Evaluating Student Discipline Practices in a Public School Through Behavioral Assessment of Office Referrals

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Office discipline referrals are a common practice in public schools to address students' problem behaviors. The authors report two descriptive studies in a public elementary-middle school to illustrate frequency of office referrals as an evaluative data source. Study I was a behavioral assessment of office referrals to determine the types of discipline problems confronting school personnel and the distribution of referrals among teachers, students, and grade level. In Study II, a fifth-grade class that had the most office referrals in the school received whole-class and individual-student interventions that produced a decrease in the number of referrals. These findings support use of office referrals as a readily available index by which to identify school discipline problems, design interventions, and evaluate outcome.

Keywords: behavioral assessment; student discipline; office referrals; public schools

Discipline problems are a critical concern within public school settings (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998; Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1996; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). Disruptive behaviors posed by students interfere with instruction, compete with learning, and deleteriously affect acquisition of academic skills. Furthermore, the attention that must be devoted to student discipline consumes a significant

amount of time from school personnel. Very serious discipline problems such as violence, substance use, and weapons possession threaten the physical well-being of students and create an unsafe educational environment. For these reasons, development and implementation of schoolwide discipline programs have been a priority for educational and behavioral research (Lewis, Sugai, & Colvin, 1998; Luiselli, Putnam, & Handler, 2001; Mayer, 1995; Walker et al., 1996).

Behavioral consultation to public schools can be successful in reducing discipline problems (Kratochwill & Bergan, 1990; Luiselli, 2002; Martens, 1993). One of the components necessary for the design of effective interventions is objective assessment of outcome. Data such as the frequency of problem behaviors, time on task in the classroom, academic productivity, and related indexes provide empirical documentation to evaluate the efficacy of school-based intervention efforts. However, obtaining such information can be a daunting task for teachers and other staff who are required to carry out instruction with large groups of students, supervise ancillary activities, respond to administrative requests, and manage crises. These responsibilities essentially preclude the ability to conduct assessment using frequency-count, rating-scale, or interval recording methods. Furthermore, most schools do not have the resources that allow personnel to function solely as observers and data collectors.

One approach to overcome the limitations imposed on behavior assessment within public school settings is to target naturally occurring data sources. Sugai, Sprague, Horner, and Walker (2000), for example, described use of office discipline referrals as a meaningful metric to plan and evaluate school-based interventions. They noted that an office referral is initiated when a staff member observes a student behave in a way that violates a school rule. These infractions produce a written summary that serves as a permanent product measure. As such, "The major advantage of discipline referrals is that they are already collected in most schools and provide an efficient source of information for documenting whether reform efforts result in systems change" (Sugai et al., 2000, p. 96).

Despite utility of office discipline referrals as an evaluative measure, previous research on this topic has not been extensive. In one study, Wright and Dusek (1998) analyzed office referrals across a 3-

year period at two elementary schools in an urban district. They found significant variability in referral patterns between individual schools but also demonstrated that referral rates at a single school building were sufficiently stable over time. Their conclusion was that a relatively uniform database can be used "in making predictions about future teacher-initiated disciplinary referrals among selected subgroups of students" (p. 144). In another example of school-based assessment, Sugai et al. (2000) collected office discipline referrals from 11 elementary schools and 9 middle junior high schools across seven school districts in two states. An analysis of these data suggested a model to guide selection of whole-school, classroom-wide, and individual-student interventions.

In this article, we illustrate further how office referral data can be incorporated to evaluate student discipline practices in public schools. Study I was a behavioral assessment and analysis of office referrals at a public elementary-middle school that identified types of discipline problems encountered in that setting, the referral patterns of teachers, and distribution of referrals among the student population. The evaluation demonstrates how office referrals can be used to document a discipline profile and to select intervention objectives. In Study II, we targeted one classroom in the same school that had the highest frequency of office referrals and subsequently developed classroomwide and individual student intervention plans to reduce discipline problems. This study provides an example of behavior support planning and outcome evaluation that relies on office referrals as a data source.

STUDY I

METHOD

Participants and Setting

The participants were the entire student population ($N = 592$) of a public elementary-middle school (kindergarten through sixth grade) in Massachusetts. The data analyzed in the study were reported during the course of one school year (1997-1998). The school was one of 18

elementary schools located in a blue-collar urban community of approximately 93,000 residents. The student population at the school was approximately 56% African American, 38% Caucasian, and 6% Hispanic. Twenty-five percent of students had limited English proficiency and 66% received free lunch.

In total, there were 70 staff members in the school who contributed office referral data. This school was selected for the study because it had an ongoing system of recording office referrals, made these data available for analysis, and expressed interest in improving discipline practices.

Documentation of Office Referrals

Office referrals were recorded on a standardized form and were completed anytime a teacher or other staff member identified a student discipline problem. The form included (a) the student's name and grade level, (b) the date the incident occurred, (c) the time of the incident, and (d) the name of the referring staff member. An entry was made on the form to indicate whether the behavior displayed by the student was aggression, disruption, disrespect, noncompliance, or other infraction. A brief description of the incident, people involved, and disciplinary action also were noted. Finally, the form designated the location where the incident was observed (e.g., classroom, hallway, cafeteria, lavatory).

Each time a staff member completed an office discipline referral, he or she submitted the form to the office administrator who in turn notified the school's assistant principal. The assistant principal was responsible for instituting one or more discipline actions that included a verbal warning, parent notification with a telephone call, in-school work period, after school detention, or suspension. The completed referral forms were retained and filed by the assistant principal.

Data Summary and Analysis

The authors reviewed all completed office referral forms. School personnel had never analyzed this information previously. Several dependent measures were quantified:

1. Frequency of occurrence was determined by grouping the referral forms according to the type of discipline problem that had been recorded. In cases where this information could not be discerned from a referral form, it was scored "unclear."
2. Distribution of office referrals by grade level was completed by dividing the number of referrals specific to each grade by the total number of referrals for the school.
3. A grouped frequency distribution of office referrals by teacher was completed by grouping teachers according to whether they had initiated 1 to 5, 6 to 10, 11 to 15, 16 to 20, 21 to 25, 26 to 30, or 31 or more referrals during the school year. Number of teachers comprising each group was divided by total number of teachers to yield the percentage of teachers making a referral relative to the range of referral frequency.
4. A grouped frequency distribution of office referrals by student was computed by grouping students according to whether they had received 1 to 5, 6 to 10, 11 to 15, 16 to 20, 21 to 25, 26 to 30, or 31 or more referrals during the school year. The number of students comprising each group was summed.

RESULTS

In total, there were 748 office referrals initiated during the school year or an average of 1.26 referrals per enrolled student. Referrals were written for 188 students, which accounted for 31.8% of the school population.

Results are presented in Figures 1 through 4. Figure 1 shows frequency of discipline problems receiving an office referral. Referrals were most frequent for disruptive and harassment behaviors. The next most frequently occurring referrals were for defiance, inappropriate language, and fighting. Figure 2 indicates that office referrals increased with grade level. On whole, nearly 50% of referrals occurred for students who were in the fifth and sixth grades. As depicted in Figure 3, 70% of teachers initiated from 1 to 5 office referrals during the school year. However, 6.2% of teachers made 26 or more referrals. With regard to student distribution (see Figure 4), 162 students received from 1 to 5 office referrals, 17 students received 131 referrals, and 9 students had 210 referrals.
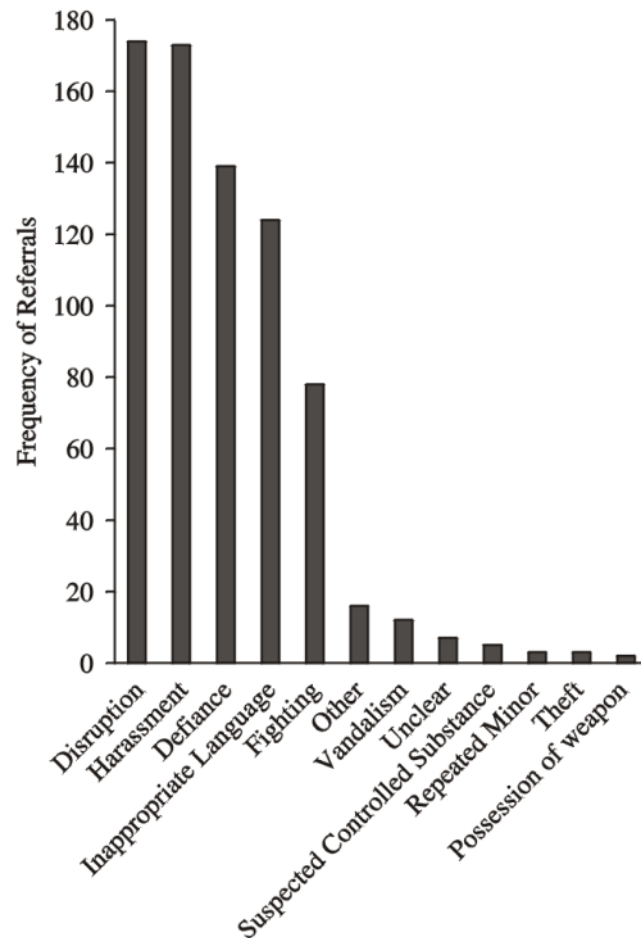
Figure 1. Frequency of discipline problems receiving an office referral (Study I).

DISCUSSION

This descriptive study illustrates use of office referrals as a data source to identify discipline patterns and practices in a public school. In this setting, the prevalent discipline concerns related to disruptive, defiant, and harassment behaviors. Problems of inappropriate language and fighting by students also were identified by an analysis of
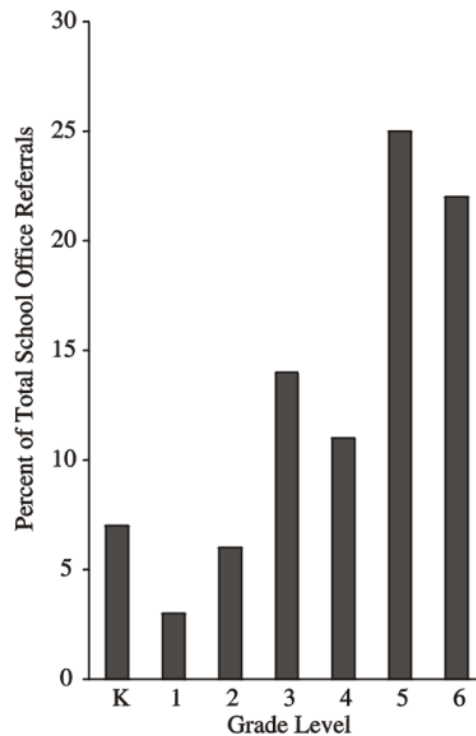
Figure 2.   Percentage of total office referrals by grade level (Study I).

the office referral data. By contrast, serious infractions such as vandalism, theft, and possession of a controlled substance or weapon were relative low-incidence problems. Another finding was that office discipline referrals tended to increase with higher grade level. It was determined that nearly three quarters of the teachers initiated from 1 to 5 referrals. Thus, the majority of teachers in this school did not make frequent referrals. Similarly, 86% (162/188) of students had received from 1 to 5 referrals, whereas 4.7% (9/188) of students had received 11 or more referrals. With regard to this latter group, the students accounted for 28% of the total referrals during the school year.

As discussed by Sugai et al. (2000), the information gleaned from an evaluation of office discipline referrals can be used to select school
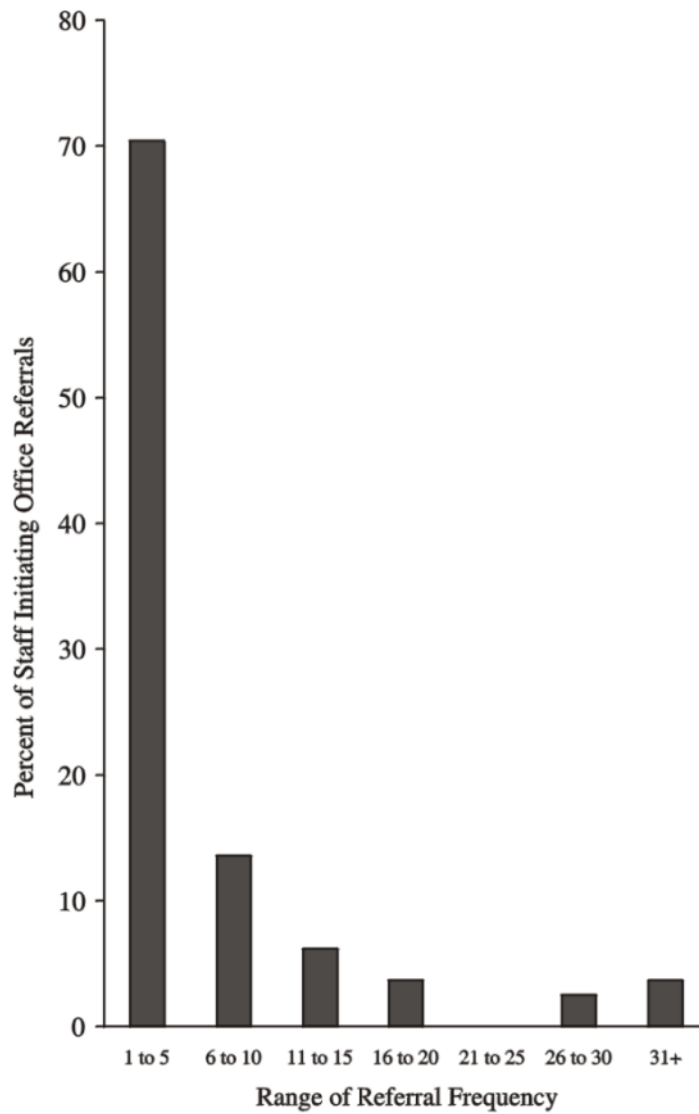
Figure 3.   Percentage of staff initiating office referrals (Study I).

intervention objectives. For example, implementation of behavior support strategies may be indicated for the entire school population
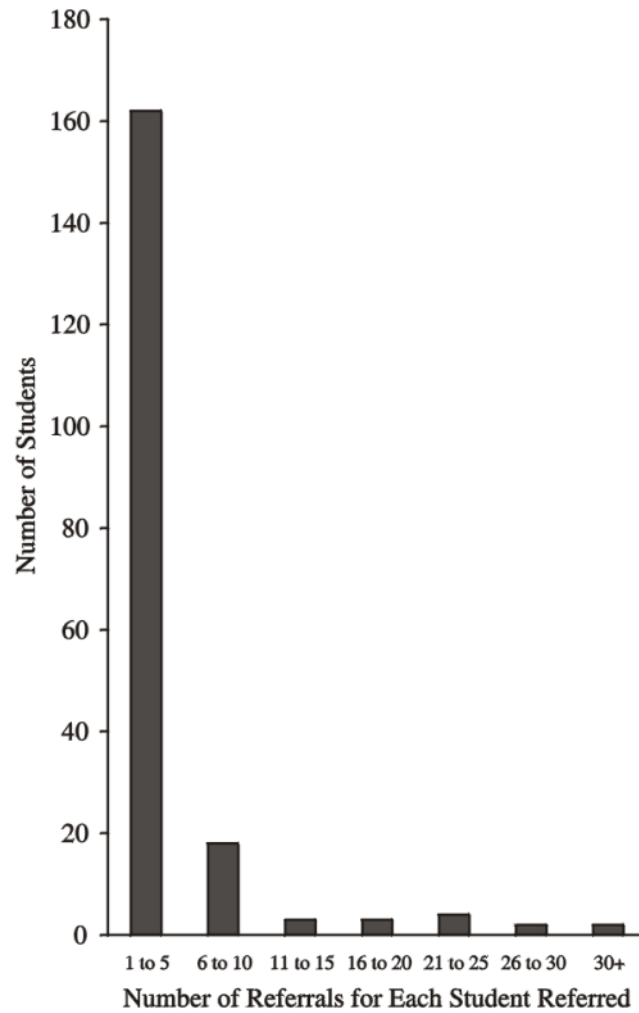
Figure 4.   Number of students receiving office referrals (Study I).

("universal" interventions) when discipline referrals are frequent across many classrooms and include a large percentage of students. In other cases, the data may reveal that discipline referrals are prevalent in certain classrooms but less frequent in others. This pattern would

suggest that intervention, consultation, and teacher training should focus on the identified classrooms. Yet another pattern seen in a review of data would be individual students who account for the majority of office discipline referrals. In these cases, consultants and school personnel would concentrate on formulating behavior support plans that are tailored to the unique presentation of individual students.

The data analysis completed in Study I indicated a need to develop effective behavior support strategies for classrooms and individual students that had the largest percentage of office referrals at the elementary-middle school. Furthermore, because the majority of teachers did not make frequent referrals, it was most efficient to intervene with those who initiated the most referrals. The goal of Study II was to design classroomwide and student-specific interventions in this setting using office referral data to assess the efficacy of these behavior supports.

STUDY II

METHOD

Participants and Setting

Participants were 26 students and the teacher from a fifth-grade classroom at the public school described in Study I. Study II was completed during the subsequent school year (1998-1999). A woman with 1 year of school experience served as the classroom teacher. All of the participants were previous fourth-grade students at the school but not one had been involved with this teacher at a prior grade level.

Measurement

The dependent measure was the number of office discipline referrals initiated by the classroom teacher each month. The procedures of completing and submitting referral forms were identical to those in Study I.

Procedures

The evaluation performed in Study II conformed to an ABC sequential design in which A was a baseline phase and B and C were two approaches to classroom intervention.

Baseline (4 months). During the baseline phase, the classroom teacher completed office referrals according to the school discipline policy. Students who received an office referral typically were required to sit in the main school office for a specified time period. Within the classroom, the teacher generally responded to discipline problems by delivering a verbal warning, withholding recess, or making a telephone call to parents.

Classroom intervention plan (3 months). A review of data revealed that for the 4 months comprising the baseline phase, the most frequent office referrals emanated from the fifth-grade classroom. For this reason, a decision was made to focus intervention with this teacher using the office referral data as an evaluative measure.

The teacher continued to issue office discipline referrals as described in the baseline phase. In addition, an intervention plan to improve effective instruction and behavior management in the classroom was designed by the authors in collaboration with the teacher. The plan had several components:

1. The teacher was instructed to increase her visual monitoring of the classroom during academic activities. Frequent visual monitoring was recommended (approximately every 60 seconds) so that the teacher could identify and acknowledge students who were attending appropriately to academic tasks. Teacher praise and approval were delivered contingent on such behaviors.
2. A list of classroom rules was created and posted. The rules were stated in positive "action terms" (e.g., "Stay in your seat until I ask you to move.") and were reviewed with students at least weekly.
3. Students were surveyed to determine activity preferences that were incorporated into a program of positive reinforcement. Points were awarded to teams of students for compliance with academic tasks and for adhering to classroom rules during transitions and instructional activities. Accumulation of points during the day was tallied on a large graph that was visible to students. Points were exchanged daily and then weekly for access to preferred activities.

4. The teacher was trained to present instructions to students according to a standard protocol. The instruction-giving guidelines specified that the teacher should (a) elicit student eye contact before presenting an instruction, (b) state the instruction one time using words that described clearly what the student should do, (c) ask the student to repeat the instruction, and (d) praise the student when she or he complies with the instruction as presented.

Classroom intervention plan and student-specific behavior support (3 months). Office discipline referrals and the classroom intervention plan remained in effect. An individual program of behavior support also was introduced with the student who had the highest frequency of office referrals in the classroom during the baseline and classroomwide intervention plan phase. The student was an 11-year-old boy who demonstrated disruptive and noncompliant behaviors. The third author conducted indirect and descriptive functional behavior assessment (Iwata, Vollmer, & Zarcone, 1990), which consisted of direct observation, interview with the classroom teacher, and review of data. Results of assessment suggested that these behaviors were most likely to occur during difficult academic assignments and were "escape motivated." Therefore, one component of his program was to provide individualized instructional support during these assignments. Following scheduled instructional activities, the student filled in a self-monitoring chart with the teacher. Using the chart, he recorded whether he had remained in his seat, raised his hand before speaking, maintained attention, and kept hands to himself during each activity. If his and the teacher's evaluation was that he had achieved these behavioral criteria, he was allowed to spend 5 minutes with a preferred activity (computer, art work, conversing with peers). Praise and approval also were given by the classroom teacher frequently during the day to remind the student that he was working productively and interacting positively with peers. Finally, periodic breaks from instructional activities were scheduled to reduce further the demands of academic assignments.

RESULTS

Figure 5 shows the average number of office discipline referrals initiated by the teacher each day during the school year. For the 4-month

baseline phase, an average of 0.64 referrals were made per day or 3.2 referrals each week. With the classroom intervention plan in effect, office referrals decreased to an average of 0.28 per day or 1.4 each week. Addition of the student-specific behavior support program was associated with a further reduction in office referrals to an average of 0.06 per day or one every 3 to 4 weeks. Figure 6 shows that following intervention, fewer students in the classroom received office referrals.

The percentage of total school office referrals accounted for by the fifth-grade teacher is presented in Figure 7. These data revealed that the teacher was responsible for 18% of total school office referrals during baseline, 9% during the classroom intervention plan, and 2% during the classroom intervention plan combined with student-specific behavior support. Figure 8 represents the percentage of total classroom office referrals for the student who received individualized behavior support. At baseline, the student accounted for 24% of total classroom office referrals. During implementation of the classroom intervention plan, he made up 27% of the referrals. With implementation of his individualized behavior support program, office referrals were eliminated.

DISCUSSION

Study II suggests that office referral data can serve as a useful index to document school discipline problems, construct relevant interventions, and evaluate outcome. With implementation of classroomwide and student-specific behavior support plans, the teacher reduced her office referrals, included fewer students in the referral process, and had a reduced percentage of referrals for the entire school. The student who had the most frequent office referrals in the classroom showed dramatic improvement when a systematic program of behavior support was designed for him. One qualification to these findings is that our data analysis could not ascertain if the students participating in Study II also accounted for the most office referrals reported 1 year earlier in Study I. Similarly, the referral history of the classroom teacher during the previous school year could not be confirmed. Information of this type would be useful in defining more clearly whether
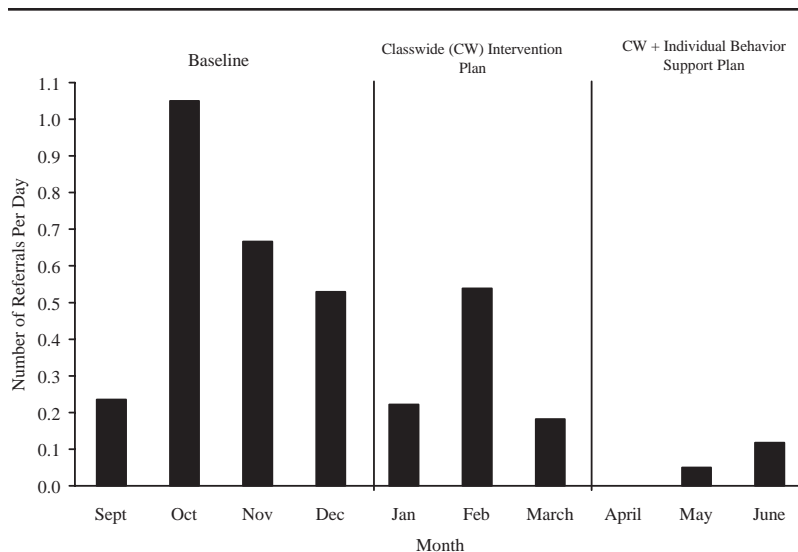
Figure 5. **Average number of office referrals initiated by fifth-grade teacher per day each month in the classroom targeted for intervention (Study II).**

the source of classroom difficulty rests with the teacher's management skills, the particular composition of students, or both.

The study did not have the experimental rigor to state convincingly that the intervention was responsible for the behavior improvement documented in the classroom. For example, in the baseline phase, there was a decreasing trend of office referrals during the 2 months preceding introduction of the classroom intervention plan. Although it would have been preferable to delay intervention until a more stable data trend was apparent, school administrators were concerned that the classroom teacher would benefit from consultation that was provided "sooner than later." This priority had precedent over experimental protocol and accordingly the classroomwide intervention plan was implemented. Another limitation is that the study did not demonstrate replication of intervention effects through either a reversal or a multiple baseline evaluation design. The finding that the referred student improved only when an individualized behavior support was intro-
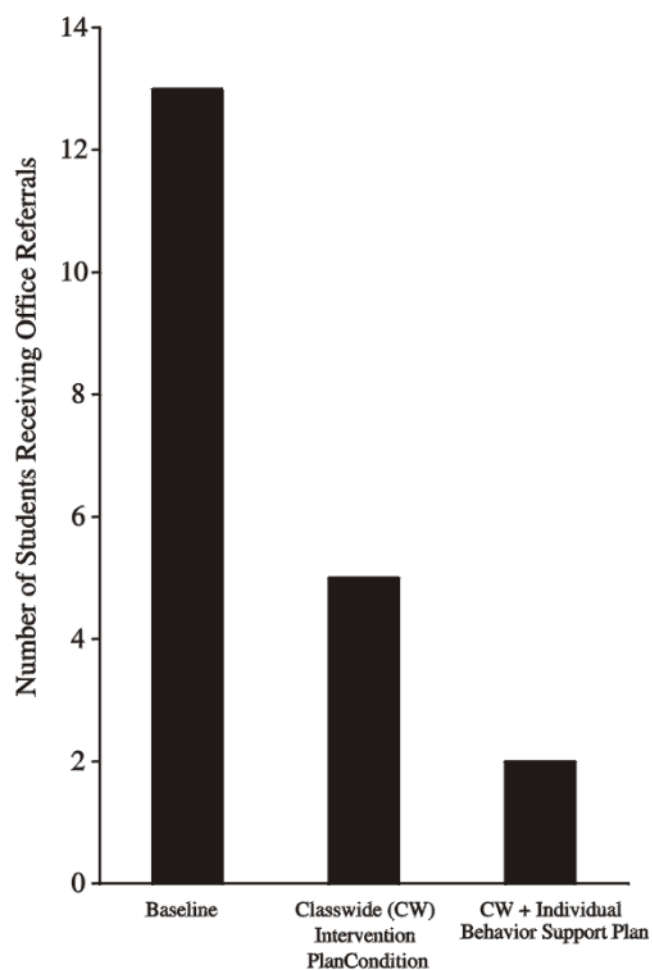
Figure 6. Number of students receiving office referrals in the classroom targeted for intervention (Study II).

duced suggests that it was influential. Nevertheless, these shortcomings argue for more controlled evaluations of school discipline programs that use office referral data as an outcome measure (discussed in detail in the next section).
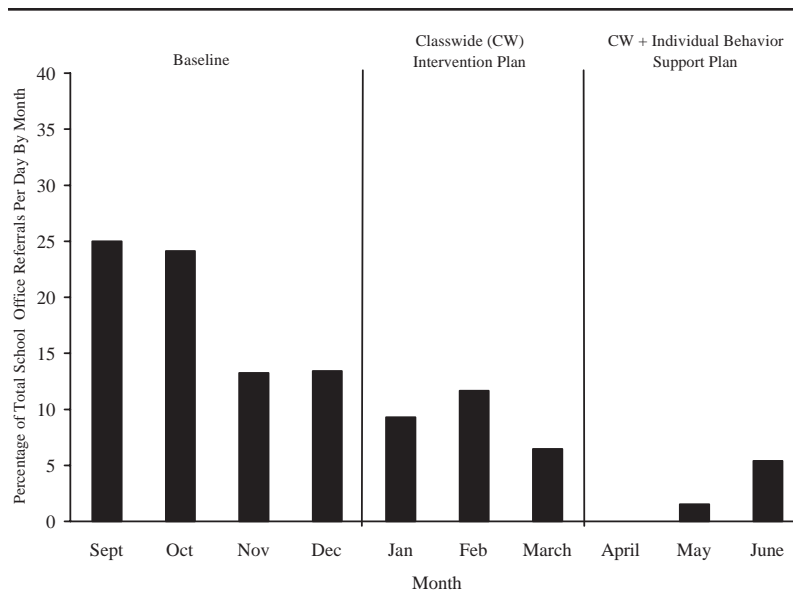
Figure 7. Percentage of total office referrals per day accounted for by the fifth-grade teacher in the classroom targeted for intervention (Study II).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In this article, we described the behavioral assessment of office discipline referrals in a public school and a study that used this data source to select and evaluate classroom interventions. Our work adds to the research of other investigators who have advocated for, and illustrated how, office referral data can be used to design schoolwide discipline programs (Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; Sugai et al., 2000; Wright & Dusek, 1998). To reiterate, recording of office discipline referrals has the advantage of being a common practice in most public schools. Information gathered from an analysis of the referral data can be helpful in pinpointing particular discipline problems, prevalence rates, and possible contextual determinants. This readily available database represents an economical approach to program evaluation (Sugai et al., 2000). Most important, the office referral data enable staff to make informed decisions about the focus of their intervention efforts and to evaluate immediate and long-term efficacy.
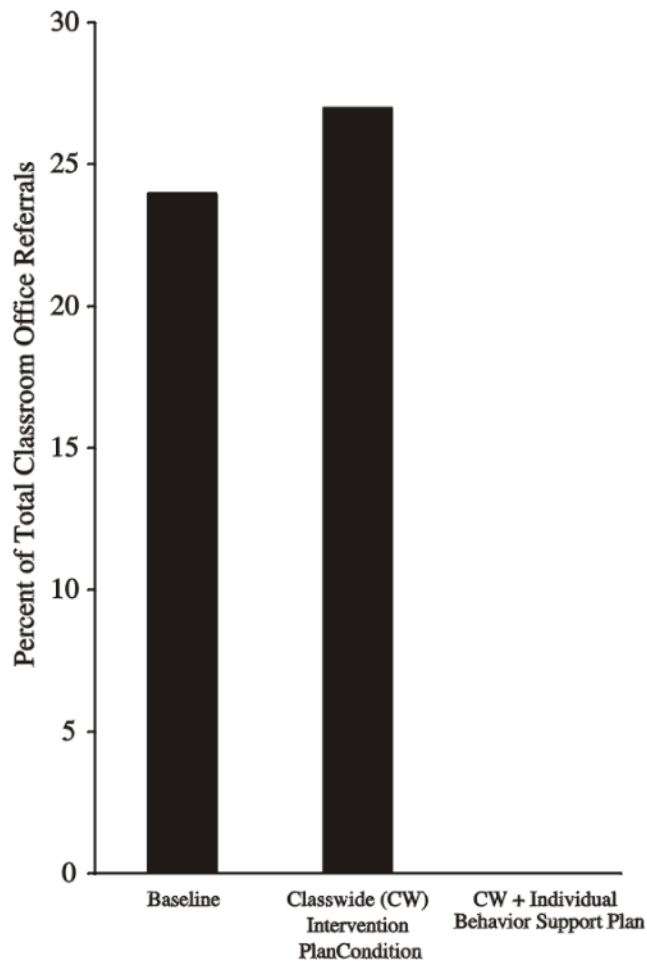
Figure 8. Percentage of total classroom office referrals accounted for by the student receiving individualized behavior support (Study II).

Office referral data should be one of several indexes considered when evaluating school discipline practices. Furthermore, if such data are to be used meaningfully in the design of whole-school discipline practices, several issues should be addressed that go beyond the scope of our descriptive studies. First, we did not include reliability and

validity assessment of the office referral data. It is crucial, for example, to verify that teachers initiate referrals for the same behaviors and that they do so consistently, as well as to confirm that referrals correlate with actual challenging behaviors in the classroom. Another focus should be on the functional and contextual determinants of discipline referrals. As reported in Study I, we found that the percentage of office referrals at the public school increased with advanced grade level, but it would be informative to examine other potential variables. To illustrate, are office discipline referrals influenced by the types of academic demands placed on students, consequences imposed by a school when a referral is made, or characteristics of teachers such as their behavior management skills or capacity to tolerate challenging behaviors? In essence, more evidence as to how office referrals are used in a functional behavioral assessment at the system and student level is needed.

As a final note, we emphasize that if office referral data are to be referenced as a dependent measure in the manner described in Study II, more rigorous control over the implementation of behavior support interventions must be established. Earlier we noted that the study was not experimental and that the findings could be attributed to other factors. For example, office discipline referrals may have decreased because the classroom teacher was singled out or her management skills improved over time. The fact that number of months in the intervention phases was less than baseline could have affected outcome such as the number of different students receiving office referrals (see Figure 6). And as acknowledged previously, reliability was not assessed and referrals were not linked to actual classroom behavior. Last, we recommend that in future applications of this approach to evaluation, there be an assessment of intervention integrity to ensure that teachers and allied staff implement discipline procedures with fidelity.

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