
Creating a Peace Literate Culture of Respect and Belonging in a Montessori Learning Community

Sharyn Clough,* Paul K. Chappell, Jacqui Miller, and Natalie Celeste

A slightly abbreviated version of this essay is available at
<https://montessoripublic.org/2021/05/behavior-support-informed-by-peace-literacy/>

Introduction: Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a systemic, evidence-based approach to addressing some of the more challenging behavior that children can present in the classroom (Simonsen, et al 2015). While PBIS approaches get implemented in a variety of ways, there are two main features that most PBIS approaches share and that serve as conceptual improvements over more traditional approaches to addressing challenging behavior: 1) most PBIS approaches focus on rewarding positive behaviors, rather than, or in addition to, simply punishing challenging behaviors; and 2) most PBIS approaches recognize that classrooms and schools are systems with a variety of stakeholders who all interact to produce challenging behaviors, and need collectively to take responsibility for the building of supports that diminish those same behaviors. Teachers, administrators, and support staff all have a role to play and all of them need to be on the same page (Simonsen, et al 2015). When these conceptual changes are implemented consistently with buy-in from all the relevant stakeholders, PBIS approaches have been associated with a reduction in the challenging behaviors of concern, and a reduction in the kinds of punishments that traditionally accompany these behaviors (Sugai and Horner 2013). These results have encouraged departments of

education across the US to institute requirements for the implementation of PBIS approaches in all public schools and on particular timelines (see, e.g., Ohio Department of Education PBIS Report Card 2020).

However, PBIS approaches, for all their documented successes, have a number of similarly well-documented weaknesses (e.g., Bornstein 2017; Danforth and Smith 2005). For public schools aligned with Montessori, the weaknesses of the PBIS approach are especially salient (Knestrict 2015). In this document we offer a brief account of some of the problems with adopting a PBIS approach generally, and from a Montessori perspective in particular.

We also provide an outline of foundational principles of the modified behavioral support model we endorse that has well-documented positive outcomes similar to those of PBIS approaches, while avoiding the weaknesses of those approaches. The modified model we prescribe is based on the insights provided by the following:

- Paul K. Chappell's new paradigm for trauma-informed education called Peace Literacy (Chappell 2012, 2015, 2017, and forthcoming, peaceliteracy.org)
- Greene's research on the efficacy of the Collaborative and Proactive Solutions model (e.g., Greene 2008, 2018)

- Zaretta Hammond’s work on Culturally Responsive Teaching (Hammond 2014)
 - the Nautilus Approach designed by Public Montessori in Action (montessori-action.org)
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Just as Montessori’s insights into the development of children offer important correctives to traditional educational models—insights that we believe should be made more widely available—so too the modified behavioral support approach we prescribe offers important correctives to PBIS approaches that we believe should be more widely available.

At the end of this document we have appended a series of pedagogical posters, charts, and check lists to help implement and model the approach we endorse, based on Montessori’s understanding of the pedagogical importance of the prepared environment (e.g., Montessori 1949a) understood as the interplay between the Physical Environment, the Psychological Environment, the Prepared Adult, and the Child.

Weaknesses of PBIS Approaches, Especially for Montessori Contexts

1. While PBIS focuses on rewarding positive behaviors rather than or in addition to simply punishing challenging behaviors, it still keeps a focus exclusively on behavior and its management. Extensive evidence makes clear that behaviors are merely observable symptoms of deeper issues (Greene 2008), including and especially trauma (Chappell forthcoming). Attempts to modify behavior in the absence of an understanding of the underlying problem will only take us so far (Greene 2008, 2018) and for many children that is not far enough.
2. Additionally, offering positive consequences or rewards for behavior as a way to encourage that behavior works to build extrinsic motivation at the expense of helping children develop intrinsic motivation (Kamii 1984; Knestrict 2015; Greene 2018). Montessori made clear that the intrinsic motivation is key (e.g., Montessori 1949b). Any documented gains from the PBIS focus on extrinsic motivations are thus bound to be short-lived and restricted to very particular contexts (Deci, Koestner, and Ryan, 1999; Greene 2008, 2018).
3. PBIS approaches typically view behavioral change as a pre-requisite before successful academic study can begin, rather than an integral part of academics (Greene 2018, 24). Research into social, emotional learning informed by Peace Literacy, reinforces and elaborates on Montessori’s insights that social, behavioral development is the child’s primary work and needs to be trained, modeled, and practiced as a literacy in its own right, as an academic subject of elementary and middle school (and higher grades to the extent possible), and around which other academic subjects can be organized (Montessori 1949b).
4. The systemic support offered by most PBIS approaches does not center the perspective of the child, if indeed the child’s view is included at all (Bornstein 2017). Montessori has shown us why a focus

on the child is so critical, and why its absence is a problem. Too often PBIS approaches inscribe unidirectional power over children by teachers, rather than collaboratively building relations of power with children, teachers, and caregivers (Greene 2018). In other words, PBIS approaches too often “reinstate order” at the expense of “establishing justice” (Bornstein 2017).

5. In societies like the US structured inequitably around race, the focus on “order” becomes particularly problematic. Educators tend to have absorbed implicit biases about “order,” who needs it, and what counts as violating it, which disproportionately penalizes young Black children, especially Black boys (Hammond 2014; Staats 2015). By focusing on behavior rather than the cultural and community contexts within which some children’s behaviors becomes salient and others not, PBIS approaches can exacerbate existing social inequities. The focus on behavior was meant to make PBIS approaches more objective, but ironically, by stripping behavioral analysis of its cultural and community context, PBIS approaches can contribute to racial and other inequities.
6. Finally, the tripartite structure of most PBIS frameworks has the emphasis on interventions and supports precisely backwards. Built on a base of so-called universal interventions and supports deemed sufficient for the behavioral growth of the majority of children, and moving up in a pyramid fashion to the secondary or targeted interventions and supports believed to be necessary for behavioral growth in a smaller subset of children, most PBIS systems envision as tertiary and intensive those interventions and supports necessary for behavioral growth of a minority of children who present behaviors that are particularly challenging (Simonsen, et al 2015). The modified behavioral support approach we prescribe recognizes first that the children behaving in particularly challenging ways no longer comprise a small minority of children in any given classroom but that, regardless of their number, the behaviors they exhibit represent a larger problem in our society, attention to which ought to be universal. Just as disability rights activists have argued successfully that accommodations for people with disabilities ultimately help everyone (i.e., the argument for universal design), so too, attention to the problems with which these “tertiary” children struggle, provides insights valuable to everyone in the school setting (and this includes the adults too - educators, administrators, caregivers, and community members). The behaviors these children exhibit are symptomatic of a broader ecological problem in our schools, communities, and families. Students who do *not* exhibit these behaviors are not necessarily healthy and thriving, often they have merely found ways to adapt to this problematic ecology. Rather than rewarding their adaptation to a maladaptive ecology, we want to educate children to help *change* the ecology.

A Montessori Model for Behavioral Support Informed by Peace Literacy:

The modified approach we endorse conforms to typical state requirements for PBIS and builds on the insights of Montessori to which we are all committed. It is based on a new paradigm for trauma-

informed education called Peace Literacy, designed by Paul K. Chappell (2012, 2015, 2017, forthcoming). Increasing literacy in peace for all members of our learning communities requires that we work on three elements: Increasing the accuracy of our **understanding** about the world and our place in it; learning and practicing new **skills**, and building **capacities** (see Figure 1). We return to the themes of understanding, skills, and capacities below, and in the appended documents.



Figure 1: The Three Elements of Peace Literacy

A Montessori school guided by the needs of the developing child and dedicated to building a culture of peace and justice, requires all of us—children and adults alike—to develop our Peace Literacy by recognizing and supporting the following foundational principles:

1. **All of us have non-physical needs, such as our need for belonging, purpose and meaning, nurturing relationships, and transcendence.** Developing our literacy in peace involves understanding these non-physical needs and taking them seriously as drivers of human behavior (Chappell, forthcoming). These needs are so strong that if we can't meet them in healthful ways, we'll meet them in unhealthy ways. To help children meet these needs in healthful ways, adults must prepare an environment where children can work uninterrupted, transcending their sense of time, in a community of healthy belonging, with minimal but nurturing supervision, on tasks that provide them with purpose and meaning. The Nautilus Approach (montessori-action.org) provides a roadmap for helping children with their work, and helping them return to that work when it is interrupted. When we adults prepare this kind of environment for children, it helps us meet our needs as well.

2. **All of us want to do well if we can.** Humans generally, and children in particular, typically want to help others and they want to live up to the positive expectations others set for them. When we find that we, or our colleagues, or the children in our care, aren't doing well, aren't performing to expectations, it is common to make judgments of laziness, unwillingness to learn, or attention-seeking. However, these judgments are based on explanations that are inaccurate because they focus only on symptoms. Additionally, this focus on symptoms contributes to inequities in the classroom, especially for children of color (Hammond 2014). According to Greene's extensive research (e.g., Greene 2018), when we aren't doing well, a more accurate and equitable explanation gets to the root: there is a gap in our understanding, skills, and/or capacities, that makes us unable to meet a challenge we've experienced in the learning environment.
3. **All of us can feel the fires of distress when we encounter a gap in our understanding, skills, and/or capacities.** The fires of distress can look like frustration, shame, or fear, and children and adults alike will sometimes respond to the fires of distress by behaving with the heat of aggression (Chappell 2017). Conflicts and challenges are inevitable in any learning community, but aggressive responses are *not* inevitable. To effectively mitigate the heat of aggression, we need to understand and attend to the fire of distress at the root of the aggressive behavior by deploying our skills in listening and cultivating calm, and by flexing our capacities for empathy, imagination, and conscience.
4. **All of us can help each other if we encounter a gap, experience distress, and respond with aggression.** What challenge in the learning environment is at the root of the distress? Have we understood our non-physical needs? Do we have the skills to meet those needs in a healthful way? Have we built the capacities needed for exercising those skills? Greene's Collaborative Proactive Solutions model suggests a way forward (Greene 2008). When we work collaboratively with the children in our care, to identify the challenge in the environment that is causing the distress, when we get help understanding the relevant needs, learning the skills, and building the capacities, then we can close the gap, lower the distress, and mitigate the aggression. Hammond emphasizes that these kinds of collaborations ought not to characterize the gaps as deficits, but as problems to solve, and that each child brings unique strengths and solutions from which we can all learn (Hammond 2014).
5. **All of us can help each other increase our understanding, learn skills, and build our capacities—to develop our literacy in peace.** In addition to traditional academic subjects, we can build on social emotional learning outcomes to include:
 - Understanding our nonphysical needs and how to meet those needs in healthful ways;
 - Learning the skills of recognizing when we are in distress (and when trauma is the cause of that distress) and for empathizing with that distress rather than responding with aggression;
 - Building our capacity for empathy, conscience, and hope.

These learning outcomes are designed to prepare children to be engaged citizens working for peace and justice. Helping children develop their Peace Literacy is a key academic subject for primary education. **Peace Literacy is their work. It is our work.**

About the Authors

Sharyn Clough is a professor of philosophy at Oregon State University and the author of many scholarly essays on Peace Literacy research and pedagogy. She has a PhD from Simon Fraser University in Canada and has been teaching for 25 years. She serves as curriculum coordinator for the Peace Literacy Institute.

Paul K. Chappell is a graduate of West Point and a veteran of the war in Iraq; he is the founder of Peace Literacy and Executive Director of the Peace Literacy Institute. He lectures internationally and has authored 6 books in the *Road to Peace* series.

Jacqui Miller has 20 years of Montessori teaching experience at the elementary and adolescent levels. She was the founding principal of a preschool-6th grade public Montessori charter school in Cleveland, Ohio. She holds an AMI Elementary Diploma from the Washington Montessori Institute and has a BA from the University of Pennsylvania.

Natalie Celeste is the principal of Tremont Montessori School, a preschool-8th grade public Montessori school in her hometown of Cleveland, Ohio. She received her AMS Secondary Credential from Houston Montessori Center, with an MA in Education from Ursuline College and a BA from Oberlin College. Natalie has served in the education and nonprofit sectors for over 20 years.

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**This document is supported by a number of charts and posters, listed below,
soon to be available for free download at peaceliteracy.org/pbis
(contact Clough for more info)**

Charts:

Essential Components of the Prepared Environment for Creating a Peace Literate Culture of Respect and Belonging in a Montessori Learning Community

- The Physical Environment
- The Psychological Environment
- The Prepared Adult
- The Child
- Combining Greene’s Insights with a Peace Literacy **Understanding** of Nonphysical Needs, Development of **Capacities**, and Learning of **Skills**
- Helping Ourselves and Other Adults Identify and Respond to Emotions and Needs
- Meeting the Non-Physical Needs of Children
- Helping Children Build Their Vocabulary and Self-Knowledge About Their Non-Physical Needs and the Tangles of Trauma: A Collaborative Tool
- Matrix for Comparing PBIS and Peace Literacy/Montessori Frameworks

Posters:

- Foundational Principles of a Montessori Model for Behavioral Support informed by Peace Literacy
- Our 9 Non-Physical Needs
- The 7 Nutrients for Healthy Belonging
- The Fires Beneath Aggression
- Peace Literacy Plus Greene Arrow