communicate, unintentional consequences are overlooked, and harm can easily be normalized.

This capstone draws from political and critical theory, including work from Marxist, Black feminist, anti-capitalist, and anti-colonial educational theorists, to re-describe the well-known object of PBIS. While PBIS claims to do one thing—replace exclusionary discipline with positive behavioral support—its messaging suggests it is also doing other things. To determine the unnamed political consequences, I am going to create a thick description of PBIS that looks different than it does in its promotional material. Re-describing the practices of PBIS in classrooms provides the chance to come to a greater understanding of this model that has taken off with wild popularity across the U.S. schools. By drawing a new picture of what PBIS looks like, I will seek to critique it as new. When describing PBIS in Foucauldian and Marxist and Freirean terms, I hope to subject the widely celebrated program to new questions which have the potential to reveal a deeper layer of political consciousness.

For the critique, I will review relevant political and social theorists and theories and establish them as the tools with which I will re-describe a selection of raw materials: primary sources distributed by PBIS and its students and instructors. By re-describing PBIS as new, one can subject this widely-celebrated disciplinary regime to new questions. I will first focus on the PBIS website and its expansive materials, testimonials, and case studies of the framework's implementation. Then, I will seek online testimonials from parents, teachers, students, and administrators posted on blogs and social media to gain firsthand insight into the experiences of working with and under PBIS. In doing so, I will glean examples of "positive behavior," how it is encouraged among students, and what messages it has the potential to send about students' relationships with rules and each other. By applying theory to practice, I will portray a PBIS which is fundamentally different from how it self-identifies to imagine otherwise and analyze its political consequences as a federally-funded program of citizen socialization.

While most scholarship on PBIS focuses on its implementation's effect on student performance, school climate, mental health, and disciplinary outcomes, this capstone will focus on the less manifest, normative culture of obedience encouraged by PBIS. A critique via re-description has the potential to illuminate previously overlooked consequences of PBIS on civic engagement and democracy— terms in which this classroom management technique has not yet been described. By doing so, we can see how scholars have failed to analyze the intentions of PBIS as a reflection of the types of attitudes rewarded in American society, and its implementation as a form of citizen socialization. Understanding the fine-grain mechanisms of socialization and perceptions of security at the school level offers an opportunity to understand them at the national level.

### **Limitations and Scope**

This capstone does not seek to make any causal argument about how schools socialize students to theorize power a certain way as adults. In fact, a necessary caveat to this study is that people are socialized in myriad ways. It would be false to attribute any single attitude to any one of those ways. Instead, I hope to draw a parallel between the logics and dominant discourses of security, legality, justness, deservingness, and threat perception we see in both the spheres of the school community and the national community.

This study is a critique of the stated intentions of PBIS (the why), not the effects of PBIS (the how). The critique focuses on what PBIS says it is doing and how individuals are being recruited and trained to carry that out, not what types of people and citizens the pedagogy creates. I will not critique individuals who were educated within the PBIS framework or who help perpetuate it in their schools, or who they become. The socio-emotional, behavioral, academic, and attitudinal effects of PBIS on students have been researched at length, help explain PBIS' popularity, and will be described here in a literature review.

### **Behavioral Psychology**

Rooted in behavioral psychology, PBIS proposes to enhance students' educational experiences by dramatically reducing the need for punitive or exclusionary disciplinary tactics and replacing them with positive rewards to incentivize good behavior. Behavioral psychology is based on the theory that individuals and groups can be controlled through inputs and incentives. The central goal of PBIS, to optimize positive behavior through external rewards and incentives and, thus, minimize negative behavior, then, is directly compatible with the logic of positive reinforcement.

The behaviorist theory of learning states that learning can only take place when a change in outward behavior is observed.<sup>11</sup> Behaviorist learning is not concerned with the inward, mental processing of the learner because it is deemed “too subjective.”<sup>12</sup> Psychologist B.F. Skinner is known for his behaviorist approach to education which supports emphasis on observable behavior: he suggested educators encourage positive behavior in students rather than punish negative behavior.<sup>13</sup> The popularity of Skinner’s ideas demonstrates a pivot from the belief that harsh consequences are sufficient to control behavior to the belief that external rewards as incentive for good behavior is a more efficient mode of control. Essentially, if behavior is so perfectly driven by the desire for external rewards, punishment would be deemed unnecessary.

As a result, the primary principle of learning in the behaviorist approach to education is conditioning. By frequently repeating activities, making objectives clear, and reinforcing positive behaviors, students will quickly learn to pair their behaviors with results doled out by their teachers.<sup>14</sup> For this reason, the behaviorist teacher is results oriented: they will create an environment designating the intended behavior favorable to students. For example, if a teacher wants to encourage healthy competition among students taking an exam, the behaviorist teacher will rank students’ scores and publish them in the classroom and provoke students to want to out-rank their peers.<sup>15</sup>

Skinner’s positive reinforcement model— known as operant conditioning— shifted pedagogical focus away from classical conditioning— the previously accepted theory presented

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<sup>11</sup> Seryda Adwubi Britwum. “Discuss the Educational Implications of the Behaviorist Theory in the Mathematics Classroom.” University of Cape Coast College of Education, 2014, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Cherry, K. “Behaviorism.” *Psychology About*. 8 October 2014. Web.

<sup>13</sup> Heward, William L., and John O. Cooper. "Radical Behaviorism: A Productive and Needed Philosophy for Education." *Journal of Behavioral Education* 2.4 (1992): 345-365.

<sup>14</sup> Seryda Adwubi Britwum. “Discuss the Educational Implications of the Behaviorist Theory in the Mathematics Classroom.” University of Cape Coast College of Education, (2014): 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

by Ivan Pavlov. In classical conditioning, people are taught to re-associate reactions and stimuli to change their situational behavior. The famed experiment featuring Pavlov's dogs best demonstrates classical conditioning. Dogs are conditioned, through repetition and the pairing of reactions and new stimuli, to salivate when they hear a bell which typically indicates food, even without being presented food.<sup>16</sup> Operant conditioning, however, uses positive reinforcement to access people's psychological reward system and shape behavior. In a famous experiment, Skinner demonstrated how operant conditioning works by showing how rats changed their behavior in response to positive reinforcement. When placed in a box, later known as a Skinner box, rats accidentally hit a lever that released a food pellet.<sup>17</sup> Soon, upon seeing that their behavior was positively rewarded, the rats intentionally hit the lever to receive food.

Behavioral psychology has a long history of informing instructional and disciplinary practices in U.S. schools. Positive behavioral support, PBS, from which many of the techniques in PBIS is derived, is defined as "a systematic approach to the delivery of clinical and educational services that is rooted in behavior analysis."<sup>18</sup> The three central features of PBS—a person-centered value base, recognition of the individuality of each person, and working toward meaningful outcomes through assessment and multifaceted interventions<sup>19</sup>—all originate in applied behavioral analysis. Applied behavioral analysis does not stress the theoretical importance of the disciplinary technique. but instead, its power in "altering behavior enough to

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<sup>16</sup> Rehman, Ibraheem, Navid Mahabadi, and Chaudhry I. Rehman. "Classical Conditioning." *StatPearls*, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Staddon, John ER, and Daniel T. Cerutti. "Operant Conditioning." *Annual Review of Psychology* 54.1 (2003): 115-144.

<sup>18</sup> Anderson, Cynthia M., and Kurt A. Freeman. "Positive Behavior Support: Expanding the Application of Applied Behavior Analysis." *The Behavior Analyst* 23.1 (2000): 85-94.

<sup>19</sup> Carr, James E., and Tina M. Sidener. "On the Relation between Applied Behavior Analysis and Positive Behavioral Support." *The Behavior Analyst* 25.2 (2002): 246.

be socially important.”<sup>20</sup> Given the heavy overlap of PBS characteristics and applied behavioral analysis, PBS is widely known as a “behavior-analytic service-delivery framework.”<sup>21</sup>

PBIS’ locatedness within PBS explicitly exposes PBIS a disciplinary regime dedicated to behavioral management and little more. PBIS is fixated on observable behaviors and neglects students’ independent cognitive, emotional, and social capacities as they relate to behavior or their well-being. Instead, in line with PBS, PBIS replaces response to social and emotional needs of children with external rewards which directly tap into the psychological reward system of children.

The paradigmatic shift from classical to operant conditioning was underscored when PBIS entered the realm of school discipline. Using positive reinforcement, PBIS could ensure that the ability to psychologically manipulate students became less manifest while its disciplinary nature remained the same. In doing so, PBIS token economies punish students who are trying to learn the expected behavior because it rewards those who already know how to do it: nothing is learned, and no behavior is adjusted.<sup>22</sup> PBIS simply perpetuates dominant culture discourses of normal behavior and power.<sup>23</sup>

Further, a number of scholars of education and pedagogy have employed Foucauldian theory to critique PBIS and behavioral psychology as weaponizing biopower and individualization to medicalize students and punish those who are not neuro-typical. By characterizing PBIS as a school discipline regime which “constitutes the formation and legitimation of certain knowledges, relationships, skills, values, and ultimately, subjectivities,”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Bornstein, Joshua. "Can PBIS Build Justice Rather Than Merely Restore Order?." *The School to Prison Pipeline: The Role of Culture and Discipline in School*. Emerald Publishing Limited, 2017. 135-167.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Robbins, Christopher G., and Serhiy Kovalchuk. "Dangerous disciplines: Understanding Pedagogies of Punishment in the Neoliberal States of America." *Journal of Pedagogy/Pedagogický Casopis* 3.2 (2012): 198-218.

one understands power to circulate in an insidious way. Foucault's theories of governmentality and biopolitics, some argue, "mirror the primary modes of punishing and discipline under neoliberalism: criminalization and individualization."<sup>25</sup> Consequently, though PBIS claims to be a non-violent alternative to suspension and expulsion, it has the same effect on students as a "medicalized system of restoring order." The medicalization of students can pathologize unwanted behavior as a behavioral disability, calling "disorderly" students "disordered" students without consideration of their identity: their race, class, gender identity, or neuro-typicality.<sup>26</sup> The medicalization of students deems disorderly behavior the most severe problem in schools, and the orderly student inherently "good." Compliance as "normal" becomes a baseline condition against which "The more diagnostic and therapeutic discourses of upper tiers of PBIS would be measured."<sup>27</sup>

### **The Popularity of PBIS**

As of October 2018, the SEP and OESE re-launched a new, five-year funding cycle to help schools implement more intensive tiers of PBIS framework targeting at-risk students.<sup>28</sup> PBIS is widely celebrated as a silver bullet remedy for slumping student attitudes, mental health,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Bornstein, Joshua. "Can PBIS Build Justice Rather Than Merely Restore Order?." Emerald Publishing Limited, 2017. 135-167. "PBIS is Broken: How Do We Fit It?" *Why Haven't They Done That Yet*. 16 April 2018. Web.

<sup>27</sup> Bornstein, Joshua. "'If They're On Tier 1, There Are Really No Concerns That We Can See': PBIS Medicalizes Compliant Behavior." *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research* 9.4, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> "About the TA Center." *Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports*. OSEP Technical Assistance Center. 2019. Web.

and school climates and for disciplinary and academic outcomes.<sup>29,30,31</sup> Today, nearly 28,000 K-12 schools in U.S. 49 states use PBIS.<sup>32</sup>

*The Effect of PBIS on Mental Health, Student Attitudes, and School Climate*

With mental health at the forefront of educational concerns during the last decade, many studies have specifically analyzed how PBIS contributes to student wellness, particularly among at risk populations, interpersonal attitudes, and school climate. Most studies find that PBIS has an overwhelmingly positive impact on students' mental health outcomes, particularly when supplemented with social-emotional learning techniques (SEL).<sup>33</sup> In schools which implemented both PBIS and SEL, students showed increased engagement with course material and a faster acquisition of social-emotional skills.<sup>34</sup>

The mental health of students who experience childhood trauma is a particularly salient issue in schooling. One of the core tenets of PBIS is to respond to all students as individuals with varying needs, and students who experienced childhood trauma are certainly included. In a study on how PBIS impacts students who experienced neglect and abuse, a parent who adopted a previously neglected child and the PBIS interventionists at the school were interviewed. All interviewees recalled that PBIS had a positive impact on the student, who received a particularly

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<sup>29</sup> PBIS has rapidly grown in popularity since its conception, seeing an 80% increase from 2008 to 2014. Molloy, Lauren E., et al. "Understanding Real-World Implementation Quality and "Active Ingredients" of PBIS." *Prevention Science* 14.6 (2013): 593-605.

<sup>30</sup> 21% of the nearly 133,000 public and private primary and secondary schools nation-wide use PBIS. "Educational Institutions." *Fast Facts*. National Center for Education Statistics. Web.

<sup>31</sup> As of 2016, 13%, or about 3,100, of PBIS schools were high schools, making 7% of all U.S. high schools PBIS schools. Freeman, J., S. Wilkinson, and J. Vanlone. "Status of High School PBIS Implementation in the US." *Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports* (2017).

<sup>32</sup> "About the TA Center." *Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports*. OSEP Technical Assistance Center. 2019. Web.

<sup>33</sup> Cook, Clayton R., et al. "An Integrated Approach to Universal Prevention: Independent and Combined Effects of PBIS and SEL on Youths' Mental Health." *School Psychology Quarterly* 30.2 (2015): 166.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

individualized and intensive PBIS.<sup>35</sup> The student received focused functional assessments of problem behaviors, workshops on person-centered planning, and help developing a behavioral support plan to anticipate and subvert instances of problem behavior before they manifested in full.<sup>36</sup> The study pointed to the need for more empirical research on how PBIS can support students who have experienced abuse and neglect, but ultimately concluded that in this case, the student was greatly supported by PBIS strategies.<sup>37</sup>

Mental health problems have been linked to increased interpersonal problems, long-term unemployment, and increased dropout and incarceration rates among young adults, all of which contribute to negative opinions about schooling, peers, and being part of a schooling community among students. PBIS is widely lauded for improving students' attitudes toward each other, their peers, and their teachers. Specifically, students educated in a PBIS framework were corrected significantly less than students in a non-PBIS school in one study,<sup>38</sup> creating a more positive student-teacher rapport. Such a change is attributed to the "instructional ecology" of PBIS, which prioritizes prevention and therefore rarely reaches exclusion, which significantly reduces aggressive behavior and hostility among students.<sup>39</sup>

PBIS also works across educational settings. In a study on applying PBIS to alternative education for students with particularly high-risk behavior, similarities are drawn between the structure of a public school and the alternative program, and the authors argue PBIS helps both programs in a similar way. In a restrictive setting, PBIS can improve interpersonal attitudes so

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<sup>35</sup> Buschbacher, Pamelazita W. "Positive Behavior Support for a Young Child Who has Experienced Neglect and Abuse: Testimonials of a Family Member and Professionals." *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions* 4.4 (2002): 242-248.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Scott, John S., et al. "Effects of Positive Unified Behavior Support on Instruction." *International Journal on School Disaffection* 6.2 (2009): 41-48.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

long as it is carried out with the highest degree of fidelity.<sup>40</sup> By doing so, students who are already susceptible to feeling excluded from the school community can be included in decision-making and administrators who might typically react to these students with more reactive and punitive tactics can promote a more encouraging school climate.<sup>41</sup> Here, it is important to note PBIS reveals itself as a regime which tracks students' risk profiles in order to best intervene—and therefore anticipate— certain students' behavioral outcomes before they even occur.

PBIS has the capacity to improve student attitudes between peers, too. In a longitudinal study run across 37 elementary schools, 2,507 staff mentioned a “significant effect” of PBIS on the school environment over three years.<sup>42</sup> Through the lens of public health, PBIS has even been known to foster accepting and supportive school climates which reduce bullying between students.<sup>43</sup> PBIS and its non-specific framework can serve as a useful tool to implement a variety of programs, like anti-bullying seminars, that reduce hostility among the student body and contribute to a healthier overall educational environment.

Despite widespread praise for the effect of PBIS interventions on students' mental health, the meaning behind the vague buzzword “mental health” should be interrogated. The above studies tend to reduce mental health to surface-level happiness driven by a “healthy” desire to please authority and the external rewards which follow from that. In the aforementioned studies, PBIS success metrics can be reduced down to the quelling of student dissent and voiced dissatisfaction. If one were to define “mental health” as a collective project in social justice and empowerment, I am not sure that the current success metrics would stand.

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<sup>40</sup> Simonsen, Brandi, and George Sugai. "PBIS in Alternative Education Settings: Positive Support for Youth with High-Risk Behavior." *Education and Treatment of Children* (2013): 3-14.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Bradshaw, Catherine P., et al. "The Impact of School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) on the Organizational Health of Elementary Schools." *School Psychology Quarterly* 23.4 (2008): 462.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

*The Effect of PBIS on Student Academic and Disciplinary Outcomes*

Student academic and disciplinary outcomes stem from mental health, so the success of PBIS interventions are often quantified by their positive effect on them. One salient study of school-wide PBIS implementation in New Hampshire middle and high schools reports that over five years, schools saw 6,010 fewer office referrals, 1,032 fewer suspensions, and the recovery of 864 days of teaching, 1,701 days of learning, and 571 days of leadership.<sup>44</sup> Though, such a positive student outcome is often dependent on implementation fidelity of PBIS—<sup>45</sup> despite its intentional programmatic vagueness.

Researchers agree that most essential to PBIS improving disciplinary outcomes among students is real-world implementation fidelity, especially since some schools are more conducive to high quality implementation than others (i.e. small, primary schools whose students are of higher socioeconomic status).<sup>46</sup>

Disciplinary disparities are also reportedly reduced by PBIS. Studies have found that class disruptions in the form of disciplinary removals were significantly reduced for low-income students and males more than other demographics.<sup>47</sup> Students who are traditionally disproportionately subjected to school discipline, like Black students, were disciplined at a more equal rate to that of their peers in multiple PBIS schools.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Muscott, Howard S., Eric L. Mann, and Marcel R. LeBrun. "Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports in New Hampshire: Effects of Large-Scale Implementation of Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support on Student Discipline and Academic Achievement." *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions* 10.3 (2008): 190-205.

<sup>45</sup> Bradshaw, Catherine P., Mary M. Mitchell, and Philip J. Leaf. "Examining the Effects of Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports on Student Outcomes: Results from a Randomized Controlled Effectiveness Trial in Elementary Schools." *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions* 12.3 (2010): 133-148.

<sup>46</sup> Molloy, Lauren E., et al. "Understanding Real-World Implementation Quality and "Active Ingredients" of PBIS." *Prevention Science* 14.6 (2013): 593-605.

<sup>47</sup> Norton, Linda Clark. *The Impact of Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports (PBIS) on Student Behavior and Academic Achievement*. ProQuest LLC. 789 East Eisenhower Parkway, PO Box 1346, Ann Arbor, MI 48106, 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Ellwood, Kathleen. "The Perceptions of Teachers in a K-8 School on the Implementation and Impact of Culturally Responsive-Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (CR-PBIS)." (2017).

Part of why PBIS has been so positively received by teachers is because, as Carla Shalaby points out in *Troublemakers*, teachers quickly grow exhausted trying to force students to conform to rules against their will.<sup>49</sup> Disciplinary problems are a major contributor to teacher burnout— in fact, among new teachers who leave the field, disciplinary problems are the number one reason for their choice.<sup>50</sup> PBIS all but solved this issue. Positive rewards made students *willingly* conform to rules, which reduced the need for disciplinary action, and, in turn, led to happier teachers who had more firm control over their classrooms.

What practitioners laud in PBIS, scholars critique. Clarissa Hayward and Carla Shalaby both offer highly relevant works on power and authority that bridge the gap between theory and practice to make critiquing PBIS as a disciplinary regime more broadly possible.

### **Problem and Significance**

To a large extent, schools are places wherein those who succeed are those who are able to meet the expectations the schools set forth. Schools set norms of compliance and obedience with the reward of praise, progress, and promotion. With the rise of capitalism came the translation of the concept of “human transformation” into the theory of “capital accumulation.”<sup>51</sup> Martin Carnoy writes, from the inception of public education “...schools functioned to control social change (to maintain order), to produce better labor inputs... and to transform individuals into competitive men and women who functioned well and believed in the capitalist system.”<sup>52</sup> Obedience under such a capitalist system, then, results in an accumulation of capital— monetary or otherwise— and manifests in classrooms.

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<sup>49</sup> Shalaby, Carla. *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom From Young Children at School*. The New Press, 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Hastings, R. P. & Bham, M. S. “The Relationship between Student Behavior Patterns and Teacher Burnout.” *School Psychology International* 24.1 (2003): 115-127.

<sup>51</sup> Carnoy, Martin. *Education as Cultural Imperialism*. Longman, 1974, 4.

<sup>52</sup> Carnoy, Martin. *Education as Cultural Imperialism*. Longman, 1974, 5.

With obedience as the means to capital accumulation as an end, schools are an essential mediator responsible for equipping students to succeed in this societal reward system. Author and educator Carla Shalaby writes that “Unquestioning deference to authority is the requirement and the expectation of school, where adult directives replace children’s own desires”<sup>53</sup> in relation to her visit to a second-grade classroom wherein a student drew a picture of a perfectly postured and behaved row of students to accompany their new vocabulary word, “obedience.”<sup>54</sup> To graduate is to avoid disciplinary infractions with school administrators or law enforcement, and is echoed by Shalaby: “Students who do not behave by our standards are then not permitted to progress by our standards.”<sup>55</sup> Similarly, a student’s inability to succeed in school is often dependent on their failure to follow rules, comply with norms, and meet expectations.

Rewarding behavior which unquestioningly defers to authority is bad for democracy. When rules, or the law, exist as the highest authority, their infallibility has implications for broader ideas of citizenship. Hirschfield and Celinska argue that school criminalization strengthens contemporary power relations, and that zero-tolerance policies create a “narrow public sphere” and a “docile citizenry” by disempowering students.<sup>56</sup> Just as zero-tolerance policies de-emphasize students’ independent cognitive and emotional capacities, PBIS dehumanizes students by reducing them to reflexes to stimuli. Deeming rules the highest moral power can lead to a “disempowered citizenship” that normalizes docility; a mirror of the

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<sup>53</sup> Shalaby, Carla. *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom From Young Children at School*. The New Press (2017): xxvi.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Shalaby, Carla. *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom From Young Children at School*. The New Press, 2017, xxviii.

<sup>56</sup> Hirschfield, Paul J., and Katarzyna Celinska. "Beyond Fear: Sociological Perspectives on the Criminalization of School Discipline." *Sociology Compass* 5.1 (2011): 17.

undemocratic school as a site of compliant worker training and capitalist accumulation that Martin Carnoy observed.<sup>57</sup>

As federally promoted pedagogy, PBIS gives us insight into what types of citizens the United States government is socializing through schools. I hope to ultimately show how useful looking at both scholarship and classroom practices is for drawing enlightening parallels between how we socialize students, what that can reflect about American civic values, and what implications that stratification has for determining who belongs in the national community and who threatens it. PBIS offers a grounding example of what types of values and behaviors are reinforced within a system in which one never questions the rule, but always the rule breaker. Determining in- and out-groups based on obedience to the law and rules is bad for democracy and therefore has the potential to breed attitudes and dispositions that undermines calls for social justice and structural change.

Further, PBIS has a predictive element to it. PBIS, using meticulously collected classroom data, aims to predict and expect unwanted behavior. PBIS is therefore not merely about rule following, but threat assessment and risk profiling. Behavioral data and surveillance enable the prediction of people's actions, which allows authority figures to tailor classroom environments to anticipate misbehavior from different students. Under PBIS, a student does not have to immediately have done anything wrong to be seen as a potential threat to "order." To predict and expect unwanted behavior is also to justify preemptive discipline before the behavior has occurred. PBIS creates risk profiles of students and disciplines them accordingly.

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<sup>57</sup> Hirschfield, Paul J., and Katarzyna Celinska. "Beyond Fear: Sociological Perspectives on the Criminalization of School Discipline." *Sociology Compass* 5.1 (2011): 8.

PBIS is not preparing students to think, participate, and engage in a democracy. PBIS socializes students to behave in ways that optimize the availability of rewards and little more. PBIS endorses pedagogy which renders students unable to identify power, and certainly unable to resist or defend it if unjust. When a method of socialization that is bad for democracy is federally funded and endorsed, it takes on a new meaning and closeness to a nation-building agenda. We have been missing a critical aspect of the American nation-building project that is so normative and so subversive because there exists a massive disconnect between educational theory and practice. If the U.S. is teaching children how to determine who is good and who is bad based on a series of behaviors incentivized by free fries or the chance to use the bathroom or the chance to get a drink of water, we should not treat it as a discrete matter of schoolhouse practice, but a deeply telling reflection of the types of Americans the U.S. Department of Education has the most interest in socializing, and why.

PBIS, then, functions as a federally-sponsored program predicated upon behavioral psychology as a means of social conditioning and control.

### **Research Questions**

Given the origins and effects of PBIS in the American education landscape, questions about the civic implications of the attitudes, behaviors, and orientations PBIS endorses and nurtures arise. By re-describing PBIS as a feature of a federal nation-building agenda, I wonder what civic norms and relations of power (including interpersonal relations) are upheld or endorsed by the pedagogies of PBIS? What are the possible implications of such norms for democratic citizenship, social justice, political engagement, and community building more broadly? Further, in what ways does PBIS pedagogy function as a disciplinary regime? What is the nature and function of a type of disciplinary practice that is less manifest?

## **Analysis**

Re-describing PBIS using political and critical theory subjects the program to new critiques which build upon each other to put this classroom behavioral management program into conversation with attitudes and relationships with authority that characterize U.S. national society. This analysis, in three sections, crescendos up to the aforementioned point. First, by describing PBIS as a highly disciplinary program in which authority figures are rendered infallible and students are unable to contribute to community norms, PBIS can be understood as an authoritarian pedagogy that fails to socialize students with democratic values of community.

Second, within an authoritarian PBIS classroom, authority figures further reduce students to reflexes to stimuli and systematically neglect their social and emotional needs in favor of behavioral compliance driven by external incentives and little else. Such a system driven by capital— or reward— accumulation de-emphasizes moral and interpersonal behavior based on empathy and justice. Therefore, PBIS socializes students to form a particular relationship with capitalism and power within which rules are values and following those values results in rewards, leading to wealth.

Finally, PBIS creates a dichotomy of the moral, good, deserving rule follower and the immoral, bad, undeserving rule breaker. PBIS socializes students to pair feelings of deservingness with capital accumulation from unquestioned compliance. By virtue of that, PBIS also socializes students to perceive those who do not follow rules to be threats to themselves and the collective whole.

PBIS first reduces, then manipulates, and finally defines peers and threats for students based on a political economy of abidingness. The following analysis will expand on this process.

*Section 1: PBIS is Authoritarian and Anti-Democratic*

PBIS is a disciplinary framework within which rules and expectations are determined by authority figures without student input or community participation. PBIS creates a system in which authority figures (especially teachers) are infallible: they neither can nor should be questioned. PBIS dictates that students are to defer to teachers for lessons on how to conceive of oneself, others, and one's community in the classroom. Under PBIS, students are never given the opportunity to contribute to the terms on which their community runs. This is a strictly anti-democratic, cultural, and political expectation.

When rules are taught, not communally agreed upon. Teaching begins to sound more like management. For example, a Tweet from the Ohio PBIS Network reads: ““We cannot assume that children know appropriate ways to behave or what the behavioral expectations are in all school settings. We need to teach expectations and rules with the same intentionality as academics. Teach, practice, and provide feedback to change behavior. #PBIS.””<sup>58</sup> This Tweet from state-level implementers of PBIS to teachers advises them to assume that PBIS expectations and standards of behavior are favorable to students' and therefore students need to learn them. This logic completely removes students from participating in discussions of how they will be socialized. When rules and expectations are taught rather than communally agreed upon, teaching begins to sound more like management.

PBIS is undemocratic, in part, because it denies students what political scientist Clarissa Rile Hayward calls political freedom. In her book, De-Facing Power, Hayward defines political freedom as “the social capacity to act, alone and with others, upon boundaries that define one's

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<sup>58</sup> @OHPBIS. “We cannot assume that children know appropriate ways to behave or what the behavioral expectations are in all school settings. We need to teach expectations and rules with the same intentionality as academics. Teach, practice, and provide feedback to change behavior. #PBIS 👍.” *Twitter*, 14 November 2019, 11:02 a.m., <https://twitter.com/OHPBIS/status/1195009147273666560>.

field of action.”<sup>59</sup> Hayward argues that power should be de-faced, or re-defined “not as an instrument some agents use to alter the independent action of others, but rather as a network of boundaries that delimit, for all, the field of what’s socially possible.”<sup>60</sup> PBIS directly limits students' capacity to act upon their social boundaries by convincing teachers that eliminating it is actually best for an orderly classroom, which, according to PBIS, is best for students.

The concept of pre-corrections undermines students’ autonomy as people and as members of a classroom community. Subjecting students to paternalism prohibits them from developing individual political conceptions of themselves and their community. Perhaps more dangerously, the concept of pre-corrections explicitly advocates assessing students for their risk to some orderly whole community and creating a plan to keep them from deviating from norms before the behavior even occurs. The main PBIS website celebrates pre-corrections as a productive and preemptive approach to behavioral management. As part of their Tier 3 plan for most the most intensive interventions, the website states:

At this level, another key practice to prevent problem behaviors is to anticipate when a student is likely to act out and do something to get ahead of it. For example, specifically reminding students of classroom expectations. These pre-corrections might be gestures or verbal statements delivered to an entire class, a small group of students, or with an individual student. Pre-corrections set students up for success by reminding them, prior to any problem, what to do.<sup>61</sup>

As a disciplinary pedagogy, pre-corrections signal that PBIS prioritizes reacting to students over responding to them. While behavior is meant to signal a student’s need, pre-corrections eliminate

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<sup>59</sup> Hayward, Clarissa Rile. *De-Facing Power*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 8.

<sup>60</sup> Hayward, Clarissa Rile. *De-Facing Power*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 3.

<sup>61</sup> “Tier 3.” *Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports*. OSEP Technical Assistance Center. 2019. Web.

that channel of communication to react to the student's data-predicted behavior instead. The practice of pre-corrections blatantly undermines students' natural, cognitive, rational instincts to behave, removing any human agency from their interpersonal interactions. Teachers and school leadership not only define what students do, but preempt the behavior of students by undermining their independent psychology. Pre-corrections serve as an example of how PBIS exercises what Michel Foucault calls *disciplinary power*, which is power that not only represses and excludes, but which produces.<sup>62</sup> By establishing normalizing judgment, one of the three pillars of disciplinary power, which punishes deviation and creates a binary of good and bad behavior based on a set of universalized norms, PBIS homogenizes students and strips them of their ability to democratically contribute to what their classroom community deems good or bad. By punishing students in a way that gratifies them, PBIS actively creates a system of determining who is good and who is evil. In other words, those who follow rules deserve their privileges and those who do not simply do not.

PBIS prohibits students from being part of a more collective and democratic pedagogy in which they can help to establish values and norms. Political scientist Joel Westheimer distinguishes between authoritarian and democratic patriotism by focusing on the role of students' autonomy as key to democratic functioning.<sup>63</sup> An education guided by democratic patriotism, first and foremost, teaches students to protest and organize in the face of injustice: the opposite of authoritarian patriotism which inculcates "I abide, so I am protected." PBIS endorses behaviors which align with the latter.

## *Section 2: Incentives and Capitalism*

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<sup>62</sup> Foucault, Michel. (1977). The Means of Correct Training. In Anthony Elliott (Ed.), *Blackwell Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (pp. 97). Blackwell.

<sup>63</sup> Westheimer, Joel. "Politics and Patriotism in Education." *Phi Delta Kappan* 87.8 (2006): 608-620.

This section analyzes PBIS' use of behavioral psychology, previously described at length, as the primary technique for behavioral management. I will present two examples of incentives that guide behaviors and analyze how behavioral psychology encourages students to form a particular relationship with capitalism.

PBIS even self-refers as management. The PBIS methodology is further described on their website tab detailing full-classroom techniques:

You might know classroom PBIS as positive classroom behavior support, positive and proactive classroom management, or by some other similar sounding name. They're all different ways of describing the same critical features of PBIS – practices, data, and systems – tailored to create better outcomes in your classrooms.<sup>64</sup>

Here, PBIS casually conflates behavioral support with behavioral management and, in so doing, reduces children to reflexes to stimuli. Such blatant advocacy for behaviorism demonstrates PBIS' fixation with putting in the right inputs— expectations, incentives, and rewards— to get out of students the right outputs— orderly behavior. PBIS' methodology endorses Skinner's metaphor comparing a learner's mind to an opaque, black box into which one has no insight, therefore rendering its inner working inessential for determining behavior.<sup>65</sup> Behavioral management teaches students to act on external cues— and little else.

Further, PBIS' obsession with inputs and behavioral outputs depoliticizes student behavior— especially in response to reductive norms and authoritarian relationships with authority figures. By describing behavior in objective, controllable terms, the conversation shifts from power dynamics to science. PBIS rhetoric treats education like a positivist project of

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<sup>64</sup> "Classroom PBIS." *Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports*. OSEP Technical Assistance Center. 2019. Web.

<sup>65</sup> "Behaviorism: A Psychological Perspective." *Penn State University*. Web.

ensuring successful outcomes and behavior like a neutral response to stimuli which can be adequately “managed” as such.

One of the longest-standing and most agreed upon psychological critiques of PBIS is that a behaviorist approach to children is condescending, reductive, and ineffective as a tool of discipline.<sup>66</sup> Behaviorism focuses solely on outward behavior, and therefore incentivizes students to behave with rewards and gifts in favor of attending to inner thought processes, reducing children to animals who will perform for treats.<sup>67</sup> By doing so, PBIS perpetuates the “continuing problem of discipline in schools by refocusing on training people to function within a system of rules rather than relying on simple domination of authority” which scholars have attributed to a moral deficit in younger generations of students.<sup>68</sup> The reductive logic of behaviorism also creates false dichotomies of behaviors, which assumes students are incapable of nuanced reflection and self-agency and results in ineffectively simplistic disciplinary structures.<sup>69</sup>

One of the ways PBIS depoliticizes behavior is by ignoring the social and emotional needs of children— needs that contribute to power dynamics which are inherently political. Incentives designed to elicit certain behaviors require no emotional intelligence, sense of context, or caring of why a child might behave in a certain way. In one example, a PBIS classroom teacher uses the 4:1 ratio— a behavioral management technique that asks teachers to give students four positive affirmations for every one constructive comment— specifically to reduce heightened student emotions over classroom situations so that they more peacefully comply with

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<sup>66</sup> Garrison, Mark J. "Resurgent Behaviorism and the Rise of Neoliberal Schooling." *The Wiley Handbook of Global Educational Reform* (2018): 323.

<sup>67</sup> Kohn, Alfie. "Students Aren't Lab Rats. Stop Treating Them Like They Are." *Education Week*. 4 September 2018. Web.

<sup>68</sup> Bryant, William, and Cayce McCamish. "Breaking All the Rules: Radically Reinventing Moral Education Through Compassionate Discipline." *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 6.1 (2015).

<sup>69</sup> Weiss, Mary Jane, et al. "ABA and PBS: The Dangers in Creating Artificial Dichotomies in Behavioral Intervention." *The Behavior Analyst Today* 10.3-4 (2010): 428.

rules. I will not go into more detail here, but have cited this interaction in full for reference.<sup>70</sup>

PBIS celebrates de-emphasizing dynamics of power, or, in other words, the politics of subject formation.

By using positive reinforcement to alter students' behavior, students are, often unknowingly, being disciplined. Again, Foucault's concept of disciplinary power is useful for making sense of the disciplinary nature, less manifest and shrouded by positive rewards, of PBIS. In fact, as Foucault illuminates, power is most effective when experienced not as punishment, but as pleasure.<sup>71</sup> Because the power exercised by PBIS is productive, not repressive, blindsided and manipulated students are at danger of developing into adults who are unable to locate, and therefore resist, power.<sup>72</sup> What you end up with, the, is PBIS as a system that feigns banality but is actually highly authoritarian.

In an effort to incentivize good behavior, PBIS deprioritizes ethical and interpersonal relationships with an emphasis, instead, on external rewards. PBIS' incentivizing is problematized by the social and civic implications of socializing students to base their interpersonal interactions on external cues. In doing so, PBIS obscures the more meaningful, significant reasons students should treat others with respect and kindness with an appeal to base desires fueled by the prospect of earning material goods. This reward structure prepares students for a certain relationship to a capitalist structure of power.

Within the PBIS framework, the right thing to do is the behavior which brings about a reward— even if other people's well-being is at stake. PBIS proudly replaces an ethic of

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<sup>70</sup> "A Snapshot of the PBIS 4:1 Ratio In a High School Classroom." *YouTube*, uploaded by SanBdoCitySchools, 11 February 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3wpviS5gaQ>.

<sup>71</sup> Foucault, Michel. (1977). The Means of Correct Training. In Anthony Elliott (Ed.), *Blackwell Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (pp. 97-106). Blackwell.

<sup>72</sup> Shalaby, Carla. *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom From Young Children at School*. The New Press, 2017, 31.

behavior with an incentive to behave. On the PBIS website under the “Bullying Prevention” tab, PBIS reveals its conception of the phrase: “An effective social culture has a formal process for limiting the social rewards available for bullying, and harmful behavior. We call this bullying prevention.”<sup>73</sup> Relying on base desires (material gains) obscures the fact there are more meaningful reasons for communicating and participating in a learning community.<sup>74</sup> PBIS teaches students not to terrorize and behave cruelly toward others only because it is a less rewarding behavior than other options.

Under PBIS, compliant behavior is currency, and currency is power. Not only does students form a capitalist relationship to power, but it is one. Students who meet behavioral expectations, regardless of the reasons, are legitimately given more money and spending power than those who do not. Moreover, PBIS provides the inspiration and resources to help teachers facilitate such a political— and monetary— economy. The website [pbisworld.com](http://pbisworld.com), an off-shoot of the official PBIS site, offers a printable template of mock U.S. currency in different denominations (from 1-100) which schools can brand with “(insert school name) Bucks” for use in a PBIS token reward economy.<sup>75</sup> In addition to being incredibly on the nose, PBIS bucks takes capitalistic socialization a step further: not only do students get external rewards for good behavior, but here, those rewards look exactly like U.S. dollars.

Where students should be developing social and interpersonal skills, PBIS places them within a capitalist framework which reduces them to production value. Except, in the case of using PBIS bucks, that production value— or positive behavioral output— is precisely correlated

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<sup>73</sup> “Bullying Prevention.” *Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports*. OSEP Technical Assistance Center. 2019. Web.

<sup>74</sup> “PBIS, Token Economies, and Dreary Estimates of the Human Potential.” *An Urban Teacher’s Education*. 2015. Web.

<sup>75</sup> “School Reward Dollars.” *PBISWorld.com*. Web.

with school reward bucks— or here, U.S. currency. By reducing students to their production value, this system replaces more meaningful reasons to behave in a way that is conducive to being part of a learning community with cash.

Schools as dissent-management factories which only seek to produce competitive capitalist workers are undemocratic.<sup>76</sup> Martin Carnoy writes, “...schools functioned to control social change (to maintain order), to produce better labor inputs... and to transform individuals into competitive men and women who functioned well and believed in the capitalist system.”<sup>77</sup> Schools became centers of dissent-management under the guidance of “the proponents of capitalism as an end in itself,”<sup>78</sup> and as a result, are inherently undemocratic. By likening rule-following to capital-accumulation, PBIS is doing just that.

Moreover, within this capitalist power structure, compliance as currency creates a class system in schools. If good behavior is currency, then the best behaved are wealthy, and vice versa for students who, for whatever reason, fail to meet behavioral expectations. This creates a tiered, financial class system wherein some students redeem their PBIS bucks for privileges, often extracurricular experiences like movie days or lunch with the principal, and sometimes for goods like tee shirts or Apple AirPods. Some schools even sell essential goods in their PBIS stores. For example, a PBIS school tweeted a thank you to a community member who donated goods to be redeemed for PBIS bucks and included a photo of miniature toiletries like shampoo, toothpaste, and deodorant and other essential items like socks and toothbrushes.<sup>79</sup> PBIS

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<sup>76</sup> Carnoy, Martin. *Education as Cultural Imperialism*. Longman, 1974, 4.

<sup>77</sup> Carnoy, Martin. *Education as Cultural Imperialism*. Longman, 1974, 5.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> @hannerpj. “THANK YOU to Christall Johnson for donating supplies to our PBIS Cats Cash Store! We appreciate it very much!” *Twitter*, 14 October 2019, 10:27 a.m., <https://twitter.com/hannerpj/status/1183751123615698947>.

incentives quickly translate into different levels of compliance-generated wealth, creating a rich and poor divide within schools.

PBIS socializes students to thrive in a capitalist system and makes this a priority of their behavioral management program. Shalaby in Troublemakers warns this does not just happen in schools, but also in society: Mrs. Beverly’s classroom, in which students are rewarded for complying and villainizing those who don’t is creating citizens on the rung of managers: entrepreneurs, creatives.<sup>80</sup> They’re learning skills to make money. Shalaby writes: “Students who do not behave by our standards are then not permitted to progress by our standards.”<sup>81</sup>

The PBIS economy of abidingness, which socially stratifies, leaves little room for any moral economy which seeks student engagement. The civic disempowerment of students in their classrooms foreshadows future disempowerment in communities that disproportionately impacts marginalized students. Bettina Love points to internalization of a system’s failures as one’s own— system justification— as a key contributor to the civic empowerment gap.<sup>82</sup> When already marginalized students are gaslighted by educational systems which cast them to fill social roles, they are more likely to internalize that belief than other students.<sup>83</sup> The economy of abidingness which underpins PBIS contributes to that gaslighting and, in addition to creating an underclass, creates an environment in which those who occupy it are compelled to internalize it.

Commodifying obedience as positive behavior upholds the normative attitude that those who follow rules are deserving of exceptional privileges and rewards, and those who do not are not. Such a political economy encourages students to negatively evaluate the rule breaker, never

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<sup>80</sup> Shalaby, Carla. *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom From Young Children at School*. The New Press, 2017, 25.

<sup>81</sup> Shalaby, Carla. *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom From Young Children at School*. The New Press, 2017, xxviii.

<sup>82</sup> Love, Bettina L. “The Hunger Games.” *We Want to do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, Beacon Press, 2019, 86.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

the rule; to blame the individual rather than understand the causes behind their behaviors more fully; to prioritize rule of law over humanity.

*Section 3: Moral Dichotomies And Deservingness*

PBIS rewards practices enforce the dichotomy of good/deserving rule followers entitled to privileges and bad/undeserving rule breakers who are not and are a threat to the whole. The practice of pairing compliance with rewards conflates rules with values and, in turn, distinguishes rule followers as people who are good and deserving of privileges and justifies the disciplinary nature of external rewards. PBIS then uses the stratification of students to further manipulate students to produce the optimal behavior by introducing a moral, value-based component to compliance: not only will compliance result in an external reward, but that reward indicates the good character and, hence, deservingness of the rewards that come of that. PBIS preys on the rule-follower and -breaker stratification, which falls along gender, race, and class lines to weaponize dissent from power and deviation from the status quo

PBIS group rewards turn students against those who do not adhere to rules, displacing empathy with a drive to achieve a reward. The following account, taken from Glennon Doyle's parenting book Untamed, of a parent trying to instill empathy in their daughter when they express anger toward a classmate whose misbehavior prevents the class from earning a group reward demonstrates the power of incentives to eclipse empathy in interpersonal relationships. The child, Amma, describes her classmate, Tommy, as someone who often falls asleep, forgets his homework, and makes the teacher cranky. Amma remarks, "Again! He forgot his homework again! WE are never going to earn our pizza party, never! Why can't he just do what he's

supposed to do?”<sup>84</sup> We learn Amma believes Tommy does not do his homework because he is irresponsible, unlike her, who would never do that. Doyle prompts Amma to recall that she has a secure and stable home that lets her get enough sleep each night and ensures her homework is complete.<sup>85</sup> Doyle is, notably, shocked at her child’s anger toward her classmate.

In light of the above comment, this account of a parent trying to work against the logic of a points-based classroom demonstrates the socially destructive potential of group rewards. Doyle emphasizes the importance of helping children use their imagination to understand the different circumstances of their peers and develop empathy in the face of a class-wide reward system which, instead, generates animosity and social division. When the external reward is based on the behavior of peers, students turn on those who sabotage the mission with their bad behavior, regardless of the reason. Such a system socializes students to think of their peers transactionally, not humanely.

The use of positive reinforcement obscures the reality that PBIS is a disciplinary regime which enacts power onto students. In Teaching to Transgress, bell hooks consistently argued throughout that to educate engaged, proactive citizens, students need to be taught not how to comply with power, but how to locate and organize against it.<sup>86</sup> The concept of group rewards disorients students’ conceptions of power. They perceive a class reward as a formal good, but it is actually a disciplinary tactic that causes the rule-followers to organize against their fellow students. Outside of the classroom, this blindness to power renders people defenseless against

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<sup>84</sup> While Doyle does not specify that her story references PBIS, she is clearly referring to a class-wide point system used for positive behavior reinforcement which is the subject of this critique. Doyle, Glennon. *Untamed*. Dial Press, 2020, 186.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Hooks, Bell. *Teaching to Transgress*. Routledge, 2014.

rules and laws even if they are unjust because they are unable to locate and organize against violence.

Furthermore, when difference is pathologized, we unjustly place responsibility on the individual and neglect to critique the system. By pathologizing these students, PBIS sends a message that their rules are actually values.<sup>87</sup> To break rules is to be a bad person. Hayward's De-Facing Power provides an example of this phenomenon in Mrs. Segal's— a progressive, chipper, and self-proclaimed inclusive educator— classroom. Ms. Segal boasts that her classroom is not run by rules, but instead by shared values. She explains that students are compelled to follow the rules because if you break them, it means you compromise values, violate the classroom's social contract, and revoke your protection under it and in your community of peers.<sup>88</sup> As a result, students lash out at, snitch on, and police each other. A student's attack on rules becomes a personal attack on the class: a result of students who are unable to locate and resist power and instead turn on each other.

Under PBIS, law is absolute. Within that construct, meritocracy prevails: what you have, you deserve based on your ability to adhere to pre-established norms under the absolute rule of law. PBIS encourages its school partners to post instructional YouTube videos demonstrating fun and creative ways they are implementing the framework. In one such video from West Salem Elementary School, the idea that law is absolute is remarkably clear. In the video, which parodies the movie *The Arrival*, teachers are depicted as sheriffs and deputies who intimidatingly roam empty halls to ensure students are complying with rules during the daily morning arrival. The American Western theme shows a sheriff lassoing a cow while explaining there should be “no strays in the halls before the bell.” That same sheriff is shown pretending to ride a horse through

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<sup>87</sup> Shalaby, Carla. *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom From Young Children at School*. The New Press, 2017, 38.

<sup>88</sup> Hayward, Clarissa Rile. *De-Facing Power*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 122.

the halls, peering in on classrooms and offices to assure that everyone is in place and is “following the West Salem Way: safe, respectful, and responsible.”<sup>89</sup>

In this video, there is a sly recognition that PBIS is a disciplinary regime by likening the teachers to sheriffs and deputies. Teachers posing as sheriffs emphasize that they are enforcing the rules to make sure everyone follows universalized rules that are best—practically and in principle—for everyone. The “West Salem Way” is “safe, respectful, and responsible—” dissent from that can easily be perceived as a threat to the whole.

Accepting that law is absolute renders systems infallible and those who fail to abide undeserving of protection. In *Troublemakers*, Shalaby warns that the student who misbehaves in a classroom is the canary in the coal mine. If a system of education prioritizes preservation of disciplinary systems over humanity of students, it fails to recognize its own flaws.<sup>90</sup> Shalaby calls upon us to think of the troublemaker as someone who challenges the norms of conformity and thus has radical potential to act on systems that constrain freedom.

PBIS gives these students the opposite of the attention Shalaby calls for. Instead of recognizing students as perceptive, cognitive beings who demand to be free, PBIS pathologized, criminalizes, and medicates them with positive reinforcement to quiet them and detract attention from systemic flaws. Shalaby appropriately writes: “If schools fail to offer young people the chance to imagine freedom, to practice freedom, and to prepare for freedom, it is unlikely that these young people will prove able to create the free country human beings deserve.”<sup>91</sup>

In conclusion, PBIS creates a dichotomy of good, deserving rule followers and bad, undeserving rule breakers by pairing being a good/deserving rule follower with a privilege and

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<sup>89</sup> “PBIS - The Good. The Bad. The Arrival. (West Salem Elementary).” *YouTube*, uploaded by PBIS videos - West Salem Elementary School, 30 August 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKdbCdSGZkI&t=233s>.

<sup>90</sup> Shalaby, Carla. *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom From Young Children at School*. The New Press, 2017, xiii

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, xxix.

recognition-based structure of rewards. PBIS even preserves the futurity of this dichotomy. Just below the surface, the predictive aspect of PBIS meticulously tracks and anticipates which students will be rule followers or breakers. Being deserving or undeserving is future looking: it is about what you are owed rather than just being rewarded for what you did in the past.

As PBIS proactively rewards, it also proactively disciplines and deters, giving the deserving dichotomy a dangerous potential to profile students in and out of the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

I have been long winded to provide all of the evidence needed to make a clear case for how much we have to gain from putting theory into conversation with practice. Re-describing PBIS using critical and political theory made it possible to conduct a political discourse analysis detailing how power manifests subtly within the PBIS framework to influence students' perceptions of legality, justness, deservingness, community, and threats to its sanctity. To summarize, the three parts of my analysis build upon each other to draw parallels between the attitudes endorsed by PBIS and which contribute to American national character as we know it today. First, I explained that PBIS is a highly disciplinary program which renders authority figures infallible and prohibits students from contributing to the establishment of community norms. Second, I explained that the foundational philosophy of PBIS— behavioral psychology— is a reductive approach to educating children that de-emphasizes moral and interpersonal relationships in favor of appealing to base desires with external rewards. Finally, I illustrated how PBIS creates a dichotomy of the moral and deserving rule follower and the immoral and undeserving rule breaker to fuel a political economy of abidingness. In sum, I believe that PBIS as a federally-funded behavioral management program should be considered important in conversations of America's civic values and behaviors.

I wrote this capstone under what might be the final year of Donald Trump's administration. As daily headlines of divisive fear-mongering, otherizing rhetoric and dog whistle politics became weekly headlines of mass shootings, monthly headlines of white supremacist movements and rallies, yearly international travel bans and other cruel restrictions on immigration and asylum-seeking, and four years of democratic backsliding and white nationalist resolve, I fought against desensitization. I used this capstone, in part, as a constant reminder of present civic circumstances. Every time I read about the rollback of civic and environmental protections I did not even know existed, I was stunned by their legality. I have worked with refugees whose families were stopped and held indefinitely in airports after waiting years to be granted asylum and entry into the U.S. because of travel bans announced on social media. Even more shocking than the legality of what has been achieved by this administration, however, is the belief, admiration, and protection so many Americans take in it— even when it directly harms them. In the most politically divisive time of my life, I cannot help but wonder how the moral economy of America's only federally-funded behavioral management program might play in the landscape of our national values.

It is worthwhile to continue this type of discussion around federal education initiatives, especially as they relate to behavior and control, under any administration. My work on this capstone has raised many new questions about how nation building and education are entangled in each other. PBIS provides a good starting point for asking some of those questions, particularly as they related to community, deservingness, and threat perception. By deeming rules as absolute and value-based, does PBIS set students up for modes of citizenship that uphold harmful meritocratic ideals, like the prison industrial complex and anti-immigrant and -poverty sentiment in which access to capital means entitlement to greater privileges? Does PBIS uphold

and reproduce ideals which conflate production value with deservingness? Is it patriotic to defer to policies and rules without question so long as that behavior is materially or socially beneficial within a national framework? Can someone who questions rules before rule breakers be considered a good American?

While my focus is on imagining otherwise for civic socialization and education, I have mentioned the predictive, forward-looking element of PBIS throughout this capstone with good reason. The predictive element of PBIS underlies the critique I have made and becomes increasingly relevant as the digital age makes data so readily available. PBIS implementation means meticulously collecting data about students to harness the usefulness of data at its core: to predict the future. By relegating behavior to observable science, which is considered successful when it can accurately predict, optimal PBIS takes the form of strong predictive power. As a result, PBIS does not simply look back and reward or punish behavior, but it creates risk profiles for students as individuals and as they exist in groups determined by any number of demographic factors: race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, academic performance, disciplinary history, and neurotypicality, to name a few. These risk profiles can be read through the PBIS technique of pre-corrections: if a student needs more pre-corrections, then they are categorized as a higher risk—to the classroom, the community, and, within the PBIS framework, to themselves.

Given the predictive nature of PBIS, a rich area for further research would be to connect the foundational civic critique I have provided with the logic of prevention and data collection. Data collection is not innocent. Students graduate from PBIS with years of behavioral data attached to them for the use of predicting how their behavior will deviate from classroom norms and rules. This data will not disappear upon their graduation and neither will the lasting effects

of the life-long decisions made based upon whatever their risk profiles from as early as infancy end up being.

As I graduate into this ever-increasingly unjust world as someone who has largely benefitted from the power structures of national and classroom communities alike, the questions posed throughout this capstone remain at the forefront of my mind. This research has reminded me to question rules before rule breakers and urged me to understand what systems are in place that keep us from prioritizing humanity over law. Especially if you, too, are similarly privileged by present circulations of power, I hope the same will be true.

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