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Positive behaviour support in Swedish schools: Staff perspectives on relationships, climate, and implementation challenges

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ABSTRACT

This study examines long-term staff perceptions of the Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) framework, implemented over three years in two Swedish compulsory schools, focusing on its impact on teaching, student behaviour, and the overall social environment conducive to learning. Using a qualitative design, data were gathered through group interviews with school staff. Results indicate that staff perceive PBS as highly effective in fostering strong relationships between staff and students, strengthening staff consensus, and cultivating a positive school climate. However, implementation faces persistent challenges: staff reported a lack of resources (including time for documentation and training for new hires), unstructured meeting schedules, and a consensus that the Tier 1 framework is insufficient for supporting students with severe behavioural challenges or engaging older students. The study concludes that successful long-term PBS implementation requires sustained organisational resources, continuous structured follow-up, and a tailored approach to meet the varying needs of all students within the school context.

1. Introduction

The Swedish Education Act (Chapter 5, § 3) mandates that all students be provided with a social environment that promotes learning, characterised by safety and a pedagogical atmosphere conducive to academic growth values (Skollag). Despite this legal requirement, recent data suggests a significant disconnect between policy and the lived experience of school participants; in 2024, only half of the students and teachers in Swedish compulsory and upper secondary schools reported being able to concentrate during lessons, with roughly 30% of students frequently disturbed by high noise levels (Skolverket, 2025). Because a social environment conducive to learning is fundamentally linked to the quality of instruction, teacher leadership, and systemic support (Statens offentliga utredningar [SOU], 2024), it is clear that teachers cannot establish such an environment if their leadership is ineffective or isolated (Steinberg, 2024). To foster effective leadership, staff require comprehensive frameworks that assist them as a collective in creating a structured, predictable, and supportive school culture (Sørlie et al., 2016). Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) is one such internationally recognised framework employed to bridge the gap between legislative ideals and classroom reality.

1.1. Positive behaviour support (PBS) conceptual overview

The PBS framework is an internationally recognised, evidence-based approach aimed at creating a social environment that supports learning within schools by improving student behaviour and school climate (Center on PBIS, 2023). It includes a wide range of behavioural methods, such as functional assessment and positive reinforcement, alongside environmental strategies, such as routines and visual supports (Horner et al., 2010; Talme et al., 2018). International trials demonstrate that PBS effectively reduces problem behaviours, enhances staff's perceived self-efficacy in behaviour management, and fosters a more predictable social environment (Luh et al., 2025). While PBS originated in the United States, its application across Europe has expanded significantly, as documented in a recent scoping review by Demirtaş, Karahan, et al. (2025). This review highlights that European implementations generally lead to improved school climates and staff perceptions, though success often depends on adaptation to local educational values and legal frameworks, such as the Swedish Education Act, which prioritises inclusion and democratic values (Skollag).

According to the PBIS Implementation Blueprint (Center on PBIS, 2023), the framework is characterised by the integration of five essential elements: outcomes, data, practices, systems, and equity. Outcomes consist of well-defined social and academic aims recognised by students,

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families, and educators. Data refers to the information used to determine the status, required changes, and outcomes of interventions. Practices refer to evidence-based interventions such as functional assessment, positive reinforcement, and visual supports that directly support student behaviour (Mestari et al., 2024). Systems encompass the administrative and organisational supports, including team structures, training, and coaching, that ensure staff can implement these practices effectively over time (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Finally, equity is a core component that ensures these systems and practices are applied fairly to meet the needs of all students within the school population.

This model emphasises core values such as respect, responsibility, and safety to strengthen the pedagogical setting (Demirtaş, Karasu, et al., 2025). By involving school-wide interventions designed to improve staff competencies, PBS helps cultivate a better learning environment and fosters positive relationships between students and staff (Horner et al., 2010; Sørlie & Ogden, 2015). The framework can effectively promote socio-emotional development and academic outcomes when implemented with high fidelity to the method (Horner et al., 2010). The broader aim is to prevent problem behaviours and enhance functional skills through an ongoing process of research-based assessment and data-driven decision-making (Mestari et al., 2024).

PBS is increasingly recommended worldwide and is based on a multilevel strategy that includes proactive efforts and person-centred planning (Hayward, 2025). A fundamental principle of the approach is the commitment to never applying harsh, restrictive, or degrading methods (Bruinsma et al., 2025). The framework is structured into three levels of support: universal (Tier 1), targeted (Tier 2), and intensive (Tier 3) (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Tier 1 serves as the starting point for establishing the framework, enabling the screening and identification of students who may eventually require more intensive interventions (Luh et al., 2025). At this universal level, support efforts from coaches, trainers, and administrators are referred to as implementation elements (McIntosh et al., 2013). Evaluating the long-term implementation of such a framework in Sweden is crucial to understanding how these global practices align with Swedish egalitarian values. However, fully translating PBS into practice is a lengthy process that can span several years, often complicated by limitations in personnel, resources, or organisational conflicts between staff and management (Sørlie & Ogden, 2015).

1.2. PBS in the Swedish context

In Sweden, initiatives related to PBS began gaining traction around 2005, serving as a catalyst for exploring how international behavioural support models could be integrated into the national school system (Ingemarson et al., 2016). While the framework is internationally recognised as Positive behaviour supports (PBS) or School-Wide Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS or PBIS), the Swedish context features several culturally adapted versions, including School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support (PALS) originally from Norway the school-wide prevention programme (PS), and the Inclusive Behavioural Support in Schools programme (IBIS) (Talme et al., 2018; Vårdgivarwebben, 2023). These Swedish adaptations are marked by distinct cultural shifts aimed at aligning the framework with the national Education Act. Specifically, they emphasise relationship-based pedagogy and democratic values rather than relying solely on behavioural rewards, ensuring that behavioural expectations do not overshadow the teacher-student bond (Talme et al., 2018). Consequently, Swedish approaches often shift the focus away from behavioural reinforcement, favouring social validation and the Low Arousal Approach in line with Swedish egalitarian values (Hejlskov Elvén, 2009).

The foundational pilot for this integration was the PS programme (Positiv Skola), which initiated its research phase in 2005 to target all students at a primary prevention level (Ingemarson et al., 2016). Early evaluations of the PS programme revealed that implementation failure often caused by a lack of staff consensus and significant organisational barriers prevented the framework from achieving its intended effects (Ingemarson et al., 2014; Nylén et al., 2021). As a result, contemporary Swedish projects place a greater emphasis on long-term coaching, ongoing data-driven decision-making, and implementation fidelity (Karlberg, 2025; Nylén et al., 2021). Building on these lessons, the current research project explores a five-year initiative in two schools comprising three functional units (school 1A, school 1B and school 2) within a Swedish municipality, school 1 is divided into two closely collaborating entities, driven by a local need to systematically reduce problematic behaviours, improve academic performance, and establish a sustainable foundation for a social environment conducive to learning.

At the heart of this project's origin is the belief that student success requires a shared pedagogical approach in which staff clarify expectations and provide consistent, positive feedback. The primary aim is to enhance teacher competence in classroom leadership through proactive methods that promote both prosocial and academic behaviours. Unlike earlier Swedish efforts that relied on external consultants, this project is led by a school psychologist and utilises a specific Swedish manual, *Clarity, Leadership & Encouragement: Positive Behaviour* Support *in the Classroom* (Karlsson, 2020). This handbook provides a three-part framework: a Universal Framework (Tier 1) emphasising relationship-building, the physical environment, routines, and social skills training; and Targeted & Intensive Support (Tiers 2 & 3) for students at risk of mental health issues or long-term behavioural challenges.

The project follows a deliberate, phased rollout over five years to transition from short-term fixes to long-term institutionalisation. During Years 1–2, the focus remained on establishing the universal system and training staff in proactive strategies for inclusion and well-being; an evaluation after the second year assessed the initial impact on teacher leadership and school climate (Abou Zaid, 2025). While the initial phase of the PBS implementation project involved three school sites, School 1A, School 1 B, and School 2 (Abou Zaid, 2025), the current study focuses exclusively on the two sites, School 1A and School 1 B.

The execution strategy employed a top-down and bottom-up integration approach, utilising a train-the-trainer framework where school leadership and a dedicated PBS team supported colleagues in daily classroom routines. In practice, this meant restructuring school systems to establish a common language and visual supports across all environments rather than merely implementing behavioural rewards. To ensure implementation fidelity, the project held regular consensus-building meetings to assess consistency, a systematic approach crucial for determining whether outcomes result from the PBS framework or external variables (Horner et al., 2010). By measuring the project through multiple stages, including this third-year review, the study provides essential empirical knowledge on how staff perceptions evolve as the complexity of the support increases.

1.3. Previous research

As this study exclusively examines Tier 1 of PBS, the literature review is limited to research specifically related to this universal level of support. Previous studies have consistently shown that implementing PBS positively impacts the school environment by improving student interactions, enhancing teaching quality, and fostering a supportive social setting characterised by staff consensus (Berg et al., 2024; Ingemarson et al., 2016; Willemse et al., 2023). International research indicates that Tier 1 training boosts teachers' collective confidence and self-efficacy in managing challenging behaviours (Michael et al., 2023; Willemse et al., 2023). However, the Swedish research context highlights a more intricate interaction between relational pedagogy and organisational challenges (Nylén et al., 2021).

An essential finding in PBS research is the fundamental shift in staff–student interactions from reactive to proactive (Simonsen et al., 2008). In the Swedish context, Berg et al. (2024) found that the framework offers a solid structure for relationship-based work,

particularly in compulsory school settings, leading to qualitative improvements in interactions and stronger staff cohesion. This is supported by international longitudinal studies, such as those on the Norwegian PALS framework, which reported a notable increase in the use of praise and encouragement after three years (Sørlie & Ogden, 2015). Despite these gains, Swedish research also highlights a discrepancy in behavioural development; early assessments by Ingemarson et al. (2016) indicated that while PBS promoted changes in teacher behaviour, it did not always lead to immediate, observable changes in student conduct. This is mirrored in initial evaluations of the current project, where staff in the second year perceived the framework as highly beneficial for strengthening relationships despite not yet noticing visible changes in student behaviour (Abou Zaid, 2025).

Further evidence suggests that PBS fosters a safer, more predictable learning environment by establishing a common language and shared values for behaviour management (Abou Zaid, 2024; Fohlin et al., 2023; Willemse et al., 2023). By emphasising proactive core values—such as respect and responsibility—the framework enhances the pedagogical environment and helps reduce noise levels and disruptions that hinder concentration (Demirtaş, Karasu, et al., 2025). In Scandinavia, this approach has been shown to enhance staff's shared belief in their ability to maintain a positive classroom climate and reduce professional isolation through unified collective leadership (Sørlie & Ogden, 2015; Willemse et al., 2023). Nylén et al. (2021) emphasise that a social environment conducive to learning depends on how effectively practices like routines and visual supports are incorporated into everyday activities. When executed with fidelity, this fosters a shared commitment that directly associates with an enhanced capacity to deliver quality instruction (Michael et al., 2023; Talme et al., 2018).

Despite these positive outcomes, persistent obstacles to long-term implementation remain. Implementation fidelity is often jeopardised by organisational challenges, such as the lack of ongoing resources for documentation and training new staff, or conflicts over resource allocation (Abou Zaid, 2024; Fohlin et al., 2023; Sørlie & Ogden, 2015). Berg et al. (2024) describe the implementation as a lengthy, complex process, and Swedish critics often point to the exclusion of non-pedagogical staff—such as cleaners and caretakers—which can hamper the school-wide cohesion needed for success (Abou Zaid, 2025; Karlberg, 2025). Furthermore, cultural resistance can occur if staff perceive behavioural components as contradictory to national pedagogical traditions or democratic values (Ingemarson et al., 2016). There is also a consistent finding that Tier 1 may be insufficient for students with severe behavioural challenges or for maintaining engagement among older students (Michael et al., 2023).

To transition from short-term implementation to long-term institutionalisation, schools must overcome the implementation dip caused by staff turnover and shifting leadership priorities (Fohlin et al., 2023). This necessitates a focus on cooperative learning to sustain fidelity after external support concludes. The present study extends the findings of Fohlin et al. (2023) and Nylén et al. (2021) by offering a longitudinal perspective at the three-year mark a period often characterised by the transition from Tier 1 to Tier 2. While previous Swedish research has focused on initial organisational capacity (Ingemarson et al., 2014), this study captures the evolving effects of the framework as it moves toward true institutionalisation.

1.4. Problem statement, significance of the present study, added value, and research questions

To generate evidence-based knowledge about the framework's effectiveness, this study assesses part of a five-year PBS project implemented in two schools, with the evaluation conducted three years after the project began. The most significant factors that promote or hinder such projects are continuity, cohesion, and inclusion. An essential element of successful school development projects is the shift from short-term implementation to long-term institutionalisation, which requires a long-term perspective in evaluation studies to identify factors that promote or hinder progress (Damber et al., 2022). Furthermore, the PBS framework explicitly depends on a continuous process of research-based assessment and data-driven decision-making to ensure that interventions effectively meet the needs of the specific school population, especially when moving from Tier 1 (Universal) of PBS to Tier 2 (Targeted) and Tier 3 (Intensive) (Mestari et al., 2024).

A persistent barrier to long-term implementation is the lack of school development projects spanning multiple stages, such as a second-year evaluation followed by a third- and fifth-year review, that provide essential empirical knowledge about the evolving effects of the framework and help refine strategies for maintaining a social environment conducive to learning (Fohlin et al., 2023; Nylén et al., 2021). This is especially true when schools face different challenges and situations each year. According to Hall and Hord (2020), the initial stages of a project are characterised by mechanical use, where staff focus primarily on the technicalities of the tools. However, the transition towards sustainability and full implementation generally requires a three-to five--year trajectory (Fixsen et al., 2009).

This study's three-year evaluation is therefore critical to determining whether the schools have progressed beyond mechanical application towards a self-sustaining school culture (McIntosh et al., 2013). The evaluation is particularly important, as the schools plan to complete the implementation of Tier 1 (Universal) of PBS in the third year and commence Tier 2 (Targeted). While the previous study (Abou Zaid, 2025) established the baseline for initial staff buy-in, the present study investigates the durability of these perceptions. This allows an analysis of whether initial enthusiasm has developed into institutionalised practice or succumbed to implementation fatigue. Additionally, multiple evaluations are important to follow implementation fidelity, as collecting data over time is crucial for measuring it; without ongoing monitoring of systems and practices, the effectiveness of the framework regarding student behaviour and academic outcomes cannot be accurately determined (Center on PBIS, 2023; Michael et al., 2023).

The results of this study are significant in several ways: a systematically measured school development project provides insights for similar initiatives; it provides empirical knowledge about the effects of PBS in Sweden; and it aids in identifying strategies to foster a social environment conducive to learning in the classroom. The current study explores staff perceptions after three years of the project, addressing the following research questions:

RQ1. How do staff perceive the implementation during the first three years?
RQ2. How do staff perceive the results of the PBS framework after three years?
RQ3. How do staff perceive the social environment conducive to learning in the school three years after implementation?

2. Method

This section outlines the qualitative research design employed to assess the third year of the five-year PBS project in Sweden. The study adopts an inductive approach to explore staff experiences. This section outlines the research design, empirical data, and selected research methods, along with a critical discussion of these methods.

2.1. School context and implementation fidelity

The study was carried out in two municipal compulsory schools. The sample for this longitudinal evaluation differs from the previous year-two study (Abou Zaid, 2025); whereas the earlier research included data from School 2, that site opted to discontinue the PBS framework due to resource constraints, leaving Schools 1A and 1B as the primary focus for this three-year follow-up. Both schools are situated in semi-rural to suburban areas. School 1A caters to approximately 140

students from preschool through Year 9. The staff comprises 14 full-time equivalents (16 total staff), including class teachers, subject teachers, special educators, and support staff. School 1B serves around 110 students from preschool through Year 6. The staff includes 10 full-time equivalents. This organisational structure was established to ensure reliability by tracking progress and guiding the project's strategic focus. In the PBS implementation, the schools utilise the SW-PBS Self-Assessment Survey (SAS), as presented in Karlsson (2020), which evaluates staff perceptions of the framework's integration. This tool is a Swedish translation and adaptation of the PBIS Self-Assessment Survey version 3.0. According to the longitudinal data from the project, implementation Fidelity show a positive trend across all systems in the first three years. Essential fidelity results indicate that School-wide systems and non-classroom settings reached high implementation levels by the third year, with scores increasing from initial baseline measures in the first year. While Classroom systems also showed growth, the results for Individual support systems remain the lowest-scoring area.

2.2. Participant selection and profiles

A convenience sampling strategy was used, with nine participants from a staff pool of 26 across the two schools volunteering. Although the sample was based on availability, it naturally provided a wide range of perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It offered a realistic view of the implementation process through multiple professional perspectives, ensuring the data was 'information-rich' despite the small sample size. This includes subject teachers, class teachers, special educators, and a teacher assistant, illustrating how PBS functions in both formal and less structured school environments. The sample features a diverse range of experience levels, from early-career educators to seasoned staff. This enables the study to consider how the framework is perceived across different pedagogical generations. Selection was based on informed consent and a willingness to offer detailed, critical reflections on the framework's impact after three years. By including staff members from various grade levels and professional roles, the study avoids presenting an idealised view. As shown in Table 1, the sample represents a variety of grade levels and professional experiences.

2.3. Data collection

Data collection took place during the third year (spring 2025) of the five-year project plan, allowing the study to capture experiences and reflections from a phase when the project's structures and working methods had started to take shape.

The total staff at the two schools comprises 26 staff members, of whom 9 were interviewed, working in both theoretical and practical subjects. The majority of the interviewed staff members are subject teachers and have worked at the school for over three years. Although both men and women participated in the study, women were clearly overrepresented in the interviews (8 women, 1 man) (see Table 1).

Each participant signed an informed consent form prior to the semi-structured interviews, which averaged 45–60 min. The interview guide (Appendix 1) utilised 33 questions covering implementation fidelity, relational changes, and perceived social environment. The interview guide, consisting of 33 questions, was designed to investigate the participants' experiences of a PBS project focusing on the following aspects: implementation, perceived specificity of the framework, teaching and learning, the project's opportunities and limitations, and results after three years. Participants were anonymised and designated T1 to T9. The interviews were conducted with a standardised question order and format. Before participating, each person gave their informed consent and agreed to be recorded. The empirical material comprises 58 A4 pages of transcribed material and 1 h and 47 min of recorded material.

Table 1
Participant profiles and project involvement.

ID	Gender	Role	Grade Level	Teaching Exp. (Years)	PBS Involvement (Years)
P1	Woman	Class Teacher	Upper (3–4)	More than 30	3 (PBS Team)
P2	Woman	Class Teacher	Lower (F–3)	5-10	3
P3	Woman	Teacher assistant	School-wide	10-20	3
P4	Woman	Subject Teacher	Middle (4–6)	10-20	3 (PBS Team)
P5	Man	Subject Teacher	Upper (7–9)	10-20	3 (PBS Team)
P6	Woman	Class Teacher	Upper (3–4)	10-20	3
P7	Woman	Class Teacher	Lower (F–3)	10-20	3 (PBS Team)
P8	Woman	Subject Teacher	Middle (4–6)	20-25	2
P9	Woman	Special needs teacher	Upper (7–9)	5-10	3

Note. This table illustrates the professional diversity of the sample. PBS Team denotes participants who are members of the school's core leadership team for implementation.

2.4. Data analysis

Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis, focusing on manifest content, which enabled a systematic examination of the descriptive material in the text (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The aim was to identify themes and categories based on the explicit message, without interpreting underlying meanings (Graneheim et al., 2017; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

The interviews were conducted in Swedish. The interviews were read, listened to, and reread multiple times to grasp the information within the data and the experiences of PBS. In line with Graneheim and Lundman (2004), the data were divided into meaning units based on the study's research questions. These units were condensed and coded according to the principles of qualitative content analysis (Graneheim et al., 2017). The codes were abstracted into words or phrases that described the manifest content of the text and were then grouped based on similarities and differences. The analysis was carried out over a period of five weeks by two researchers who worked together to ensure depth and rigour. The process involved these iterative steps: Both researchers read and re-read the transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the material. Initial codes were generated independently by the primary researcher. Meaning units were identified and condensed while retaining their core essence. Codes were grouped into preliminary categories based on similarities and differences. The researchers held three consensus meetings to abstract categories into overarching themes that addressed the research questions. Themes were refined through iterative coding rounds until no new insights emerged, ensuring the categories were mutually exclusive and exhaustive. Through this process, overarching themes and categories were identified (see Figs. 1–3).

2.5. Rigour and trustworthiness

To ensure the study's validity, trustworthiness, and generalizability, the guidelines for publishing qualitative research studies outlined by Graneheim and Lundman (2004) were followed. The analysis process was conducted in three main phases: preparation, organisation, and reporting. Two researchers participated in the coding and theme-identification process. Discrepancies in interpretation were addressed through dialogue until full consensus was reached. The categorisation matrix was carefully reviewed to ensure it effectively reflected the core concepts. A transparent categorisation matrix and a log of coding refinements were maintained to document the progression from raw data to final themes. The researchers maintained a critical distance to ensure that the findings remained grounded in the

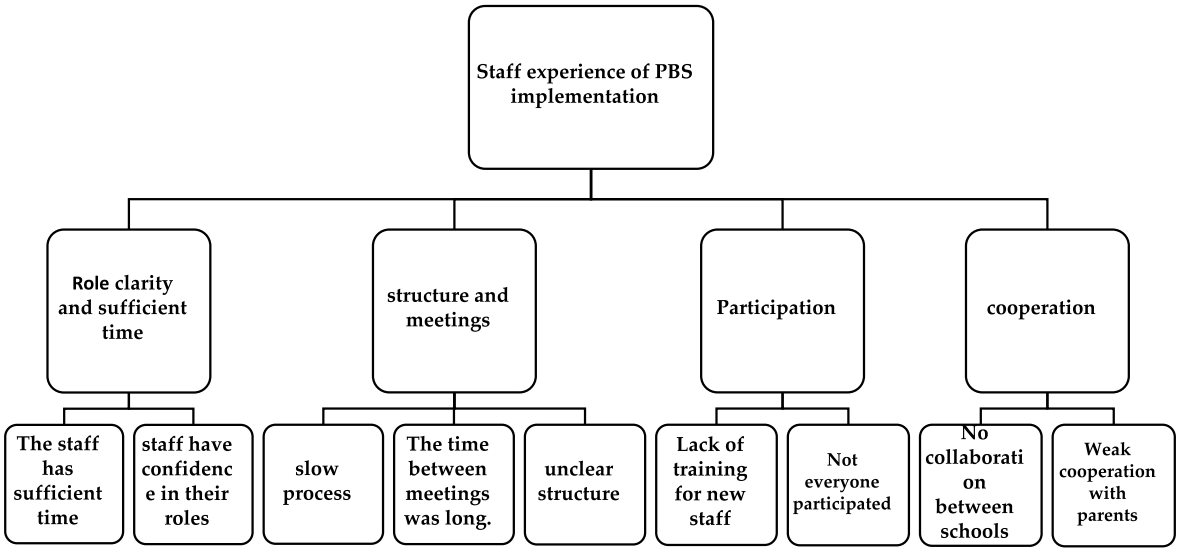

Fig. 1. Thematic map of Processes for implementing the categories.

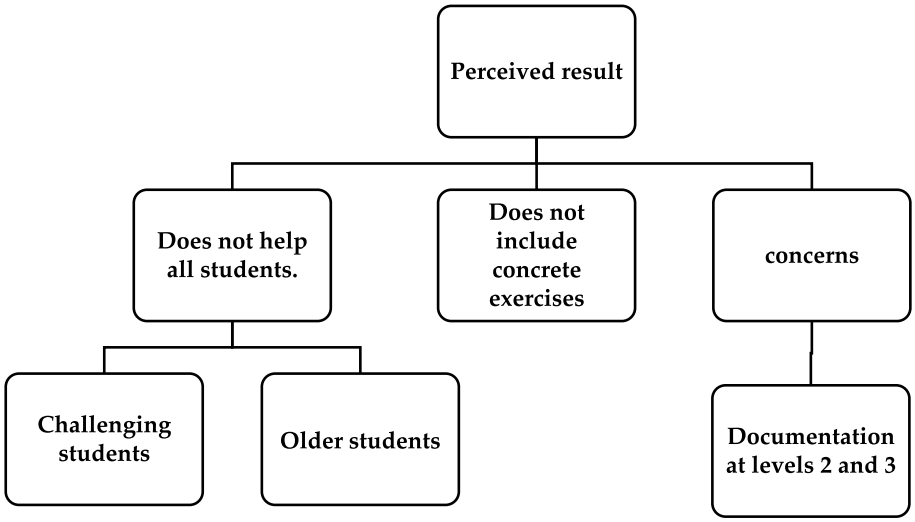

Fig. 2. Thematic map of framework specificity.

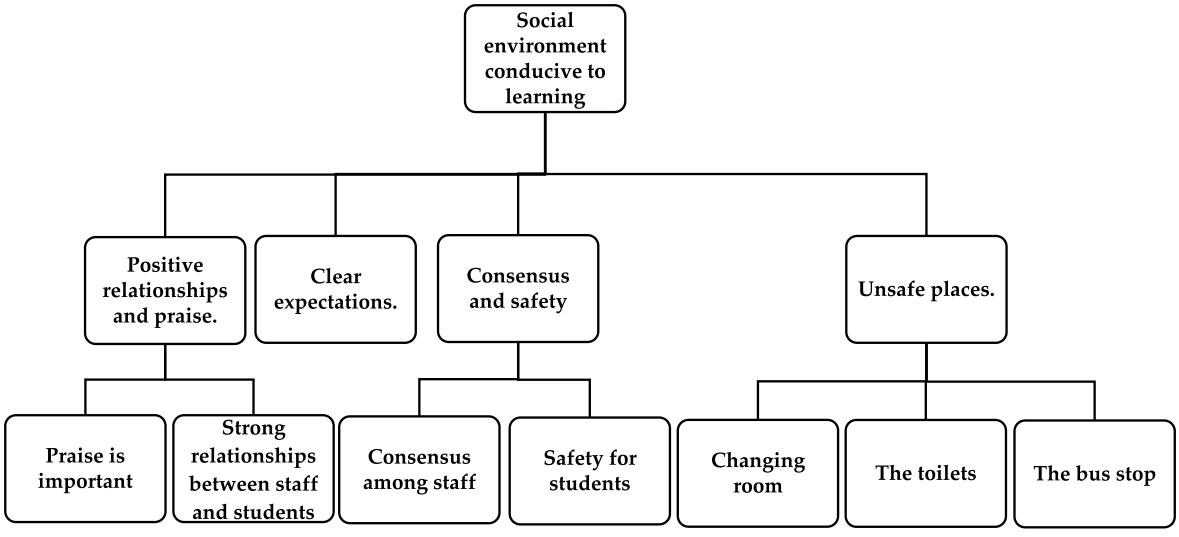

Fig. 3. Thematic map of the social environment conducive to learning at school.

participants' actual accounts. Although PBS has proven effective in many school environments, the study's generalizability is limited as it concentrates on specific schools with unique organisational prerequisites and challenges.

3. Results

This section presents the study's results in the context of the research questions (see Figs. 1–3). The results address each question separately.

3.1. Implementation of PBS

Staff experience of PBS implementation after three years is illustrated in Fig. 1. The following themes emerged: role clarity and sufficient time, structure and meetings, and participation and collaboration. These are described in more detail below.

In the interviews, it is clear that staff feel they have sufficient time to dedicate to the project. They are allocated time to work on PBS planning, which influences their commitment and participation. T6 describes, "I think we have time, and sometimes we have even gotten comp, yes." After three years, there is greater clarity among staff regarding their roles within the PBS framework (cf. Abou Zaid, 2025), which leads to increased security and consistency in implementation. T5 describes: "We have also been quite unsure of our role. I feel that I have control over myself and my role in the PBS team. Only now. It feels like we have worked our way into this framework ".

Some staff have criticisms regarding the use of PBS, as the meetings had an unclear structure. T5 explains: "The criticism that may have been discussed in the staff group may rather be that the structure of when we have had our meetings has been a bit unclear." Some other staff, however, believe the structure was clear, and they are positive, especially regarding consensus. "It is structured; one is positive. We have a common structure (T1)."

Staff felt that the time between meetings was too long and that the intervals varied, which affected motivation and created a significant gap between the team and other employees. One staff member comments: "No, it has been a bit disjointed. A bit long between some meetings. Sometimes it has been short between meetings, and sometimes it has been a bit long (T 5)".

Most felt that the implementation of Tier 1 of PBS was slow and took a long time, and they wanted to see results and feel like they were making progress. T 5 describes: "Want to move forward then? Five years is a bit long. I think we perhaps should have worked according to the book at a slightly faster pace". T 2 confirms: " … it took too long".

Some informants see the need for training for new employees. There is a need for more training and guidance for both new and existing employees to ensure they are adequately prepared for project engagement, and this requires an accountable person to oversee this process. T 9 describes: "Someone who is responsible. To train new staff and time to do it, that is what is missing in/ … /."

Staff also recognise that not only teachers but all personnel at the school, including the school doctor, cleaning staff, restaurant staff, school nurse, and caretaker, need to be involved. All adults at the school can help and take part in the responsibility. T 1 describes "But then it's still important that everyone is involved. We have dining room staff, we have cleaning staff, we have janitors and more. There are many who are not involved".

Informants recognise the importance of communication with other schools that are working with PBS. They express a desire to collaborate with other schools to share experiences and ideas related to PBS initiatives. T 7 explains: "It would be nice to meet other schools that also work with PBS more than once in three years. It would have been fun to see how it is going for them and what they think and so on". The schools have strived to involve guardians in the PBS project by highlighting the work at parent meetings, where guardians have had the opportunity to discuss and give feedback. Some staff emphasise that collaboration with guardians is of great importance and should be further developed, T5 explains, "we had scenarios about PBS at parent meetings, when guardians are allowed to participate and discuss behaviours."

Overall, while increased role clarity and dedicated time have fostered staff commitment, the perceived slowness of the rollout and inconsistencies in meeting structures remain significant barriers to maintaining momentum in implementation.

3.2. Perceived results of PBS after three years

The second research question in this study focused on how staff perceived the framework's results after three years of implementation. The following themes emerged from the results (Fig. 2): the approach is not useful for challenging students and older students, does not include concrete exercises, and raises concerns about documentation in Tiers 2 and 3.

Most informants note that Tier 1 of PBS, which is the group level, is ineffective for supporting students with challenging needs. Staff wish that these students receive help in Tiers 2 and 3. T 5 describes: "Tier one does not help the absolutely toughest and most challenging students".

Staff also note that it does not effectively support older students, as the examples and activities in the book are more suitable for younger students. Staff say it is difficult to motivate older students with certain activities. T4 explains: "And then I also feel that it could be adapted with a few more examples for older children". Another staff member confirms: "From a PBS perspective, we were faced with the dilemma of practising things. It's difficult with older students (T5)".

Staff believe that more concrete exercises contribute to improvements, as these facilitate planning and save time for the teacher when designing teaching activities. T 4 points out: "It would also be good if there were some ready-made scenarios so that you don't have to sit and invent them when the time comes".

Some informants believe that PBS at Tiers 2 and 3 can help some students who did not receive support at Tier 1 of PBS, but it may require more time, especially with documentation, which will affect their planning time and impact the results of Tiers 2 and 3. T 4 argues:

"What I can see as the danger with Tier 2 and 3 is precisely that the materials look good to use various types of incident reports, but one does not have time. It doesn't matter how good something is; you might not get it done. And that is a risk."

T 5 clarifies: "PBS is good, but it does not take into account the teacher's assignment and not the teacher's assignment that we also do and must document".

In summary, staff perceive the universal framework as a successful foundation but argue that its perceived lack of effectiveness for older and more challenging students necessitates a swift, less administratively burdensome transition to targeted interventions.

3.3. Social environment conducive to learning in the school

Staff experience of the social environment conducive to learning in the school is shown in Fig. 3. The following themes emerged: positive relationships and praise, clear expectations, consensus and safety, and unsafe places.

Staff believe that students thrive with recognition and need to feel seen for their efforts. This can improve their mood and engagement in the class, providing a social environment that promotes learning. With PBS, staff give more praise to students who do not usually step forward and answer questions. T 6 says: "Yes, I am probably more famous to those who have a lower status in the class in front of others, so that others can hear it". Another staff member explains: "I think it is important to give praise when someone steps forward who may not often step forward and speak" (T 7).

Informants also believe that strong relationships between staff and students are seen as crucial for preventing negative behaviours and promoting a positive school environment. T 1 comments: "And make

sure you have a good relationship". T 5 agrees and says: "Building on the relationship, and that is also a bit preventive. Preventing bad behaviours and building on relationships in general".

Most participants emphasised that expectations are clearly structured, positive, common, and consistent in different school environments (classrooms, cafeterias, etc.). They believe that this helps students understand what is expected of them, but they need to refer to those expectations more. T1 describes: "We have a social environment conducive to learning, we have positive expectations, common expectations". T5 agrees but thinks that staff need to remind people more about the expectations. "These expectation matrices that we have worked with are clear, simple, but maybe you have to refer to them more often".

Staff believe that PBS provides them with a consensus and increases safety, creating a social environment conducive to learning in the school, which encourages staff to cooperate and feel secure. T 9 describes: "Consensus, safety, social environment conducive to learning, and knowledge increases". T 1 confirms: "Common structure. Setup with the classes".

Despite staff having worked with PBS for three years, certain unsafe areas remain within the school environment. Staff specifically identify places where students experience reduced safety, such as changing rooms in connection with sports education and at bus stops. There are places where students think it is less safe than others. "Not necessarily that it is very unsafe, but that there is less safety. For example, changing rooms in sports. The bus stops too, I think, usually comes up there (T5)". Staff see that younger students have more unsafe places than older students, for example, in some of the toilets where students are afraid of being locked in. T 2 describes: "We usually see most often in our younger students what those unsafe places are". Another teacher explains: "Yes, but it is the recurring toilets that are unsafe places". Ultimately, the implementation of PBS has successfully established a social environment conducive to learning in the school; yet the persistence of specific unsafe places indicates that the physical and social environment requires further targeted monitoring.

4. Discussion

The purpose of the study was to capture and interpret the perceptions of school staff regarding the PBS framework after three years of implementation in two Swedish compulsory school contexts. The results provide valuable insights into the durability and challenges of institutionalising a comprehensive behavioural framework over time, allowing for interpretation in the context of existing international research.

4.1. The evolution of professional efficacy and role clarity

A primary finding is that after three years, staff feel secure in their roles and perceive that they have sufficient time for PBS activities. This suggests that the framework has begun to move beyond mechanical use toward becoming a natural part of the school's professional habitus (Hall & Hord, 2020). These results align with international research by Michael et al. (2023) and Sørlie and Ogden (2015), which found that sustained implementation of PBS improves teachers' collective efficacy and their shared belief in their ability to manage the classroom environment. In the Swedish context, this stability is significant, as it suggests the framework has survived the initial implementation hurdles often noted in earlier Swedish trials (Ingemarson et al., 2016).

4.2. Implementation barriers: documentation and the tier 2 transition

While staff identified positive results in general student behaviour, a change from the second-year evaluation where results were not yet visible (Abou Zaid, 2025), they expressed growing concern regarding Tier 1's inability to support the most challenging students. This implementation dip in perception reflects a common tension in PBS: the tendency to focus on individual behaviour modification despite Tier 1's goal of universal environmental change. The perceived inadequacy of Tier 1 for challenging students identified in Year 3 reflects what McIntosh and Goodman (2016) describe as the difficulty of maintaining a systems-perspective. These results contrast with the early 'honeymoon phase' of implementation and align with Nylén et al. (2021), who argue that Swedish teachers often prioritise the relational needs of the individual over the standardised structures of a behavioural framework. This represents a critical nuance in Swedish PBS. Staff view the framework's success not by how well the majority follows the rules, but by how well it serves those at the margins. The results regarding the slowness of implementation and the need for more resources nuance the Knowledge and Will framework proposed by Nylén et al. (2021). While staff in this study demonstrated the knowledge of the framework after three years, the structural barriers identified in this project after two years (Abou Zaid, 2025) and in another project in Sweden (Fohlin, 2023), such as lack of time and administrative burden, suggest that will alone is insufficient without systemic municipal support. This aligns with Fohlin et al. (2023), who argue that sustainable implementation in Swedish schools requires a shift in how staff cooperatively manage behavioural supports to prevent the framework from being perceived as an 'add-on' to their existing workload.

Furthermore, the documentation concerns emerging in Year 3 highlights a potential barrier to Tier 2 and Tier 3 adoption. McIntosh and Goodman (2016) notes that advanced tiers require complex, data-driven decision-making. The documentation concerns identified in this study highlight a critical tension between the technical requirements of the PBS framework and the professional identity of Swedish teachers. While the PBS Implementation promotes data-based decision-making as a means to enhance efficiency, staff perceive these requirements as a barrier to their pedagogical assignments. This aligns with Pinkelman et al. (2015), who found that the complexity of Tier 2 and 3 data collection is often seen as burdensome. Furthermore, these results nuance the work of Berg et al. (2024), suggesting that the extensive and complex implementation process in Sweden is not just about learning new methods, but also about negotiating the administrative demands that accompany them. To prevent implementation drift, it is essential to align data collection with existing school systems, as McIntosh and Goodman (2016) suggest.

4.3. Relationships and the school climate

A consistently positive result over the three-year period is the perceived strengthening of student–teacher relationships. This confirms the results of Berg et al. (2024) and Willemse et al. (2023), who argue that PBS provides a structure for relationship-based pedagogy. In this study, staff used the framework to prioritise social validation. This relational focus is a clear cultural adaptation that aligns with the Swedish Education Act's emphasis on inclusion and democratic values (Talme et al., 2018).

However, the persistence of unsafe places (e.g., changing rooms and toilets) despite a positive classroom climate indicates a gap between pedagogical practice and environmental supervision. National reports in Sweden have similarly identified these off-radar areas as hotspots for peer-victimisation (Friends, 2017). This implies that while the social environment has improved, the physical monitoring systems required by the PBS framework have not yet achieved full school-wide fidelity.

4.4. Integrated discussion: essential elements and the Swedish macro-context

When considered together, the results of this study provide a nuanced view of how the essential elements of PBS framework, practices, data, outcomes, and equity interact within the specific macro-context of the Swedish educational landscape. The challenges identified regarding documentation and coordination are not merely localised

administrative obstacles; they reflect a high-stakes national environment characterised by rigorous documentation requirements and an ongoing debate regarding teacher workload. Within this context, the need for stronger system-level support becomes paramount. Without systemic municipal backing to lessen the administrative burden, the will or commitment of individual teachers alone cannot sustain the framework's complexity, especially when faced with macro-level factors such as high staff turnover and shifting municipal priorities.

Furthermore, the difficulties observed in the transition to Tier 2 reveal a critical tension between practices and data use. While staff perceive PBS as beneficial for strengthening student–teacher relationships, they often regard the technical, data-driven requirements as a barrier to their professional identity and as deeply rooted in the Swedish pedagogical tradition. This documentation concern identified in Year 3 suggests that, for PBS to move beyond a temporary project and achieve long-term institutionalisation, it must be strategically aligned with the Swedish Education Act's mandate for educational equivalence.

Finally, the growing concern that Tier 1 is insufficient for the most challenging students, along with ongoing safety issues in off-radar areas such as changing rooms, directly relates to equity considerations. To achieve genuine school-wide fidelity, the framework must extend its influence to marginalised students and into the less-visible physical areas of the school. Improving the integration of these essential elements requires a shift from viewing PBS as an external add-on to integrating its data and practices into existing national quality management systems. Without such macro-level integration, the framework risks remaining a mechanical tool that survives only as long as external coaching and dedicated municipal funding remain present.

4.5. Practice-oriented recommendations

Based on these results, we recommend that schools in this implementation phase incorporate active supervision in areas where safety is a concern. Schools should utilise PBS data to map hotspots and increase adult presence in corridors and changing rooms, moving beyond the classroom-centric focus. Streamline data collection is recommended, and to reduce documentation anxiety during the Tier 2 transition, schools should adopt digital, user-friendly tools that align with Swedish administrative requirements. Fostering inter-school networks also recommends that municipalities should facilitate regular experience-sharing meetings between different PBS schools to maintain motivation and facilitate peer coaching.

4.6. Implications for future research

Future studies should prioritise the voices of the students themselves to determine if their perceptions of safety and praise align with those of the staff. There is a need for research that correlates staff perceptions with objective data, such as grades, attendance, and incident report numbers. Follow-up studies are necessary beyond the five-year mark to determine whether the framework remains viable once the initial external coaching and municipal project funding have concluded.

4.7. Study's limitations and strengths

The results of this study should be interpreted in light of both its methodological limitations and its unique strengths as a qualitative evaluation.

4.7.1. Limitations

A primary limitation of this study is the small sample size: 9 participants were interviewed from a total staff pool of 26 at the two participating schools. The results may have captured different nuances if the remaining employees had been included in the interview. Furthermore, as this study was limited to two compulsory schools, the results are not intended to be generalizable to all schools in Sweden. Instead, the goal of this qualitative study is to provide a rich, contextualised understanding through intensive studies of specific cases (Polit & Beck, 2010).

A further limitation is the potential for self-selection bias. As noted in the Method section, participants were selected based on their availability and interest. This may mean that staff with particularly strong views, either highly positive or highly critical, were more likely to participate, potentially overlooking the perspectives of neutral staff members.

4.7.2. Strengths

Despite these limitations, a significant strength of this study is the diversity and depth of the participant profiles. As detailed in Table 1, the sample was not limited to a single staff category but included a strategic mix of Role diversity, professional experience, and grade-level representation. A range of seniority, from early-career teachers to veterans with more than 30 years of experience, ensures that the results reflect how the framework is perceived across different career stages. Perspectives from lower (F–3), middle (4–6), and upper (7–9) grades provide a comprehensive view of the framework's applicability across the entire compulsory school spectrum.

Furthermore, the longitudinal nature of the data collection is a major strength. Because the majority of the staff had been involved in the project for three full years. Their reflections represent a stable, weathered perspective on the framework's sustainability. Finally, the use of two schools with similar disciplinary challenges and a shared implementation manual (Karlsson, 2020) allows for a more robust analysis of how the same systems are adapted across different school practices.

By aligning these limitations with the detailed profiles in the Method section, the study demonstrates transferability, offering insights that, while specific to the two schools, provide a realistic and professionally diverse picture of the challenges other Swedish schools may face during Year 3 of implementation.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that after three years of implementation, the PBS project in Sweden has successfully moved beyond the mechanical use phase to foster significant role clarity and relational improvements. The results indicate that the framework's core components—consistent encouragement and the systematic reinforcement of desired behaviour (Chen et al., 2025) have become embedded in the school culture. By establishing clear, regularly applied expectations, staff have successfully created a social environment conducive to learning, where positive treatment promotes student participation and influence (Iffland et al., 2024).

However, the results also reveal the inherent complexity of sustaining such initiatives. While there is consensus on the value of structure and positivity, diverse perspectives on effectiveness and resource needs underscore that a one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient. The most significant contribution of this study is the identification of a specific implementation gap shaped by Swedish educational values. While international literature often attributes the limitations of Tier 1 to technical failures or systemic drift (McIntosh et al., 2013), our results suggest that in the Swedish context, these limits are experienced as a professional tension between the requirements of behavioural frameworks and inclusive pedagogical identities (Ingemarson et al., 2014; Nylén et al., 2021).

Ultimately, while it is a foundational premise that Tier 1 supports are insufficient for students with intensive needs (Center on PBIS, 2023), this study shows that the transition to more intensive tiers is hindered more by structural barriers than by a lack of belief in the framework. The implications of this study extend beyond a simple evaluation of PBS. By documenting the third year (the institutionalisation phase), this research provides a blueprint for how Swedish schools can navigate the implementation dip. The results contribute to broader PBS research by

demonstrating that sustainability is not achieved solely through fidelity, but through the cultural adaptation of the framework to fit local teacher identities. These findings carry significant implications for the global implementation of the framework; specifically, Tier 1's failure to reach all students often prompts staff to either abandon the framework or develop more integrated Tier 2 systems (McIntosh et al., 2013). By addressing these barriers and ensuring total staff inclusion, the framework has the potential to evolve from a temporary project into a permanent, sustainable school culture that balances proactive behavioural support with the democratic values of the Swedish school system.

Informed consent statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects and their guardians involved in the study.

Informed consent

All participants were informed, both verbally and in writing, about the study's purpose, methods, and expected dissemination of results. Participants were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any point without explanation or penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from all staff members before they participated in the focus group interviews.

Institutional review board statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Swedish Ethics Review Authority (Ref. Dnr 2024-07334-01).

Data availability statement

Data from this study cannot be shared, as the respondents are children and no permission has been granted to share the data further. Furthermore, the study has undergone an extensive ethical review.

Ethical approval

The study, which involved interviewing school staff, received formal ethical approval from the Swedish Ethics Review Authority (Ref. Dnr 2024-07334-01) prior to the commencement of data collection. All procedures performed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Anonymity and confidentiality

To protect the identity of the participants and the institutions involved, the following measures were taken:

Anonymity: All identifying information, including participant names and specific school designations, was removed from the transcripts and research data. The two participating schools were referred to in the manuscript only as "School 1" and "School 2".

Confidentiality: The audio recordings and transcribed data were stored securely on an encrypted, password-protected server at Mid Sweden University, accessible only to the principal investigator. The data will be retained for a period of ten years, after which it will be permanently destroyed.

Data protection

The processing of personal data adhered to the principles set out in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) to ensure the privacy and rights of the research subjects were protected throughout the study.

Declaration of the use of AI

The author did not use AI for any part of the work related to the manuscript submitted.

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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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