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Regular Article

What's in it for us? Staff perspectives on the impact of implementing positive behavior support

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ABSTRACT

A social environment conducive to learning is important for students to achieve educational goals. Well-functioning leadership in the classroom creates conditions for teaching, learning, and development. The aim of this study was to investigate how staff perceive and receive a positive behavior support (PBS) program two years after its implementation and how it affects the social environment conducive to learning. The researcher conducted and analyzed three group interviews, one pair interview and one individual interview with teachers and principals (N = 14) through reflexive thematic analysis. The results showed that the staff perceived no visible result concerning the students' behavior after the implementation of PBS. However, the staff experienced positive results in leadership skills, teamwork, their ability to create a culture that favors a social environment conducive to learning, and how to handle students. The findings also showed that the staff had a positive view of PBS; the program gave them concrete strategies that made it easier to create expectations. Some staff were unable to participate, and additional time and resources were required. The study's results help us understand the impact of PBS in Sweden, which has not been researched thoroughly to date.

A social environment conducive to learning[1] is an important factor in ensuring an efficient and successful learning environment. Many countries struggle to establish appropriate social environments conducive to learning. For example, in the United States, 72% of public schools reported that a lack of adequate alternative placements or programs for disruptive students limited their efforts to reduce or prevent disruptive behavioral issues, and approximately 60% of schools reported challenges (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). The three most frequent behavior issues in UK schools are persistent low-level disruption, cited by more than two-thirds of staff (67%); refusal behavior or passive noncompliance, in which a child ignores an authority figure (67%); and talking back to teaching staff (64%) (Weale, 2023). In Denmark, the Ministries of Education have discussed the question of a social environment conducive to learning since 2010 (Søndergaard et al., 2014).

The Swedish School Act (Skollag, 2010, p. 800, n.d.) stipulates that all students have access to a safe and encouraging learning environment. This means that disturbances during a lesson are minimized and that the focus is directed toward the purpose of the teaching (Skolinspektionen, 2016). This type of environment is crucial for many students. It improves students' motivation, achievements, and in terms of positive academic results, and it gives students positive experiences of school and learning in general. Safety and a social environment that promotes learning in the classroom are a school's and, ultimately, a principal's duty (Skolverket, 2023a). However, there are many alarming reports about the impact of disturbances during a lesson, which affects security and the social environment. For example, a 2022 Novus survey showed that every third student experiences mess in the classroom (Fazel, 2022). Another impact of messes in classrooms and schools is that some schools are closed for that reason (Nilsson, 2023). A school environment that is characterized by calm is a prerequisite for students' learning, but the lack of calm in Swedish schools has increased over time.

An Issue of the Highest Priority in Sweden, the issue of social environments conducive to learning in school has been hotly debated by many in Sweden, over the past 20 years, including politicians, trade unions, teachers, students, researchers, and parents. Political discussions have been held about how to improve the study climate in schools and what measures can be taken to promote a social environment conducive to learning. In the last two elections, all political parties have addressed this issue in their election programs, with varying solutions proposed. These have been focused on improvements in the social environment to promote learning. Other proposals deal with strengthening the teacher's

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[1] In Swedish, the word is "studiero."

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role, with a greater focus on the teaching task or the teacher's authority. Further suggestions mentioned are better opportunities to act against unruly students and on-call classes/schools for these students (Skolvärlden, 2020).

The latest arrangement from the government is a special investigation with directives to propose measures to permanently strengthen safety and tranquility in schools. The task includes strengthening principals' and teachers' responsibilities and powers, creating clearer rules of order and safer school environments, and increasing efforts aimed at particularly violent students (Regeringen och Regeringskansliet, 2023). The most recent Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey (2022) showed that there is an emphasis on increasing Swedish students' knowledge in math and reading and that more discipline in schools is needed to achieve this (Sveriges radio, 2023).

Political consensus has led to a change in the Education Act (Skollag, 2010, p. 800, n.d.), which intended for a school's learning environment by strengthening teachers' authority to improve students' academic results (Skolvärlden, 2020). Swedish school authorities have drawn attention to this issue in several reports. For example, the School Inspectorate reviewed the work of several thousand schools and stated, "Distinctive for almost all schools with development needs is that the work to create and maintain a social environment conducive to learning needs to be further sharpened" (Skolinspektionen, 2019, p. 4).

1. How to handle the situation

The question that arises is how school's learning environment be improved. A meta-analysis (Skolforskningsinstitutet, 2021) showed that a social environment conducive to learning is promoted by clear lesson structures, solid leadership in the classroom, teaching with a clear focus and variation, the school's work with norms and values, and good school health services. Schools that succeed involve the entire organization in the task, working systematically with security and the appropriate social environment from long- and short-term perspectives, with principals and school management driving the work. Other recommendations are to involve the students—make them participate, support them, confront behaviors, and evaluate them based on observations. However, a problem in the context raised in the annual school survey is that students and teachers have different perceptions of a social environment conducive to learning. Most teachers (close to nine out of 10) answered that there is always or often a positive classroom environment in their lessons (Skolinspektionen, 2018, 2022).

In summary, social environments conducive to learning are an important issue being discussed by various people in Sweden and worldwide. Stakeholders have striven to improve learning environments and promote student learning by creating calm, safe classroom atmospheres. How to do so is an important school developmental issue, and many attempts have been made in various programs via strategies tested and implemented in schools. One of those programs which have been useful is positive behavior support (PBS) (Horner et al., 2010; Talme et al., 2018). PBS is an evidence-based intervention strategy to enhance children's behaviors, and it has gained influence internationally, with predominantly positive (Denne et al., 2023).

2. Interventions in Sweden

In Sweden, a culturally adapted version of PBS (PALS, Norwegian acronym for 'positive behavior, supportive learning environment and interaction in school) was implemented in schools in 2010. In one region, which includes 49 municipalities (Vårdgivarwebben, 2023), PALS has been tested to some extent. Ingemarson et al. (2016) investigated how Swedish teachers perceived a program called Prevention in School (PS), a kind of PBS-program. They found that PS needs to be developed further, and the teachers were varied in their perceptions of the PS program and themselves in relation to the program. Some program aspects benefited the teachers' behaviors, not the students' (Ingemarson et al., 2016). Another ongoing project in Sweden is an initiative in Uppsala (the implementation of Inclusive Behavioral Support in Schools), concerning competence development for teaching staff in the Uppsala municipality and systematic work to promote good relations with students (Fridman, 2019). Some criticism has been directed against PBS on an empirical basis. For example, Malm (2019) wrote, "Research and ethics must go hand in hand. It is not enough that an effort feels good; it must be possible to show that it has an effect" (p. 1). Some teachers criticized the program's ethics, morals, and values. For example, PS was criticized in one school for contradicting the teachers' "ideas of mankind" and for ignoring "people's natural goodness" during the early phases of implementation (Ingemarson et al., 2016, p. 7). Some criticism has addressed the cost, of implementation, stating that establishing systematically controlled educational programs and monitoring their outcomes over an extended period is quite costly in terms of time and effort (Thoutenhoofd, 2019).

3. What is PBS?

PBS is a framework for integrating academic and social–emotional intervention practices in schools for all students (Mahabbati et al., 2024). PBS was first developed for children with developmental delays and additional learning needs, derived from three main movements: the normalisation/inclusion movement, applied behavior analysis, and person-centred values. Although PBS has aspects that can be found in other techniques, what makes it special is how it combines several crucial parts into a coherent whole (Carr et al., 2002). As previously mentioned, PBS is an evidence-based approach that can be used school-wide and in classroom- and individual-level work. PBS consists of three levels or tiers: primary prevention, universal support or Tier I for all students and staff at school, and this is the level this study covers; secondary prevention, targeted interventions or Tier II for some students, which require more support; and tertiary prevention, intensive support or Tier III for a small number of students who receive it parallel with Tier I and II interventions (Horner et al., 2010; Talme et al., 2018). PBS has shown good outcomes in school-wide since the 1980s with regards to behavior problems, bullying behavior, and developing academic achievement (Kelm et al., 2014; Luiselli et al., 2005; Todd et al., 2002) and has been shown to increase teachers' experience of the classroom also (Tillery et al., 2010).

4. The present study

PBS is used internationally, and the program has been applied in the Swedish context, but the research in that context is sparse. Consequently, this study is intended to evaluate teachers' perceptions of the impact of PBS, two years after its implementation in two schools. The aim of this study was to investigate how the staff perceived and received the PBS program, how staff perceived the social environment conducive to learning in the school, and the implementation after two years. Almost all staff had spent two years working through a manual (Karlsson, 2020) for PBS under a school psychologist's direction. In each school, there was a special team that met once a month with the psychologist. In the meantime, the staff worked with the manual and completed exercises for each chapter. The exercises were simple and were discussed in joint sessions and evaluations led by team leaders.

The research questions (RQs) were as follows.

- RQ1. How did the staff perceive the implementation during the first two years?
- RQ2. How did the staff perceive the program characteristics?
- RQ3. How did the staff perceive the social environment and whether it was conducive to learning in the school?

5. Previous research

Many countries have tried to adapt PBS model to their environments, for example through PS and Inclusive Behavioral Support in Schools in Sweden and The PALS School-Wide Positive Behavior Support Model in Norway (PALS); PBS is named differently depending on the country, the specific level, and use. PBS models were created in the United States and are a well-respected strategy (Corcoran & Thomas, 2021). In recent years, PBS has also been employed in the Nordic nations, most notably in Norway, but there are now active programs in Iceland, Sweden, and Finland, adapted to their environments (Talme et al., 2018). Researchers, including Sørlie et al. (2018), have examined the three-tiered PBS approach.

Abou Zaid (2024) described the scope and content of studies conducted in the last 20 years, reporting differences in the aims, sample volumes, data collection methods, and results. Most of the studies were intended to gain a better understanding of teachers' perspectives on how PBS enhances student social relationships (Griffin et al., 2017), decreases problem behaviors (Todd et al., 2002), addresses emotional and behavioral issues (Scott et al., 2009), boosts academic performance (Kelm et al., 2014; Luiselli et al., 2005), and promotes a positive learning environment (Kelm et al., 2014; Nelen et al., 2021). Teachers observed a decrease in the proportion of students who said there were unsafe places in and around school based on a repeated-measures analysis of variances. They thought that the intervention was successful and improved classroom learning (Luiselli et al., 2005). Findings showed that students benefitted academically and behaviorally, perceived improved safety and clearer expectations at school, and perceived bullying as less prominent (Franzen & Kamps, 2008; Kelm et al., 2014; McIntosh et al., 2011; Scott et al., 2009). Furthermore, the number of behavioral incidents during recess decreased (Todd et al., 2002), and benefits for the target students' social development and academic success were revealed (Nelson et al., 2002). However, some teachers believed the program theory sharply contradicted their beliefs. The behavioristic method was criticized in one school for contradicting the teachers' "ideas of mankind" and for ignoring "people's natural goodness" during the early phases of implementation (Ingemarson et al., 2016, p. 7). Other participants believed that this criticism stemmed from a misunderstanding of the nature of the program. They concluded that PBS needs to be enhanced further due to the type of implementation difficulties and the students' lack of perceived change (Ingemarson et al., 2016).

Researchers have used various data collection strategies, from self-assessment reports to staff opinions. Only a few studies relied on external observers' opinions. Teachers gave opinions and expressed their satisfaction with policies, performance expectations, and aspects of the physical environment. Other topics were explored in a multiple-item questionnaire (Feuerborn et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2017; Kelm et al., 2014; Luiselli et al., 2005) whereas interviews with teachers were used in some other studies (Tillery et al., 2010; Ingemarson et al., 2016; McIntosh et al., 2011). Most studies were from elementary schools and teachers.

In summary, most experimental studies have confirmed PBS's efficiency at the school level, and many countries have tried to adapt PBS model to their environment. The majority of most studies researchers have used various self-assessment reports concerning staff opinions as data collection strategies. Therefore, there is a lack of research exploring staff perspectives on the impact of positive PBS in the Swedish school environment.

6. Method

6.1. Theoretical framework

This study is based on critical realism (CR; Bhaskar, 1978) as a theoretical framework and qualitative data to explore staff perspectives on the impact of PBS. Individual experience must be understood in the context of one's surroundings, according to CR's perspective (Campbell & Rnerickson, 2023). In addition to highlighting the limitations of human knowledge and experience, CR supports the idea that experiences of the empirical realm vary depending on location, time, and context. Searching for causes and impact without considering why a certain cause has a certain impact is, according to CR, ineffective (Zhang, 2023).

Finding patterns in social systems' underlying advantages and disadvantages is one of the objectives of critical-realist inquiry. We conducted interviews to help us explore how employees feel about PBS implementation. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) differentiated between biased subjectivity and perspectival subjectivity. In the former, researchers notice only what supports their opinions. In the latter, the analysis is made comprehensible by explicit perspectives, and this is what we tried to do in this study by handling the data by two different researchers and by using CR to look at the data in a critical way and design research questions which acknowledging the complexity and context of social phenomena. According to CR, the mechanisms should be identified to know the results because the mechanisms are the actual cause of the result (Stoehrel, 2007). This study uses CR as a scientific theoretical point of departure to understand the mechanisms behind the staff perspectives. (cf. Blom & Morén, 2011).

6.2. Study design

We designed this study to explore the views of the staff working in two schools with regards to the implementation of PBS for two years. We conducted three group interviews, one pair interview and one individual interview. The study design is framed by theoretical perspectives on CR. We used the PBS perspective as a basis for understanding the basics of the intervention implemented. Therefore, we focused on the staff's experiences in the social context of their workplace and in relation to their situation in school.

We planned the study design (data collection, processing of data analysis, and presentations of results) described below according to the process of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). We aimed to meet the trustworthiness criteria in the analysis of qualitative data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure credibility, we checked preliminary findings against raw data and first processed all analyses independently and then discussed them until we achieved consensus. To achieve confirmability and transferability, we use unedited quotes to present results. We collected and data according to the Swedish Research Council's guidelines of research ethics (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017).

6.3. Data collection, participants, and material

We conducted three group interviews and one individual interview with teachers and principals between June and August 2023. All participants lived in a large municipality in Sweden but worked in two different schools. One school was located on the outskirts of the big city in the municipality, and the other was in the countryside. When we conducted the interviews, the project had been ongoing for the first two of the five years in the project plan. We asked the staff who participated in the study to share (in group interviews) their experiences with the project after two years of implementation. In total, we conducted three interviews: two group interviews, the first with 11 active teachers and the second with two principals. The third interview was individual with one principal. The teachers were team leaders from each of the two participating schools and worked in theoretical and practical subjects. We interviewed two principals in pairs and one separately. Everyone on the staff had worked for more than three years in school, and they were permanent employees. Men and women participated in the study, but with a clear overrepresentation of women (13 women, one man) (see Table 1). The sample shows a variety in ages and positions, which helps to capture a broad picture of perceptions regarding two years of implementation.

Table 1
Informants divided by grade and gender.

	Female	Male	Total
Teachers Group 1	2	0	2
Teachers Group 2	4	1	5
Teachers Group 3	4	0	4
Principals	3	0	3
N	13	1	14

Before the start of each interview, an information sheet and informed consent was provided again. The researcher presented themselves, the project, the purpose of the interviews, and the participation criteria. All participants gave informed consent and consented to being recorded before participating. Each interview took between 35 and 55 min to complete. In total, the empirical material from the staff consists of 3 h 23 min of interview time, with 99 A4 pages of transcribed material.

We refer to teachers as T1–T11 and principals as P1-P3 to illustrate the distribution of perceptions. The interview guide focused on participants' experiences of the project (PBS) in relation to the following aspects: implementation, specificity perceived in the program, work experiences, teaching and learning, opportunities and limitations of the project, and results after two years. The questions asked were intended to capture how the interviewees experience the PBS project in their daily work in school and with students. The interview schedule included about 15 questions used as a tool to ensure that we included all the selected perspectives in the interviews. The questions followed the same structure in each interview and were asked in exactly the same way and in the same order every time. We transcribed all interviews verbatim after completing data collection. While we conducted the interviews in Swedish, the quotes presented are translated into English.

6.4. Data analysis

For the purposes of the study, we conducted a reflective thematic analysis (RTA) based on the procedures Braun and Clarke described (Byrne, 2022). RTA is a qualitative research method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) in the data. It is often used to explore individuals' subjective experiences and gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives. RTA requires systematic coding and an interpretative understanding of the data. It is a dynamic and iterative process that involves continuous reflection and refinement. Conducting an RTA includes several systematic steps: (a) familiarizing oneself with the data, (b) generating codes, (c) constructing themes, (d) reviewing potential themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report.

RTA involves interpreting the meaning and context of data, so maintaining a reflexive stance throughout the process is crucial. Important in the analysis is discussing researchers' roles, backgrounds and experiences, and potential biases in the analysis. Because RTA emphasizes the researcher's active role in knowledge production, codes are understood to represent the researcher's interpretations of patterns of meaning across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2019). RTA is independent of theory and epistemology (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and therefore permits broad, flexible analytic approaches across a range of epistemologies. In this study, we adopted an inductive and data-driven approach, which reflects the content of the data. We made the codebook independently throughout the coding process.

6.5. Rigor

We followed the six steps Terry et al. (2017) recommended to enhance the quality of the study. The research team in the interpretation-phase consisted of one junior researcher in pedagogical psychology and special education (FZ) and one senior researcher (LB) in school development and didactics. We used an interview schedule to maintain the data's credibility during the data collection. The research team met regularly to discuss the data and interpret it reflexively. We checked the transcripts against the original auto files and coded data independently. We examined the data from various perspectives in these meetings, and an iterative understanding of the empirical material emerged. We constantly and critically considered our positions and assumptions to ensure that our perspectives did not bias. interpretations of the data. Our skills allowed for a broad interpretation of the data material. We had different and supplementary experiences in the interpretation, which means there is sufficient knowledge of the school environment, the culture among teachers, and their complexity (e.g., Terry et al., 2017).

7. Results

We present our findings in this section and describe the results based on our research questions. The inductive coding resulted in distinct main themes for each question (see Figs. 1–3). We present our findings based on the RQs and ensured that we answered each one individually. We state the RQs and present the corresponding themes and representative quotes from the staff to illustrate these results.

7.1. Implementation

An important question to be answered in this study was how the staff perceived the implementation of PBS after two years. Four themes emerged in the results (Fig. 1): participation, the importance of meetings/discussions, more time and resources, and no visible result among students.

Concerning participation, some of the staff indicated that it is difficult to involve everyone in the project. When describing the participation in the PBS project, one respondent reflected the opinion of many of the staff regarding the implementation: "It has been difficult to gather everyone because everyone has different tasks at school" (T1). According to the staff, neither the School Age Educare Center, preschool classes, kitchen staff, cleaning staff nor the caretaker had the opportunity to participate. One respondent said, "It was difficult to get kitchen and cleaning staff involved, although they received some information about PBS" (T2). Almost everyone on the staff felt that PBS had helped them reach a consensus as a team, and the most important thing, according to staff, was a consensus regarding the expected behaviors. One teacher stated, "I think we get a consensus on many things, that you get a good approach to the students … we should use the positive instead" (T8). Another stated, "We rely on students and on each other. I think that is the strength.".

The second main theme was the importance of meetings/discussions. When discussing PBS's importance, the staff emphasized that almost everyone thinks it is important. T11 stated, "I think everyone thinks it's important. Yes. Absolutely, I think so." Most of the staff also believe that

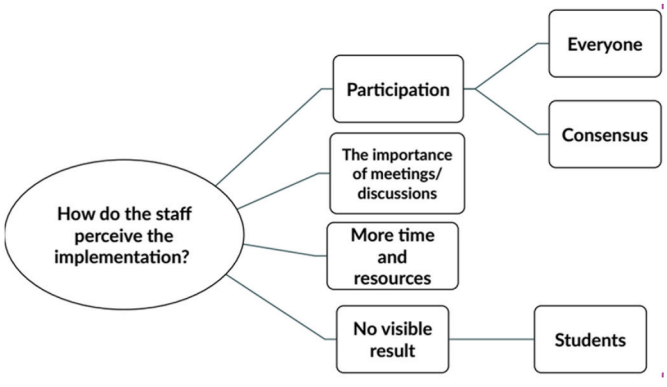

Fig. 1. Thematic map of staff perception of implementation.

some of the most important parts of PBS are the meetings and discussions, getting information, communicating, and following up on the intervention: "I think the discussions have been great always" (T11).

In the interviews, other staff members expressed similar opinions, but they thought less time should pass between the meetings and that the meetings need to be shorter. This is how T6 explained it: "But above all that, you have these regular meetings. It must not be too long in between." According to T10, meetings do not have to be so long, but they do need to be held often.

The third main theme was more time and resources. Many staff members talked about what is missing or how they wish the PBS project could be improved. When describing what is missing to make the implementation of the PBS project more effective, some of the staff stated that they would like to have more resources, time, and substitute teachers. T5 stated, "The more time and resources, the more important it is." T9 explained, "But that we would have a team where there are resources in the form of different competencies than what teachers have.".

The fourth main theme was no visible results among students. What almost all staff perceived is that there are no early results, especially concerning students. The result that some of the staff see is the development in how the staff works together as a team. One respondent said, "I probably also think the result involves us. We now take responsibility for what happens" (T3). Another stated, "I don't see any direct results among the students, either. I think you see more with us teachers" (T9). One staff member provided a critical opinion of the staff: "Concerning the results of the last two years, the only results we can see are in the dining hall" (P1). Some of the staff saw results in specific situations, but they could not say whether they were results of only PBS. For example, one staff member said, "Perhaps you have seen results when you have carried out something in the class right then and there … but overall, I can't see any clear results. Maybe it's a change because of PBS. But equally, that change could be because the student has matured, so you don't know what's what here" (T2). Another said, "Regarding whether there is any change or result because of PBS, I can't say anything right away. Then you have to know what the cause is" (T4).

7.2. Specificity in the program

The second research question we answered in this study was how staff perceived the program's specificity. Five themes emerged in the results (Fig. 2): the foundation of shared values, self-evident nature, tools and strategies, making behaviors visible, and no serious criticism.

Concerning foundation of values, many of the staff believed that PBS gives them a consensus and similar expectations. One respondent stated, "You have the same values, and you work in the same direction" (T1). Another stated, "I think this way, the PBS work gives us a consensus. We have similar expectations for the students' behavior eventually, and it permeates the school" (T5). The staff said that PBS allows them to follow the same approach, thereby making the school staff work as a team using similar strategies, which have a positive impact on student's behavior. One respondent said, "I think mainly about the foundation, that all staff have the same approach and the same foundation to stand on, that we can hear in corridors how we say, Oh, how nicely you are walking in the corridor here, instead of saying, Don't run in the corridor." (P1).

The second main theme that emerged regarding PBS's specific structure was its self-evident nature. In other words, the staff felt that the program was based on and contained the obvious for teachers. When describing their perceptions of the obviousness of PBS, some of the staff stated that they had worked with some PBS strategies previously. The ideas were not totally new knowledge, but with PBS, they manage their classrooms in a structured way. For example, one respondent stated, "PBS can be thought of as a model, and that has certainly meant that we have talked about it in a structured way every time we meet" (P1). Another stated, "We've had this way before because we're such a small unit, so it's been pretty easy to follow" (T10).

The third main theme was tools and strategies. The staff described PBS as an effective and clearly structured framework to promote safety and deal with challenging students: "I like that it is a very clearly structured framework for working preventively and promoting safety and study peace. I think it has a strong theoretical basis" (T3). PBS gives students concrete information about what they will see, do, and say, making it concrete and simple to use. The staff described PBS as preventive work, practical, and important to give students positive support: "One would say that the core of PBS is that it is important to give students positive support and good feedback" (T7). The fourth main theme was making behaviors visible. The staff learned to see behaviors more clearly, put them into words, and deal with them in a supportive way: "One thing that I think is very important, that I have been awakened to with this book and this work, is that I should be able to understand that a behavior has a function for this student" (T2).

The fifth main theme was no serious criticism. All interviewees on the staff had a positive opinion and no criticism of PBS. They merely stated that some details could be different. Some of the staff described, "Right now I can't think of anything critical of it."(T.4) "I have also no

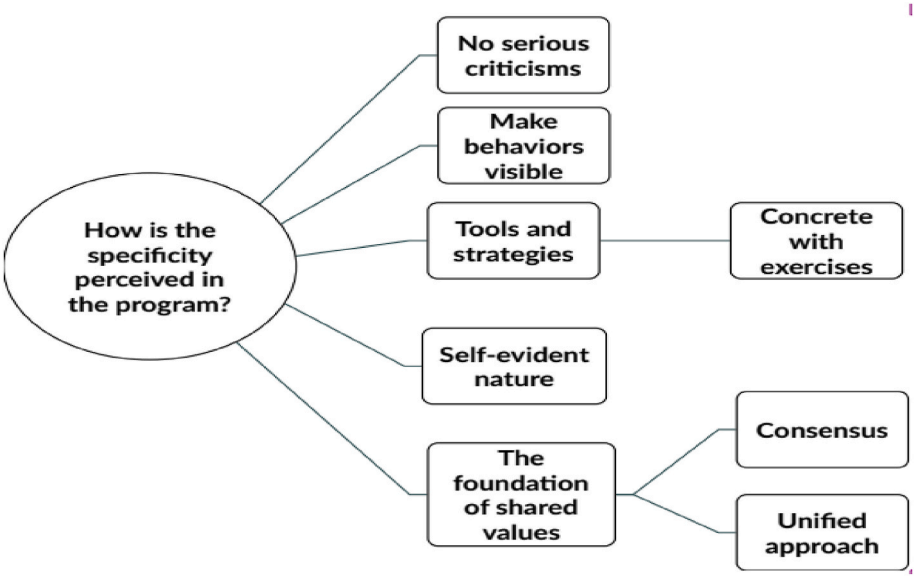

Fig. 2. Thematic map of specificity in the program.

critic of anything really yet, but there have been details in how we have"(T.3). The staff's positive opinions of PBS came from good preparation and their feeling of need for it. According to all the above, we can say that there are no real differences between teachers' and principals' perceptions of the program; the only difference is that the principals describe it widely on the school level and the teachers focused more on students' behaviors in the classroom.

7.3. The social environment conducive to learning

The last research question to be answered in this study was how the social environment conducive to learning is affected. Three themes emerged in the results (Fig. 3): the teacher's leadership, the students' situation, and the learning environment.

7.3.1. Teacher's leadership

The intervention clearly left its mark on the teachers' leadership. Some of the staff believed that the students' needs, and the school situation had changed positively. They also believed that PBS is a model for treatment of students. Describing their perceptions of PBS, some of the staff commented that it can be an effective model to meet the students' needs, help teachers respond to them in a different way, and turn negative behavior into positive behavior. One respondent stated, "It's about exploring the good in turning negative behavior into positive and thinking about how to respond" (P2). Another tellingly said, "I noticed that the students' needs and the school situation have changed and that we have to respond to them in a slightly different way" (T11). Positive relationships are the foundation of any classroom-based approach to positive behavior support. The staff saw that PBS helped them focus on relationships and communications with students. Some of the staff explained that a close relationship is very important to help students and to get good results. One respondent stated, "I think it's a winning concept, partly for the relational building with the student and partly to get good results" (T6).

Teacher's awareness, reflection, and planning are crucial when they respond to behavior, and PBS helps in the development of teacher awareness. The staff described having increased awareness due to PBS, stating they became more aware of situations with students and understood them. T8 stated, "You become more aware in situations with students. You become more aware of what you are actually doing.".

One of PBS's aims is to create safety in school and offer peace and quiet so that students and teachers can work and enjoy themselves. The staff emphasized that security is important for students and the staff. One respondent tellingly said, "It will probably be a bit safer for us to use certain terms if you think about us educators: surpluses, deficits, expected behavior, common rules, and such things. We can become confident in the vocabulary" (T5). Specifically, strategies to achieve safety in the classroom and school are made clear in the interviews: "We work as we have learned, and we feel that we will also have a sense of security so that we can act, so that we can reach these challenging students" (T5).

7.3.2. Students' situation

The second main theme was students' situations. Some of the staff believed that students are seen due to PBS. PBS practices assure students that they are seen, heard, and cared for as culturally situated human beings above all else. Many staff members describe this aspect, stating that with PBS, the students are valued. PBS also allows the staff to understand students' behavior and helps students understand their behavior. P1 confirmed, "PBS towards the students is very important so that they can feel that they receive this positively and that they are somehow seen and that they work positively all the time." Another respondent stated, "According to many respondents, PBS can help with changing and understanding behaviors, but it is rather with oneself that one thinks even more about one's own behavior" (T4).

Staff believe that quick praise and motivation for positive behavior are very important to change behavior. According to T5, "Those who change a behavior from negative to positive, I give them quick praise and let students know when they do the right behavior."

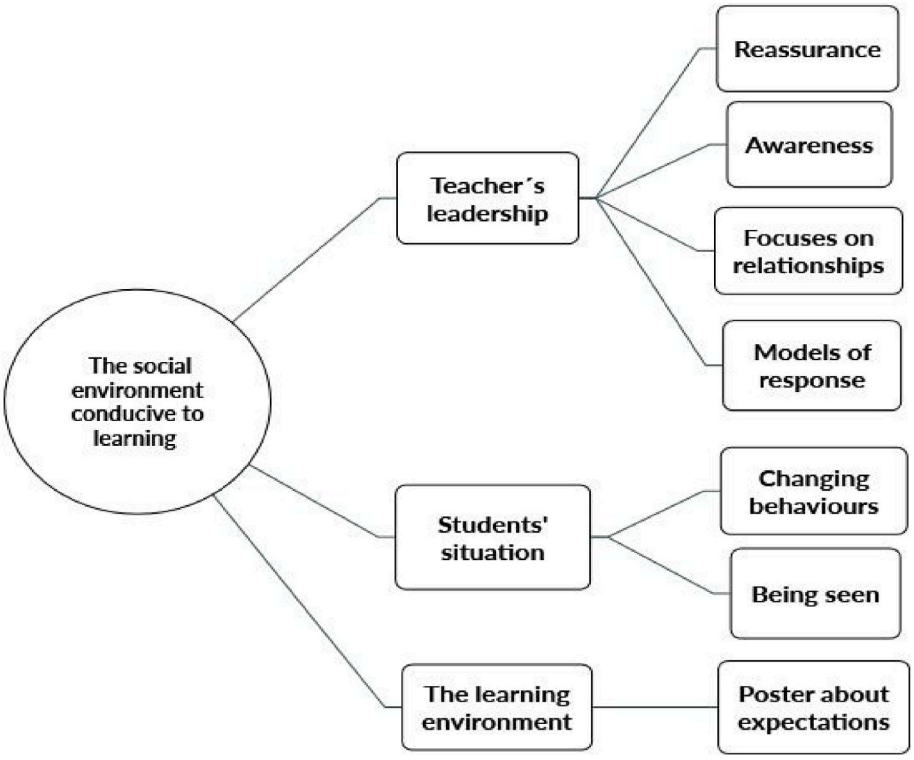

Fig. 3. Thematic Map of How the social environment conducive to learning is affected.

7.3.3. Learning environment

The third main theme was learning environments. In practice, this was more about staff agreeing on how to behave in the corridors, the dining room, and the classroom; there, the staff put up posters to remind each other and the students. One of the respondents said, "When we used these expected-behavior signs that we put up in the dining room, it got a little better" (T1). Another respondent stated:

> [We placed the signs] in the classroom, in the schoolyard, in the corridors, and in the dining hall. We've only gotten to the dining room so far and now have to start working on the outdoor environment. That's where we decided to have our observation and our focus. It becomes much more concrete for us when you narrow it down like that. (T2)

According to the staff, the expectations are the core of PBS, and the reasonable expectations of students help them achieve success. The other important factor is feedback, as T6 explained: "The core of PBS is that it is important to give students positive support and good feedback and that you should have reasonable expectations of the student." Some of the staff agreed that PBS very effectively helps staff set appropriate expectations. T3 stated, "I agree that this has been very good with expectations, but the most important thing for me is to think about setting the right expectations." The themes of connection through shared understandings, values, and behavioural expectations are related, connected, and complementary. Staff felt more aligned and clearer in their roles, which enhanced their connection to students, who felt clearer about behavioural expectations.

7.4. Summary

The data collected in this study showed that staff saw no visible results in the students' behavior due to the implementation of PBS after 2 years, and it needs more time to show results concerning students' behavior. On the other hand, the staff perceived results in their leadership skills, how they work as a team, and how they handle the students. One important criticism of implementation is that not all staff could participate. Because the staff perceive the meetings as very important, more resources and time are needed to enable these to occur and for all staff to participate. The staff have a positive view of PBS and say that it gives them concrete strategies and a foundation of values, making it easier to create expectations. The staff also said that they are working with Tier I of PBS and that results will be noticeable when they start working with Tiers II and III and give students help and support with problems and difficulties.

8. Discussion

A school climate and social environment conducive to learning seem to have a significant impact on students' academic trajectories (cf. Kubiszewski et al., 2023), teachers' classroom management (Skolverket, 2023b), and principals' mission to create optimal learning conditions for students and for teachers' teaching (Skolinspektionen, 2022). This applies in many schools throughout the world (World Bank Group, 2019), including in Sweden (Regeringen och Regeringskansliet, 2023). Various behavioral support programs are implemented in schools (cf. Denne et al., 2023), and there is great interest worldwide in initiatives to improve the school climate. Few initiatives based on PBS in Sweden have been implemented; therefore, it is of considerable interest to evaluate it in the Swedish context. Interviews enable the collection of in-depth information from participants and to explore global social phenomena. Therefore, qualitative studies are of considerable importance in looking at staff perspectives on PBS.

This study can make an important scientific contribution to the impact of PBS in the Swedish context based on the staff's perceptions. Depending on the study's outcome, the results can make a decisive contribution to teachers' leadership and the topic of social environments conducive to learning in the classroom. For student health personnel (psychologists, counsellors, special educators, etc.), the study's results can provide inspiration for organizing student health work to support students' calmness while they study and teachers' leadership from a holistic perspective not least, the result can provide input for political investigations on *a social environment conducive to learning* and provide a scientific basis on the issue for policymakers.

8.1. A stronger culture and leadership strategies but little progress with students

The clearest result of the study is that the staff gained a common value base to build a culture that favors a social environment conducive to learning. This common set of values and expectations amongst staff led to more consistent and predictable rules and boundaries for students around their behaviour This is an important step in reaching the goals the Swedish school authorities set to promote students' learning and results (cf. Skolinspektionen, 2022; Regeringen och Regeringskansliet, 2023). A critical question, however, is whether this result would have been achieved with another program for positive school climate. This study's results, like those of previous studies, corroborate the effectiveness of PBS at the teacher-leadership level. However, the results show no visible results among students during the first two years of PBS implementation, which contradicts the previous research regarding PBS's ability to reduce problem behavior at the end of the first post-intervention year (Todd et al., 2002), boost academic performance over the two years (Kelm et al., 2014; Luiselli et al., 2005), reduce incidences of inappropriate behavior two and three years after implementation (Franzen & Kamps, 2008; Nelen et al., 2021), and promote a constructive learning environment in two and three years (Kelm et al., 2014; Nelen et al., 2021).

One interesting finding is that staff members are aware that PBS implementation takes time to produce results concerning students' behavior. They considered these results could be more visible when they begin working on Tiers II and III of PBS.

8.2. Implications for applied practice

To date, two years of implementation of Tier I PBS have resulted in a positive impact for staff concerning common values, norms, and increased leadership competence. There is evidence of increased staff capacity to reach a consensus as a team regarding the expected behaviors, communicate, and focus on relationships and communications with students. Staff see that PBS is very helpful in promoting safety and creating appropriate expectations of student behavior. The staff's high degree of consensus made the implementation successful although not everyone was allowed to participate. The findings also have several practical implications for stakeholders, which highlight the need for high-quality PBS trainings that include all staff. Researchers need to work on implementing Tiers II and III of PBS and examine students' perspectives of PBS.

8.3. Limitations of study

The presented results are subject to some methodological issues. First, the sample consisted of people who led the implementation, team leaders and principals. The answers may have been a little different if we had interviewed other staff members. On the other hand, we got a broad picture of those who followed the process for a long time from the "inside." Because those we interviewed highlighted positive and negative experiences of the project, we believe that the results still show a realistic picture of the implementation. Nonetheless, the study's methodological limitations should be taken into consideration in interpretations of the results. First, we did not interview a majority of the staff members. Second, because this study was limited to two schools in Sweden, it is difficult to draw conclusions about how PBS is seen in other schools,

which may have different needs and issues. These two schools also may share similar needs and challenges.

8.4. Strengths of study

A strength is that the study is based on two schools with the same types of discipline problems and that the staff, from the bottom up, wanted to be able to handle them. Therefore, the project was anchored immediately by most of the staff, which is one decisive factor in being able to implement a PBS project.

PBS originated in a different context, and it has been criticized as not appropriate in a Swedish context. Moreover, the impacts has yet to be proven (Malm, 2019). In the current study, staff felt that they recognized PBS's benefits on school development by improving the mechanisms for delivering education in the classroom and staff leadership skills by recognising the importance of close relationships with students and having reasonable expectations of them, which increased staff understanding of students. Staff also recognized PBS's useful on teamwork, which helped them implement some PBS strategies and see positive impacts. Researchers should include other stakeholders in the implementation, most importantly the students and their experiences.

9. Conclusion

The results demonstrate some of the factors that Swedish school authorities highlight as important for creating a social environment conductive to learning, namely that the entire organization must be involved (Skolforskningsinstitutet, 2021) and the importance of leadership and structure in the classroom (Skolinspektionen, 2022). Finding and evaluating models that support social environments is also aligned with policy discussions and current government initiatives (cf. Regeringen och Regeringskansliet, 2023) and advice for Swedish schools about better discipline from the PISA manager (Sverigesradio, 2023).

To understand more clearly and explore the staff experiences, we used CR (Bhaskar, 1978). Based on the respondents' statements, we found patterns through RTA and analyzed underlying structures in the interviews because they can influence respondents' views (cf. Zhang, 2023). We were able to explore some of the mechanisms that lead to certain outcomes (cf Blom & Morén, 2011). CR was useful in interpreting the interviews because it enabled us to search for underlying patterns and mechanisms. Finally, because the chosen analysis method, RTA, emphasizes reflexivity, which critical analysis also does, we were able to reflect on our own position and our understandings of the results.

The teachers were homogeneously positive in their perceptions of PBS, its implementation, the program characteristics, and the learning environment during the first two years of its implementation. Our finding that some teachers described PBS as employing constructive methods supports existing research (Kelm et al., 2014). On the other hand, our findings were inconsistent with that of Ingemarson et al. (2016) that the teachers were heterogeneous in their perceptions of PBS. This result suggests that the staff believe PBS is very useful for the staff during the first two years; the usefulness seems to be in determining values, establishing boundaries and structure and expectations within the school, developing cohesion amongst staff and enhancing relationships with students - and that these things will pay off with improved student behaviour and outcome over time. Therefore, a continued close examination of mechanisms that leads to different results is needed.

The meeting and the discussions were the main impact that the staff saw, but some of the staff could not attend the meetings because they needed resources and time. Another positive impact of PBS, according to the staff, is that it makes student behavior visible and gives the staff effective strategies as leaders. This is an underlying advantage of using the PBS program. A few of the staff stated that they had already worked somewhat with PBS, even if they did not call it PBS, but they still believed it was beneficial for the staff as a team because it allowed them to reach consensus. According to the staff, PBS helps them create a better learning environment by designing appropriate expectations. With evaluations of individual experiences over a longer period, the specific results of this study can be better understood in their own context (cf. Campbell & Rnerickson, 2023). All of the above-mentioned conclusions can be helpful to explain the real picture of the underlying causal mechanisms that give rise to the findings, according to the CR framework, that staff have improved communication and cooperation, which gives a similar understanding of PBS (Brönnimann, 2022). It also, according to the CR framework, provides a way of thinking about what causal mechanisms have not been actualized and could be if things were different, such as more time with the implementation of PBS and creating the resources for all staff to attend the meetings, which may affect outcomes (Brunson et al., 2023).

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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