

Using Word Walls to Promote Literacy Skills and Social-Behavioral Success for Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

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Abstract

The purpose of this manuscript is to demonstrate ways that word walls can be used to promote literacy skills and social-behavioral success as part of multi-component interventions that include evidenced-based instructional and behavioral strategies for students with emotional-behavioral disorders (EBD). This approach is designed to address the inter-connection between literacy skill deficits and social-behavioral skill deficits that many students with EBD experience.

Keywords: Emotional and behavioral disorders, literacy instruction, word walls, behavioral interventions

Introduction

Students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) often struggle to achieve positive outcomes in both academic and social-behavioral domains (Kauffman & Landrum, 2013). The frequent difficulties of students with EBD to adapt to new learning challenges, tolerate frustration and persevere through challenges, maintain positive self-esteem, and seek assistance from adults and peers all contribute to their poor academic outcomes (Burke, Boon, Hatton, & Bowman-Perrott, 2015). These diffi-

culties can lead to academic challenges in a variety of domains, including literacy skills. Over the past 15 years, the literacy outcomes of students with EBD have received increased attention (Kauffman, 2010). As these students progress through school, the connection between literacy outcomes and behavior grows stronger (Bruhn & Watt, 2012). Students with EBD consistently perform lower than their peers in reading and writing (Siperstein, Wiley, & Forness, 2011), and they lag further behind in these critical areas as they advance in grade levels (Kamps et al., 2003). As their literacy skill deficits increase, problematic behaviors and emotional difficulties also increase (McIntosh, Sadler, & Brown, 2012).

Rationale for interventions that address academic and social-behavioral problems.

Researchers and practitioners are increasingly emphasizing interventions that simultaneously address both academic and social-behavioral problems in students with EBD (Ennis, 2015; Bruhn & Watt, 2012). The rationale for this approach is based on research that demonstrated that academics and behavior are closely related, with each serving as a risk factor for the other (Morgan, Farkas, Tu-

fis, & Sperling, 2008). Ennis (2015) expanded on the reasoning for why academic and social-behavioral needs should be addressed in tandem. The cycle begins when a student with EBD exhibits challenging behaviors that result in removal from academic activities. The removal from instruction contributes to the student falling further behind, which then leads to the student exhibiting more challenging behaviors and possibly experiencing social isolation. This results in a type of academic/social-behavioral vortex that spins more rapidly as the student's difficulties escalate. The short-term ramifications may include removal from the general education classroom to separate special education settings, falling behind grade-level peers academically, and increased struggles both socially and behaviorally. The long-term ramifications are post-school outcomes that may include under- or unemployment, high levels of involvement in the criminal justice system, and escalated risk of substance abuse (Burke, Boon, Hatton, & Bowman-Perrott, 2015; Lane & Carter, 2006; Kauffman & Landrum, 2013; Zigmond, 2006).

Word walls as an opportunity for simultaneous literacy and social-behavioral instruction.

Findings from the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) have largely shaped the agenda for literacy instruction for students with disabilities, including those with EBD. The report identified five core components of effective literacy instruction: phonemic awareness, phonological processing, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Each of these components is essential for building strong reading skills, and they contribute to the ability of students with disabilities to express themselves in writing (Wong, 2000). As described by Reid and Liene-

mann (2006), the components function together in an integrated manner. A student utilizes phonemic awareness to recognize and utilize sounds in spoken words. This enables the student to see or hear a word, break the word into its component parts, and then associate the sounds with letters that comprise the word. The student incorporates these skills to read with accuracy, speed, and expression (fluency). Reading fluency and the student's ability to understand the meaning of words (vocabulary) directly contribute to the student's overall ability to understand written text (comprehension).

The development of these skills also affects writing ability (Reid & Lienemann, 2006; Wong, 2000). Phonemic awareness and phonological processing help students to spell accurately and avoid interruptions in the writing process due to correcting spelling errors. Fluency contributes to the student's ability to produce writing that is organized and cohesive, as well as assists the student in generating written products that contain sufficient amounts of content. Vocabulary and comprehension are skills that enable students to use appropriate words to express their ideas and to structure written products that convey complex, interconnected pieces of information into a cohesive whole.

Word walls are a research-supported strategy for promoting many of these literacy skill domains (Hooper & Harmon, 2015; Vintinner, Harmon, Wood, & Stover, 2015; Harmon, Wood, Hedrick, Vintinner, & Willeford, 2009; Jasmine, & Schiesl, 2009). Although often viewed as static displays of disconnected words on classroom walls, word walls are actually interactive, dynamic teaching tools that enable students to gain ownership over their learning and to access support

independently for a variety of literacy-related tasks (Wingate, Rutledge, & Johnston, 2014; Houle & Krogness, 2001). For students who struggle with phonemic awareness and phonological processing, word walls can be used to teach word analysis and spelling rules (Smith & Read, 2005). At the elementary level, word walls can be used to improve reading fluency and writing output by supporting the acquisition of sight vocabulary and promoting the memory and recall of high frequency words (Jasmine & Schiesl, 2009). As students move from early elementary school into the more in-depth content courses offered in upper elementary, middle school, and high school, word walls become a tool for building both content-specific vocabulary and general academic vocabulary. Improved vocabulary skills can result in higher levels of reading comprehension, deeper content knowledge, and higher quality written products across content courses (Hooper & Harmon, 2015; Vintinner, Harmon, Wood, & Stover, 2015).

Ways to Use Word Walls to Promote Literacy Skills and Social-Behavioral Success.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate ways that word walls can be used to promote literacy skills and social-behavioral success as part of multi-component interventions that include evidenced-based instructional and behavioral strategies for children with EBD. This approach is designed to address the inter-connection between literacy skill deficits and social-behavioral skill deficits that many students with EBD experience (Morgan, Farkas, Tufis, and Sperling, 2008). In designing a multi-component intervention that includes word walls, teachers of students with EBD should a) identify the targeted literacy and behavioral outcomes, b) select the use and function of the word wall, c) identify evidence-based instructional and behavioral intervention strategies, and d) implement, evaluate, and revise the intervention as appropriate (see Figure 1).

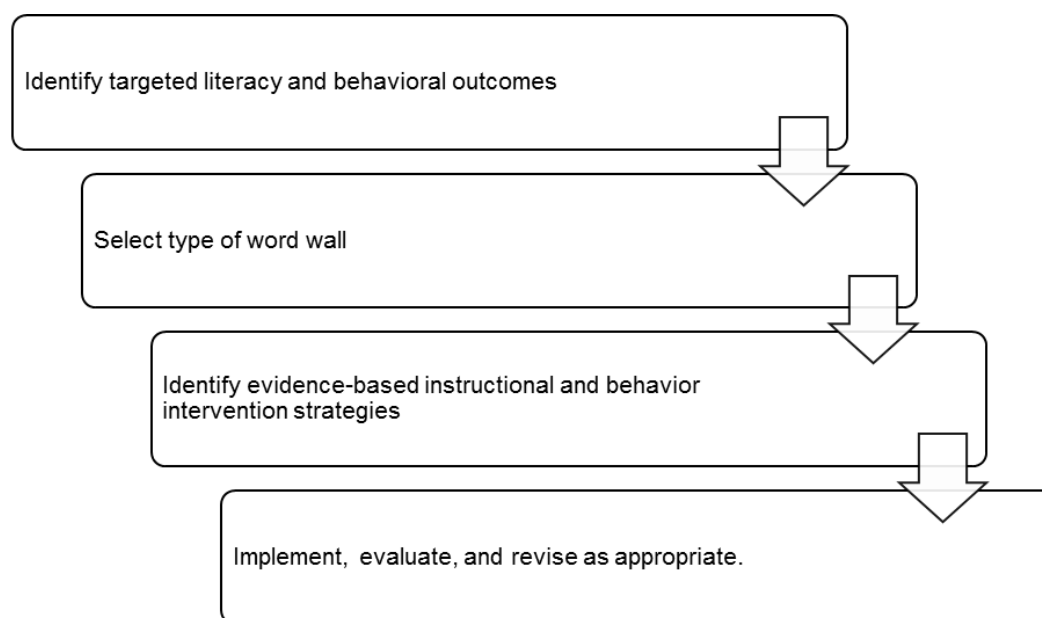


Figure 1. Steps for designing a multi-component intervention using word walls and evidence-based practices.

Potential outcomes for multi-components interventions that utilize word walls include improved skills in building a knowledge and vocabulary base of key concepts, written expression, behavioral and social competence, and self-monitoring. These educational outcomes should be matched with instructional practices that lead to the identification of evidence-based practices. The following cases studies illustrate approaches for integrating word walls with proven strategies for supporting students with EBD in order to achieve improved outcomes in reading, writing, and social-behavioral domains. In each case, we attempt to outline key considerations in designing, implementing, and evaluating the intervention.

Word walls as bridges to building prior knowledge and vocabulary base. *Marsha is a ninth grade student with moderate cognitive disabilities and an emotional-behavioral disorder. Marsha experiences high levels of anxiety, task avoidance, and withdrawal when the instructional content becomes too complex or difficult to follow. Her teacher is worried that the upcoming unit on “Urban Living” will prove overwhelming to Marsha, particularly because it will involve both new academic content and scenarios related to her everyday life in a large urban city that often prove stressful to her. One of Marsha’s annual IEP goals reads: “Given ten ‘real life’ scenarios involving decisions about living in an urban setting, Marsha will orally state an acceptable response to each situation with 90% accuracy as measured by a content-related evaluation checklist.”*

Students with disabilities often show large gaps in their store of prior knowledge. Topical content encountered in literature and expository text is often grasped at the most minimal level because many students with high in-

cidence disabilities do not have the anchoring knowledge needed for deeper processing of new content. Direct, explicit instruction in vocabulary “is extremely important for diverse learners and students of all ability levels (Wood, Harmon, & Hedrick, 2004, p. 60). A routine for vocabulary teaching suggested by Wexler, et al. (2015) included “explicitly defining and contextualizing terms using student-friendly definitions, helping students to actively process words, and providing multiple exposures to vocabulary” (p. 144). In this sense, a scaffolded approach that follows principles of modeling, guidance, practice, feedback, opportunities to respond, and continuous assessment is recommended.

Blachowicz and Fisher (2004) defined a classroom word wall as “a place where students could write new words they encountered in reading, in conversation, and in their daily experiences” (p. 67). Manyak, et. al (2014) describe a classroom that has a vocabulary word wall “that included cards presenting a target word and a corresponding visual image” (p. 18). For instance, a picture of a cartoon figure bent over and perspiring accompanied the word *exhaustion*. In her resource social studies class, Mr. Allen is all too aware that Marsha will need extra elaboration, further examples, and extended time for processing the new knowledge presented in class. A rich context must also surround Marsha’s learning of specific facts and concepts (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2010).

He decides to design a word wall to introduce the unit on “Urban Living.” In order to guide the implementation and evaluation process, Mr. Allen uses an implementation fidelity checklist for using word walls for instruction in vocabulary and social concepts (see Figure 2).

| Yes | Somewhat | No | |
|-----|----------|----|--|
| | | | Term is identified by teacher or self-selected by students and is prominently displayed in the word wall |
| | | | Teacher explains the importance and relevance of the upcoming terms(s) and gains students' commitment to engaged learning |
| | | | Term is introduced and students are prompted and questioned about existing prior knowledge and understanding |
| | | | Term is modeled and practiced until students are able to recognize with automaticity |
| | | | Term's concept is defined with critical features and descriptors |
| | | | Examples and non-examples of the term's concept are provided and discussed |
| | | | Examples of ways the term is used in narrative, expository, and expressive text and writing are provided so that students receive multiple exposures to the term |
| | | | Questions and feedback are provided about student's understanding of the term |
| | | | Relationships to related terms and ideas are provided |
| | | | Students are prompted to use the term in sentences and feedback is provided |
| | | | Samples of how the term is portrayed through text structure categories are provided – description, compare-contrast, cause/effect |
| | | | Verbal, social, and textual contexts in which the term is used are identified and discussed |
| | | | Daily and weekly reviews of the term are conducted |

Figure 2. Fidelity checklist for using word walls for instruction in vocabulary and social concepts.

The checklist highlights key considerations for selecting the terms and concepts included in the word wall, introducing and modeling the terms and concepts, and providing ongoing evaluation and feedback for student learning. After developing his instructional plan based on these items, the critical terms on the word wall – *mass transit, municipal services, residential neighborhoods, public spaces* – are previewed and discussed. In order to minimize her task avoidance behaviors, Mr. Allen scaffolds instruction by having her read the words along with him and offers her multiple attempts at defining and explaining each term (Wheeler & Richey, 2014). Mr. Allen keeps an anecdotal description of Marsha's store of information. For instance, he learns that Marsha has little background or understanding for concepts like condominiums, transit hubs, or rush hour.

When these new or challenging topics are addressed, he provides her with multiple opportunities to respond. She can identify the concept on the word wall, create an accompanying illustration, and/or use the internet to research the concept further. Providing these choices helps to increase her on-task behaviors and to alleviate anxiety and withdrawal related to academic activities (Wheeler & Richey, 2014).

Word walls as support for improving written expression. *Camille is a sixth grade student with an emotional-behavioral disorder who is working on written expression. She shows minimal involvement and is verbally resistant, making statements such as "Do I have to write about this?" and "Have I done enough that I can stop now?" Her gen-*

eral education language arts teacher is concerned about Camille's motivation and class participation and knows that the writing/spelling demands of the class are areas where Camille struggles. One of her short-term goals in written expression is: "Given a writing prompt, Camille will compose a three paragraph response with a word choice in which 70% of the words used are different (type/token ratio) and 20% of the words are multi-syllabic as measured through teacher evaluation of written assignments."

Struggling writers such as Camille can work with teachers to generate a word wall that contains topical lists of new words that will be encountered in upcoming reading assignments or that could be used in writing projects. By consulting the word wall, students are able to compose narrative stories or non-fiction descriptive pieces without avoiding or getting "stuck" on word choices (Vintinner, Harmon, Wood, & Stover, 2015). A look at the word wall from time to time allows the writer to capture topical words and readily integrate them into their pieces. The use of these new, complex words in self-directed writing creates a meaningful context for engagement with new vocabulary, much more so than passively writing isolated, disconnected sentences with new words (Wong, 2000).

In order to increase her academic engagement and improve her written expression, Camille's teacher has decided to use self-regulated strategy development (SRSD). SRSD has an established research-base as an effective practice for teaching writing to students with EBD (Ennis & Jollivette, 2012; Lane, Barton-Arwood, Nelson, & Wehby, 2008; Rogers & Graham, 2008). As described by Ennis (2015), "SRSD is a six-stage writing process that involves developing background knowledge (Stage 1), discussing the strategy (Stage 2), modeling the strategy (Stage 3), memorizing the strategy (Stage 4), supporting the strategy (Stage 5), and engaging in independent practice (Stage 6)" (p. 3).

Camille has recently expressed an interest in selecting her future career path and determining how much she can make in annual salary. Her teacher has used this as an in-road for increasing her writing productivity. In order to develop background knowledge (Stage 1 of the SRSD approach), she helps Camille to identify related vocabulary for her word wall to assist with upcoming writing projects focused on career interests and budgeting. Figure 3 shows their first word wall on these topics.

| | | | | |
|----------------|-------------|-----------|----------------|----------|
| salary | co-worker | insurance | punctuality | calendar |
| responsibility | cooperation | benefits | transportation | hurry |
| career | retire | volunteer | cooperation | expenses |

Figure 3. Camille's class word wall for writing about career interests and budgeting.

In Stage 2, the teacher introduces the POW + TREE strategy to help Camille learn how to frame and organize her writing (Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2005). This strategy requires Camille to pick a topic, organize her notes using the TREE strategy (topic sentence, reasons, examples, ending), and write and say more. Throughout the remaining stages, the teacher supports Camille through stages of modeling, memorizing the strategy, continued support, and a release to more independent practice.

Word walls for behavioral and social competence.

Angie is a ninth grade student with an emotional-behavioral disorders who struggles with socialization and pragmatic communication competencies. She is successful in her content classes with the support of co-teachers who work well together and peer assistance for comprehending complex and abstract concepts. Her family envisions a bright future for Angie, including going to college, but they are especially concerned about her difficulties with social interaction. Angie lacks social perception and decision-making about determining others' intentions and comprehending the underlying message in everyday pragmatic communication. Her interactions with peers and adults are often awkward due to not really understanding the main point of a speaker or making inappropriate statements and comments. Her IEP includes transition objectives in the social domain such as the following: "Given three simulated social experiences involving meeting and interacting with others who will present temptations and invitations to engage in inappropriate or illegal behavior, Angie will display an appropriate resistance skill for each scenario as measured by teacher observation and a content-related self-evaluation checklist."

Literacy instruction can be used as a means for fostering improved social skills for many students with disabilities (Forgan and Gonzalez-DeHass, 2004). Through literacy learning opportunities, students can engage in social problem solving scenarios and explore decision-making in a range of social situations. Within this context, word walls can serve as an instructional medium for fostering growth in social and behavioral domains while continuing the emphasis on literacy learning. A word wall can be constructed that highlights more abstract terminology related to social experiences that are often difficult for students who struggle with social pragmatics. This is similar to the way in which a high school science teacher would build word walls containing content specific vocabulary that is necessary for successfully completing a unit on climate change (Hooper & Harmon, 2015). Further, Forgan and Gonzalez-DeHass (2004) suggest a number of advantages to "infusing" social skills training into literacy instruction, including more instructional time devoted to social skills instruction and using mediums (folk literature, etc.) that are meaningful to students' lives.

For Angie, discussions between her teachers and parents have hit upon the idea of using word walls as a means of identifying critical concepts in social communication and decision-making. A special educator meets with Angie twice a week to conduct units of instruction on social skills and communication. The teacher has identified a series of short stories that focus on complex social situations often encountered by teenagers. Together with the teacher, Angie constructs a word wall that focuses on key content from the stories. Her teacher and parents then select terms from the word wall that they feel

are particular areas of difficulty for Angie. These become areas for additional focus as the team helps Angie prepare for the transition into young adulthood. The explicit instructional practices of explaining, modeling, discussing, demonstrating understanding, feedback, etc. allow Angie to now name and identify the features of her effective (terms such as *appropriate* and *wait*) and ineffective (terms such as *embarrass* and *awkward*) pragmatic communication in both hypothetical and actual social situations.

Word walls for self-monitoring and managing aggression. *Steve, a seventh grader with an autism spectrum disorder and an emotional-behavioral disorder, exhibits both verbal and physical externalizing behaviors. The concerns about his aggressive behavior have led to an IEP and behavioral intervention plan (BIP) that are heavily weighted toward reducing his oppositional and noncompliant behaviors. Although these are the primary concerns of his teachers and parents, Steve's level of achievement in reading and writing continues to be far below that of same-age peers. His IEP team has recently decided to focus on helping Steve acquire self-management strategies to decrease his aggressive outbursts. His IEP now contains the following objective: "Given three scenarios that depict new social situations, Steve will identify appropriate steps for navigating each situation with calm words and actions as measured by teacher observation and a self-evaluation checklist."*

Self-management strategies are an effective approach for supporting students with autism spectrum disorders that engage in problematic behaviors associated with an EBD diagnosis (Schulze, 2016; Carr, Moore, & Anderson, 2014). For improved academic outcomes, self-management is a category of "highly effective,

yet easy-to implement strategies that support students with EBD" (Farley, Torres, Wailehua, & Cook, 2012, p. 39). Word walls can be used with self-management interventions to introduce and support key ideas when teaching students to follow social and behavior strategies. Linn and Myles (2004) describe a self-management strategy to help students with Asperger syndrome "successfully navigate new social situations" (p. 7). This strategy (SODA) is employed when confronting situational circumstances and demands: Stop, Observe, Deliberate, Act (Bock, 2001). For teaching this strategy, a word wall could be created that both teaches the key terms and concepts related to the SODA strategy, and conveys other key content related to social interactions, self-monitoring, and self-management of aggression.

In order to help Steve learn this strategy and to generalize it to a variety of new social situations, his teacher engages in a series of scaffolded instructional steps that include defining the purpose and goals of the SODA strategy, teaching the steps of the strategy, and reinforcing the use of the strategy (Schulze, 2016). Steve initially uses the word wall to help him learn the key terms associated with the strategy. As he acquires and maintains use of the SODA strategy, the teacher introduces a series of social stories built around themes related to social justice and designed to lead to discussion and expressive writing about complex social situations. Chapman, Hobbel, and Alvarado (2011) state that "a social justice approach to writing fosters an awareness of societal challenges that affect students' families, communities, and the larger society" (p. 539). Students such as Steve with difficulties in aggression and socialization could confront ide-

as and concepts that challenge their misconceptions or beliefs about schools, teachers, and peers.

The critical terms and big ideas from these stories are added to Steve's word wall to help him gain a deeper understanding of the concepts related to social decision-making and social justice issues. In implementing the instruction with the word wall, the criteria in the fidelity checklist that deal with modeling, explanations, identifying critical features, and practice in contexts that are increasingly authentic are important concerns. Thus, terms such as *observe* and *before* (antecedents), *questions* and *options* (behavioral decision-making), and *restore* and *consequences* are related to different social situations that are associated with Steve's aggressive behavior. An example of his initial word wall is presented in Figure 4.

Conclusion and Summary

The purpose of this article has been to demonstrate ways that word walls can be used to promote literacy skills and social-behavioral success as part of multi-component interventions that include evidenced-based instructional and behavioral strategies for students with EBD. This approach is designed to address the interconnection between literacy skill deficits and social-behavioral skill deficits that many students with EBD experience. By taking a comprehensive approach that is based on the development of literacy skills and the use of research-based strategies, students with EBD should experience improvements in both academic and social-behavioral domains.

| | | | | |
|------------|----------|-------------|---------------|----------|
| deliberate | choose | options | consequences | relax |
| observe | question | solutions | relationships | irritate |
| before | actions | de-escalate | restore | peace |

Figure 3. Camille's class word wall for writing about career interests and budgeting.

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