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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Participation of students with extensive support needs in SWPBIS: Administrator and educator perspectives

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Abstract

We explored the involvement of students with extensive support needs (ESN) in School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS). We interviewed 15 administrators and special and general educators from elementary schools implementing SWPBIS during the 2019–2020 school year and analyzed responses using qualitative content analysis. In spite of reported challenges related to student characteristics and low expectations among school personnel, participants indicated that students with ESN were taught school-wide expectations and received public acknowledgement at Tier 1, often with adaptations and evidence-based practices, and were considered for Tier 2. Although participants reported commitment to inclusion as a central aspect of SWPBIS, inclusion primarily occurred outside academic classrooms, which limited student involvement across SWPBIS activities. Finally, few participants indicated that students with ESN were involved in SWPBIS data collection activities. Implications include that schools should systematically include students with ESN in all tiers of SWPBIS in such a way that focuses on students' meaningful benefit rather than solely on their physical inclusion and

create systems that ensure special and general educators collaborate in SWPBIS implementation. Our findings provide a framework for future studies to identify conditions and effective strategies that ensure SWPBIS benefits all students.

KEYWORDS

extensive support needs, interview, qualitative content analysis, school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports, severe disabilities, SWPBIS

1 | INTRODUCTION

School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) has emerged as a widely used framework that relies on evidence-based prevention and intervention practices offered through a multitiered continuum of supports to promote academic, social/emotional, and behavioral success among all students (Sugai et al., 2014). The overall purpose of SWPBIS is to guide schools in establishing positive environments that are safe, predictable, and consistent for all students (Sugai & Horner, 2010). Schools implementing SWPBIS are committed to undergoing systems change with the fundamental principles that all personnel should teach appropriate behavior to all students and intervene early to prevent challenging behavior through the use of evidence-based practices (EBPs). These schools develop *systems* to support personnel with the implementation of effective *practices* through the strategic use of *data*. The tenets of "systems, practices, and, data" guide schools in their implementation of a continuum of behavioral supports that promote the success of a continuum of learners (Lewis et al., 2016).

SWPBIS is framed by three tiers of support that are inclusive and cumulative in that more intensive supports build upon existing supports (Sugai et al., 2014). At Tier 1, a SWPBIS leadership team representative of personnel across the school (e.g., administrator, teacher, counselor, school psychologist) provides guidance for all personnel to teach all students behavioral expectations that are specifically reinforced across all school settings. The Tier 1 team reviews data (e.g., office discipline referrals) to inform practices; develops tools, such as posters and lesson plans, to be used by personnel for teaching expectations; and organizes procedures (e.g., school-wide tokens) and activities to publicly acknowledge positive student behaviors (e.g., reward assemblies). At Tier 2, schools have an additional team that reviews screening measures (e.g., frequent office referrals, teacher rating scales) to identify relatively efficient targeted (e.g., Check-in/Check-out) or small group (e.g., social skills training) interventions for students who require behavioral interventions in addition to Tier 1 supports (Bruhn et al., 2014). Tier 3 supports are implemented for students who require intensive individualized behavior plans or wraparound supports (usually guided by a functional behavioral assessment; Dunlap & Kern, 2018) in addition to Tiers 1 and 2 supports.

1.1 | SWPBIS and students with extensive support needs

Students with extensive support needs (ESN) typically receive special education services under the eligibility categories of intellectual disability, autism, and multiple disabilities. These students "require ongoing pervasive support" and often are eligible to participate in the state alternate assessment (Taub et al., 2017, p. 127). Because of the high prevalence of challenging behavior among students with ESN (Simó-Pinatella et al., 2019), it is critical to ensure their access to a full continuum of behavioral supports, including preventative strategies offered at Tiers 1 and 2 (Zagona et al., 2021). Although SWPBIS is intended to be an inclusive framework designed to offer such a continuum of support to all students, researchers have identified several potential barriers for students with ESN.

Because students with ESN typically spend a majority of their school day in separate settings (Kleinert et al., 2015; Morningstar et al., 2017), access to school-wide supports (e.g., instruction on school-wide expectations, public acknowledgment through reward systems) may be limited or unavailable depending on student schedules (Hawken & O'Neill, 2006). Additionally, special educators of students with ESN may have limited opportunities to participate in SWPBIS planning (Snell, 2006), and professional development activities at the state level may exclude discussion and strategies specific to this population of students (Landers et al., 2012). Existing school-wide supports, including lesson plans to teach school-wide expectations and token systems for public acknowledgment, may not address the needs of all students (Hawken & O'Neill, 2006). Attitudinal barriers or misconceptions also might play a role in the exclusion of students with ESN, especially among special educators of students with ESN (e.g., Shuster et al., 2017). Finally, Sailor et al. (2006) suggested that systems-level factors concerning the bifurcation of special and general education can act as barriers to the involvement of students with ESN in SWPBIS. Specifically, if general and special educators do not collaborate to proactively expand the scope of Tier 1 to include students with ESN, then Tier 1 may only benefit students without disabilities, thus relegating students with ESN to receive Tiers 2 and 3 supports delivered by special educators disconnected from general education.

Given the rapid adoption of SWPBIS and the uncertainty around how students with ESN have been involved, Kurth and Enyart (2016) presented a call to action for continued research to examine student involvement in SWPBIS. Researchers have conducted preliminary work to address this call to action in a number of ways. For example, Walker et al. (2018) conducted a survey of 179 SWPBIS schools in the United States to determine the extent and perceived importance of the involvement of students with ESN in SWPBIS systems, practices, and data collection procedures in addition to perceived barriers and enablers. Although schools largely reported high levels of implementation and importance, ratings from elementary schools, schools implementing all three tiers of SWPBIS, and schools with higher percentages of students with ESN included in general education classrooms were significantly higher for a number of SWPBIS components (e.g., taught school-wide expectations with peers without disabilities, considered for Tier 2, receive public acknowledgment). Reported barriers included negative personnel perceptions and low expectations, student characteristics (e.g., cognitive ability to understand school-wide expectations), and limited resources and administrative support. School personnel identified several strategies including involvement in SWPBIS activities and lessons or adapted versions thereof, additional strategies to address student support needs (e.g., visual support, social narratives), and including students with ESN in inclusive school environments.

In another example, Kurth and Zagona (2018) surveyed 305 SWPBIS coaches and found that perceived involvement of students with ESN often differed by respondent role, with general educators reporting lower involvement across a number of SWPBIS aspects (e.g., taught school-wide expectations to students with ESN) as compared to coaches in other roles. Another noteworthy finding from this investigation was that coaches from schools where students with ESN spent a majority of the school day in separate settings rated the importance of including students with ESN in SWPBIS significantly lower than coaches from schools where students primarily received instruction in inclusive, general education classrooms.

Researchers and other stakeholders have emphasized the importance of designing SWPBIS to be responsive to the unique needs of a diverse range of students (e.g., culturally responsive SWPBIS; Leverson et al., 2021). In one example, Loman et al. (2018) examined the effects of adapted Tier 1 SWPBIS lesson plans on challenging behavior among students with ESN in inclusive, school-wide settings. By incorporating EBPs (e.g., visual supports, systematic instruction; Browder et al., 2014; Wong et al., 2015) within lesson plans to meet the unique physical and cognitive needs of the student participants, special educators provided students with accessible Tier 1 instruction around the school-wide behavioral expectations, resulting in improved student behavior. Findings from this investigation are promising and point to the potential utility of applying established instructional practices within the SWPBIS context, resulting in more accessible and inclusive multi-tiered systems of support.

1.2 | Study purpose

Although this emerging body of research provides preliminary information regarding whether and how students with ESN are included in SWPBIS, additional research is needed to advance the field's understanding of (a) how students with ESN are included in SWPBIS systems procedures, practices, and data collection activities; (b) specific strategies used by schools to involve students with ESN within this framework; and (c) potential barriers faced by schools. This information will not only guide future research directions but also can be considered by a range of stakeholders at the school and district levels to inform decision-making around SWPBIS programming and action plans to improve accessibility for students with ESN. As such, the purpose of the current exploratory investigation was to build on this emerging line of inquiry by interviewing personnel from SWPBIS schools to provide a description of how schools are supporting students with ESN under the SWPBIS framework. Therefore, we used a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis with a descriptive, rather than theoretical, aim (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We addressed the following research questions: (a) How do school personnel describe the ways in which students with ESN are involved in SWPBIS? (b) What specific strategies do school personnel report using to involve students with ESN in SWPBIS? (c) What barriers do school personnel report that make it challenging to involve students with ESN in SWPBIS? and (d) Are educators likely to use EBPs (i.e., systematic instruction, visual supports, social narratives, video modeling) to support students with ESN in SWPBIS?

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants

Before recruitment, we obtained institutional review board approval to conduct the study. We relied on purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) to recruit participants from schools in one state in the southern region of the United States identified as effectively implementing SWPBIS. Our intent was to gather information from schools with well-established implementation records, as schools at more advanced implementation stages (Fixsen et al., 2005) are likely to have a greater capacity for tailoring SWPBIS to meet the needs of all students. The multitiered system of supports coordinator of the state's education department supplied a list of high-performing SWPBIS elementary schools from which we recruited. These high-performing schools were classified as (a) *green ribbon schools* (earned ≥80% for Tier 1 on the Tiered Fidelity Inventory [TFI; Algozzine et al., 2019] and ≥80 on the School-wide Assessment Tool [SET; Sugai et al., 2005]), (b) *model schools* (earned ≥80% for Tiers 1 and 2 on the TFI and ≥90 on the SET), or (c) *exemplar schools* (earned ≥80% for Tiers 1–3 on the TFI and ≥95 on the SET). Because the provided list of schools did not specify which included students with ESN, we sent invitations over the course of the 2019–2020 school year to all administrators on the list and specified in our invitation that only schools that educated students with ESN were eligible for participation.

The email invitation included an overview of the project, directions for distributing study information to general and special educators in their schools, and a link to an information form where participants provided demographic information about (a) themselves (i.e., role, years in role, involvement in SWPBIS team, perceptions about the importance of including students with ESN in SWPBIS), (b) SWPBIS implementation at their schools (i.e., composition of SWPBIS team, years implementing SWPBIS, tiers implemented), and (c) contact information for scheduling the interview. For nonresponsive administrators, we sent follow-up email invitations 1 and 2 months after having distributed the original invitation. A total of seven administrators responded to the invitation with five agreeing to participate; these administrators represented five elementary schools that educated students with ESN across five different districts in the state.

Table 1 provides information about the schools including setting, number of students enrolled, grade levels served, enrollment by race/ethnicity, implementation fidelity, SWPBIS team composition, and years implementing

SWPBIS. With the exception of School C, all schools had a Title 1 designation during the 2019–2020 school year. The percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch was as follows: School A, 98.0%; School B, 99.1%; School C, 5.4%; School D, 57.5%; and School E, 99.4%. In terms of the percentage of students with ESN who spent a majority of the school day in general education settings, Schools A, D, and E reported 0%–10%, School B reported 11%–20%, and School C reported 61%–70%.

All five schools implemented Tiers 1–3 and reported varying degrees and years of implementation and team membership (see Table 1). Administrators from Schools A and B provided additional information about SWPBIS training opportunities. Training for School A was delivered by district and regional coaches twice a year (i.e., at the start and middle of the school year) and focused on how to use the school's behavioral matrix and redirect challenging behavior; members of the school's leadership team and selected teachers who served on the SWPBIS team attended. For School B, a behavior specialist delivered training twice a year that addressed the fundamentals of SWPBIS; training sessions were attended by all SWPBIS team members.

We asked each administrator to identify and distribute the study invitation to one general educator and one special educator from their school who (a) supported students with ESN and (b) were involved in SWPBIS. In total, 15 school personnel provided consent and participated in the interviews, with one administrator, one general educator, and one special educator participant from each school. Table 2 provides information about participating school members including their role, years in the role, involvement in the SWPBIS team, and perceptions about the importance of including students with ESN in SWPBIS. It should be noted that we collected data on perceptions in addition to other demographic information to describe the perceived importance of including students with ESN in various SWPBIS systems procedures, practices, and data collection activities (Walker et al., 2018; see Figure S1) among participants at the time of the study.

2.2 | Procedures

Once participants completed the information form, we contacted them via email to schedule an interview that took place over Zoom video conferencing technology with one of the three research team members responsible for conducting interviews. Before the interview, the interviewer provided an overview of the study and obtained verbal consent to move forward with the audio recorded interview. Interviews provided a means to elicit detailed information about each participant's perspectives on SWPBIS implementation at their respective school. On average, interviews lasted 38 min (range: 24–73 min). The interviewer followed one of two semistructured interview protocols. Both the administrator and educator protocols included the following four open-ended questions: "How is SWPBIS currently implemented at your school?," "How are students with ESN included in SWPBIS at your school?," "What specific strategies have been used at your school to include students with ESN in SWPBIS?," and "What specific barriers have made it challenging to include students with ESN in SWPBIS at your school?" The first question, although not specific to students with ESN, provided the interviewer (and coders during the data analysis phase) with critical information about the SWPBIS context that informed subsequent probing. The interviewer used follow-up probes (Patton, 2002) throughout the interview to clarify or expand on participant responses (e.g., "Can you tell me more about the current strategies or barriers at the Tier [1–3] level?") and summarized responses to continually confirm understanding of participant statements in relation to the research questions (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

Although participants may have described practices when responding to other interview questions, the educator protocol included additional questions related to the likelihood of educators to implement four specific EBPs to support students with ESN in SWPBIS (i.e., systematic instruction, visual supports, social narratives, video modeling; Browder et al., 2014; Wong et al., 2015). We selected these EBPs specifically to build upon previous research in which special educators identified these practices due to their relevance and successfully applied them to promote accessibility and involvement in Tier 1 SWPBIS (Loman et al., 2018). Interviewers provided a description of each EBP and then asked

TABLE 1 School characteristics.

School	Setting	Student enrollment	Grade levels served	Enrollment by race/ethnicity	SWPBIS designation	SWPBIS team members	Involvement of special educator of Students with ESN on SWPBIS team	Years implementing SWPBIS
A	Rural	609	PK-5	Black: 13.6%; Hispanic: 46.6%; White: 44.5; two or more races: 4.1%	Exemplar school	GE teachers, SE teachers, special area teachers (art teacher, physical education teacher), ESL teacher	Yes	>5 years
B	Rural	352	PK-5	American Indian/Alaskan Native: 0.6%; Asian: 0.3%; Black: 65.5%; Hispanic: 4.0%; White: 27.6%; two or more races: 2.0%	Green ribbon school	Administrators, GE teachers, SE teachers, school counselors, instructional coach	Yes	3 years
C	Rural	1033	K-5	American Indian/Alaskan Native: 2%; Asian: 25.9%; Black: 15.7%; Hispanic: 7.9%; Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0.6%; White: 46%; two or more races: 3.5%	Model recognition school	Administrators, teachers, counselors	No	5 years
D	Urban	642	PK-5	American Indian/Alaskan Native: 0.2%; Black: 40.3%; Hispanic: 7.9%; White: 44.2%; two or more races: 7.3%	Green ribbon school	Administrators, GE teachers, SE teachers, teacher assistants, school counselors, special area teacher	Yes	>5 years
E	Rural	510	PK-5	American Indian/Alaskan Native: 1.4%; Asian: 9.8%; Black: 49.2%; Hispanic: 20.0%; White: 15.5%; two or more races: 4.1%	Green ribbon school	Administrators, teachers, special education staff, school counselors, school psychologists, social worker	Yes	>5 years

Note: Green ribbon schools earned 80% or higher for Tier 1 on the Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI; Algozzine et al., 2019) and a score of 80 or higher on the School-wide Assessment Tool (SET; Sugai et al., 2005). Model schools earned 80% or higher for Tiers 1 and 2 on the TFI and a score of 90 or higher on the SET. Exemplar schools earned 80% or higher for Tiers 1–3 on the TFI and a score of 95 or higher on the SET. Student enrollment and enrollment by race/ethnicity data reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/).

Abbreviations: ESL, English as a second language; ESN, extensive support needs; GE, general education; K, kindergarten; PK, prekindergarten; SE, special education; SWPBIS, school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports.

educators to indicate the likelihood of applying each practice to encourage participation among students with ESN in SWPBIS. We provided each participant with a small gift card once the interviews were conducted. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and recordings were subsequently destroyed.

We used multiple strategies to address issues of credibility and trustworthiness, including external transcription, first and second level member checks, and the use of multiple researchers and data sources. After the transcriptionist transcribed all interviews verbatim, we checked the transcriptions for accuracy and eliminated identifying information to ensure participant anonymity. We then emailed each participant a copy of their deidentified transcript for member checking purposes (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Patton, 2002). This first level member check provided each participant with the opportunity to clarify and/or add to their responses to confirm whether the content captured how students with ESN were included in SWPBIS in their schools. Nine of the 15 participants responded, with seven confirming the accuracy of the transcripts, one adjusting language in the transcript, and one adding more information to expand on the transcript content. As a second level member check, we provided each participant with a copy of the preliminary findings that emerged during data analysis. Four participants representing four different schools responded, with one being an administrator and three being educators. All four confirmed that our analysis captured how students with ESN participate in SWPBIS at their schools.

The use of multiple researchers to collect and analyze the data provided a means for triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2002) and supported researcher reflexivity (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Patton, 2002). Three members of the research team conducted the interviews using the semistructured interview protocols to reduce potential interviewer bias. Three of the researchers acted as coders due to their expertise related to students with ESN and inclusive practices. Further, two of the researchers applied additional expertise specifically related to SWPBIS, with one having experience as a behavior analyst. The third researcher had an additional expertise in teacher preparation in the area of ESN. Collectively, these shared and unique areas of expertise supported data collection and analysis (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009) related to SWPBIS and students with ESN. Further, we interviewed three individuals representing different roles in each school, and the five participating schools represented five different districts across the state. This also provided a means of triangulation as it afforded multiple data sources representing multiple perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2002). Finally, the research team met regularly to discuss the coding process and establish consensual agreements, which minimized individual bias in the application of the coding frame, supported consistency in the coding process, and served to promote joint understanding as we categorized the data.

2.3 | Data analysis

We used qualitative content analysis (QCA) to conduct a manifest analysis (Bengtsson, 2016). The goal of a manifest analysis is to stay close to the data with the purpose of describing what participants share as opposed to latent content analysis where the intent is to decipher the meaning behind what was shared (Bengtsson, 2016). Our analysis included the following QCA steps: (a) building a coding frame, (b) dividing data into units of coding, (c) testing the coding frame, (d) evaluating and modifying the coding frame, (e) main analysis, and (f) interpreting and presenting findings (Schreier, 2012).

To intentionally expand on the emerging research base, we built our initial coding frame conceptually (Schreier, 2012) by examining the existing literature on SWPBIS and students with ESN (see Table 3) to deductively identify a priori codes ($n = 36$). These codes were selected due to their relevance to the first three research questions and to support our ability to describe how participants perceived students with ESN were included in SWPBIS as compared to previously reported strategies, supports, and barriers. In particular, we used results from two survey studies (i.e., Kurth & Zagona, 2018; Walker et al., 2018) to identify specific strategies and practices used to involve students with ESN in SWPBIS and perceived barriers. Further, we reviewed conceptual publications (i.e., Hawken & O'Neill, 2006; Snell, 2006) to identify additional barriers and strategies reported in the literature.

TABLE 2 Participant characteristics.

School/participant roles[a]	Years in role	Involvement on SWPBIS team	Mean ratings for perceived importance		
			SWPBIS systems procedures	SWPBIS practices	SWPBIS data activities
School A					
Administrator	5	Member	2.6	2.0	2.0
General educator	>20	No involvement	2.8	2.8	2.5
Special educator	4	No involvement	1.6	1.2	1.0
School B					
Administrator	4	Member	2.2	2.8	2.0
General educator	4	No involvement	2.8	3.0	2.0
Special educator	3	No response	3.0	3.0	3.0
School C					
Administrator	9	Member	2.6	2.8	2.5
General educator	4	No involvement	2.8	2.0	1.0
Special educator	6	No involvement	2.0	2.5	0.25
School D					
Administrator	10	Supervises team; not a member	2.2	2.5	2.3
General educator	6	Member	2.0	2.2	2.3
Special educator	4	No involvement	2.4	2.8	2.8
School E					
Administrator	13	Member	3.0	3.0	3.0
General educator	10	No involvement	3.0	3.0	3.0
Special educator	>20	Member; grade-level representative	1.4	2.2	0.5
		Overall mean ratings and range	2.29 (0–3)	2.54 (0–3)	2.05 (0–3)

Note: Response scale for importance ratings: 0 = *none*, 1 = *low*, 2 = *moderate*, and 3 = *high*.

Abbreviations: SWPBIS, school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports.

[a]All participants reported gender as female.

2.3.1 | Coding process: Applying and refining the coding frame

We used Dedoose® (version 8.3.17), a qualitative data analysis platform, to code finalized transcripts and analyze patterns that emerged. Data within interview transcripts were divided into units of coding based on each participant conversational turn. Three of the research team members independently reviewed the transcripts to apply and test the coding frame. During initial analyses, the coders embedded memos to document the potential need for additional inductive codes and initial interpretations. Coders met weekly after independently coding two to three transcripts to discuss the code application, memos, and potential for additional codes. We relied on these intensive discussions to evaluate the coding frame and reach group consensus across all code applications and coders (Saldana, 2016). When coders reached a consensus that additional codes were appropriate to include in the data analysis, the coding frame was modified and

subsequently applied in an additional round of coding, which mirrored the initial coding process. During these meetings, coders also adjusted code definitions developed during earlier consensus meetings, thereby clarifying the definitions and application of the codes and, as noted above, enhancing the credibility of the analysis through analyst triangulation (Patton, 2002). This process resulted in sustaining 35 of the a priori codes and the addition of eight codes (two of which were derived from the original collaborative teaming code: collaboration with staff and parents), bringing the total to 43 (see Table 3). Given the descriptive aim of this interview study and the focus on strategically selected a priori codes, we did not eliminate any codes.

2.3.2 | Main analysis and interpretation

Upon finalizing coding through consensus, we continued the QCA to categorize the data in relation to the research questions (Schreier, 2012). First, we examined the frequency of code application across transcripts and participant types to determine which codes were most and least commonly applied and whether there were patterns based on school or participant characteristics. This supported selection of the codes most salient to this study. We then used Dedoose to consolidate excerpts for the most commonly applied codes and examined that output, thereby permitting analysis within and between codes. Code excerpts were organized and examined by code by each of the three coders individually, followed by group discussions of interpretation in relation to the research questions. The research team met frequently during this process to discuss the individual analyses and categorization of the data, which further supported the triangulation of results via investigator triangulation (Patton, 2002). Dedoose also supported the examination of the data in relation to descriptors (i.e., school and participant characteristics); however, we did not observe distinct patterns related to such comparisons.

3 | RESULTS

The analysis process resulted in descriptive categories organized in relation to our research questions: (a) systems procedures, practices, and data collection activities; (b) strategies; (c) barriers; and (d) EBPs.

3.1 | Systems procedures, practices, and data collection activities

When asked to describe how students with ESN were included in SWPBIS, participants identified systems procedures, practices, and data collection activities.

3.1.1 | Systems procedures: Commitment to inclusion

A majority of participants ($n = 14$) identified school-wide commitment to inclusion as a central component of including students with ESN in SWPBIS. Participants often described including students with ESN in various SWPBIS activities (e.g., SWPBIS assemblies, field trips) and inclusive settings or classes throughout the school (e.g., music class, physical education class, cafeteria, auditorium during SWPBIS assemblies). As an example, one general educator stated,

> At the beginning of the year, we have an assembly where *all students* [emphasis added] in the school attend, K–2 [kindergarten through Grade 2] and then 3–5 [Grade 3 through 5], which is our PBIS expectations assembly where we explain it [school-wide expectations] to the students.

TABLE 3 Number of participant codes across coding categories.

Research Question 1			Research Question 2	Research Question 3
Systems (*n*)	**Practices (*n*)**	**Data (*n*)**	**Strategies (*n*)**	**Barriers (*n*)**
Commitment to inclusion[a] (14)	Students with ESN taught expectations[a] (12)	Students with ESN included in office discipline referral data[a] (4)	Students with ESN included in SWPBIS activities[a] (15)	Student characteristics[a] (10)
Special education team involvement in SWPBIS[a] (3)	Students with ESN receive public acknowledgement[a] (10)	Data for students with ESN reviewed in SWPBIS meetings[a] (4)	Students with ESN included in inclusive settings[a] (14)	Low expectations[a] (6)
Special education professional development[a] (1)	Students with ESN considered for Tier 2[a] (9)	Effective data system for problem solving for students with ESN[a] (0)	Visual supports[a] (11)	Limited or no adaptations (4)
Students with ESN screened for Tier 2[a] (0)	Expectations accessible across settings[a] (4)	Students with ESN included in fidelity assessments[a] (0)	Adapted lesson plans[a] (9)	Resources[a] (3)
	Students with ESN taught expectations with peers[a] (4)		Students with ESN included in data collection[a] (6)	Special education team responsibility[a] (3)
	Students with ESN considered by teams when designing SWPBIS[a] (3)		Collaboration with staff (6)	None[a] (3)
	Expectations cognitively and physically accessible[a] (2)		Adjustments to language (6)	Segregated classrooms[a] (2)
			Personnel support[a] (6)	Personnel competency and training[a] (2)
			Other adaptations (5)	Family communication (2)
			Collaboration with parents (4)	Peer perceptions (2)
			Adapted reward system[a] (4)	Misconceptions about SWPBIS[a] (1)
			Social narratives[a] (4)	Staff perceptions[a] (0)
			Peer support[a] (3)	

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Research Question 1			Research Question 2	Research Question 3
Systems (*n*)	Practices (*n*)	Data (*n*)	Strategies (*n*)	Barriers (*n*)
			Social skills[a] (2)	
			Assistive technology (2)	
			Personnel training[a] (0)	

Abbreviation: ESN, extensive support needs.

[a]A priori codes.

Although commitment to inclusion was commonly cited, participants heavily focused on the importance of physical accessibility to promote participation in SWPBIS activities (e.g., adapted bowling ramp at bowling alley for field trip). Also of note is that participants failed to describe inclusive systems that reflected a school-wide commitment to teaching students with ESN in inclusive, general education classrooms for a *majority* of the school day. Instead, students with ESN were described as included in special area classes (e.g., art class, physical education class) or school-wide events, or in fewer cases, invited to general education classrooms for special occasions. For example, an administrator described their school's inclusive culture by stating, "You know, they [students with ESN] go to music and art. They have an assistant with them, but they're included. They're not isolated. They're not kept apart from any of the other students." A general educator also explained, "They [students with ESN] are self-contained as far as academics go. They do attend special area classes with second grade. So, when second grade comes to special areas, the students with severe disabilities kind of split up." Only one participant indicated that special educators of students with ESN attended SWPBIS professional development activities in their school.

3.1.2 | Practices

The most commonly reported SWPBIS practices that involved students with ESN were (a) being taught the school-wide expectations at Tier 1, (b) receiving public acknowledgment for engaging in expected behavior at Tier 1, and (c) being considered for Tier 2 supports.

3.1.2.1 | *Students are taught the school-wide expectations*

Participants emphasized that students with ESN received instruction on the established school-wide expectations (n = 12) and often participated in SWPBIS activities during which those expectations were taught (e.g., SWPBIS assemblies, morning broadcast). One general educator indicated that their school developed a school-wide expectations matrix and "everybody has the same one [school-wide expectations poster] in their classrooms. There's one for *all* [emphasis added] classrooms." In explaining that expectations are taught across all settings and staff, an administrator noted that "in our special multiple handicaps class, [special educator name] does that [teaches school-wide expectations] throughout the time. You know, always doing circle with the kids and helping them understand what 'respectful' [one of the school-wide expectations] looks like."

However, students with ESN often required adaptations to the way expectations were presented and taught. In describing adaptations at their school, a general educator indicated that,

> The explanation might sound different. There might be more modeling involved in it [teaching school-wide expectations]. It might take longer for the child to quite, you know, grasp what the teacher is telling them, but the language [of the school-wide expectations] stays the same.

3.1.2.2 | *Students receive public acknowledgement*

Participants also suggested that students with ESN took part in school-wide public acknowledgment systems (n = 10), with several indicating that students received the same rewards without any required adaptations. A different general educator indicated that "it's [the school-wide acknowledgment system is] all the same. Everybody gets tokens when they meet their things [performance criteria] in their room and in different settings." Likewise, in describing a student with ESN, one administrator stated, "He participates just like everyone else. He can get bear paws [tokens associated with the school-wide acknowledgment system]. He can get rewards." In contrast, a number of participants indicated that students with ESN participated in adapted versions with changes made to a range of aspects, including the performance criteria for obtaining rewards and frequency or immediacy of reinforcement. For example, a general educator indicated that students with ESN are "recognized just like anybody else when they're

doing the right thing, even if it might be doing the right thing for two seconds instead of the whole walk down the hall."

3.1.2.3 | *Students are considered for Tier 2 supports*

A majority of participants (n = 9) reported that students with ESN were included in Tier 2 in some capacity. Inclusion in Check-in/Check-out was mentioned most often but many participants acknowledged that students required adaptations to improve physical and cognitive accessibility (e.g., embedded visual supports on point card, changes to frequency or immediacy of reinforcement). For example, a special educator noted that students used an adapted Check-in/Check-out point card that included "a little Velcro reminder as a visual … with … three checks where the child is pulling off and putting on the little check mark for meeting the criteria."

3.1.3 | Data collection activities

Only four participants mentioned SWPBIS data collection activities that involved students with ESN. Specifically, these four participants indicated that data reflecting the behavior of students with ESN were reviewed during SWPBIS team meetings (e.g., one administrator noted that "when we are looking at the [school-wide] data, we do the school as a whole"), though there was no indication that data systems used by teams were effective in problem solving for students with ESN. In other words, respondents tended to emphasize the inclusion of these data, but failed to describe whether and how these data were used to make decisions for Tiers 1 and 2. It was also noted that office discipline referral data included students with ESN but, similarly, how discipline data were used was unclear. In fact, one special educator questioned the "validity" of decision-making around discipline data in determining which students with ESN receive school-wide rewards. Finally, the involvement of students with ESN in SWPBIS implementation fidelity assessments was not mentioned by any participants.

3.2 | Strategies

When asked to indicate specific strategies used to include students with ESN in SWPBIS, participants most frequently mentioned the following strategies: (a) involving students with ESN in SWPBIS activities, (b) including students in inclusive settings, (c) using visual supports, and (d) adapting SWPBIS lesson plans.

3.2.1 | Students are involved in SWPBIS activities

All 15 of the participants mentioned involving students with ESN in SWPBIS activities. One general educator said,

> They [special educators of students with ESN] advocate for their students really well and they make sure that their students are part of everything [SWPBIS activities] … And you do hear, like I said, the common language [to teach behavioral expectations] being used by all the teachers.

Specifically, participants identified involving students with ESN when teaching the school-wide expectations to the entire school, usually in assemblies, or, in fewer cases, during a daily morning broadcast. Additionally, students were involved in their schools' SWPBIS acknowledgment activities by attending celebration ceremonies, field trips, and receiving tokens like their peers.

3.2.2 | Students are included in inclusive settings

Nearly all of the participants ($n = 14$) mentioned including students with ESN in inclusive school settings as a strategy for involving students with ESN in SWPBIS. Due to their inclusion in these settings, students were exposed to instruction on school-wide expectations and rewards activities (e.g., receiving tokens, assemblies, field trips). As noted earlier, inclusion primarily took place in settings other than general education classrooms and, consequently, access to SWPBIS was limited to these settings. For example, a special educator discussed this exposure to school-wide expectations in special area classes: "We do inclusion with … our specials teachers, so, our art and our media and our music [teachers]. And so, I see them using it [school-wide expectations] as well in those areas." One general education teacher commented on access to reward activities in these settings: "As far as Tier 1, they go to our specials with us. They've got … P.E, music, media, art, they attend … one of our regular home rooms. They participate in those PBIS celebrations at the end of the quarter."

Participants also indicated that teacher assistants provided support, often in a one-to-one context, in inclusive settings to promote access and participation in SWPBIS and other activities. In describing where students with ESN access SWPBIS, one special educator said,

> With their disabilities, no matter what kind of disability they have, they're still included in everyday activity. They go to the cafeteria. They go to the gym. To programs. The TA [teacher's assistant] will work with them one on one. They're not excluded.

A different special educator highlighted how teacher assistants promote access to SWPBIS: "It may be that those Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3 kids may have a support staff with them to give them the extra support. And so, that would be a … support system so that they could meet the goals and to participate in the [SWPBIS] celebration."

3.2.3 | Students receive visual supports

A large number of participants ($n = 11$) shared that visual supports were used as a strategy to promote student involvement in SWPBIS. Visual supports representing the school-wide expectations included pictures on posters, pictures used in social narratives, and visual cues on a student's desk or a teacher's lanyard. For example, one special educator said,

> The content [of the school-wide expectations] would remain the same. It wouldn't be watered down by any means. However, the way it's presented would be different and it may be that … they're [the expectations are] more visual and we would give those visual pictures or … we can even attach a social story to that.

Some respondents shared that they used more concrete visuals to provide students with feedback on their behavior that included a lighted visual system to indicate voice level, smiley or frowny faces, and colored clips to clearly indicate whether classroom expectations were followed. A few participants mentioned that students with ESN were provided access to videos that were used to teach all students the behavioral expectations.

3.2.4 | School members use adapted SWPBIS lesson plans

The majority of participants ($n = 9$) mentioned the use of adapted SWPBIS lesson plans for students with ESN. The adapted lesson plans described by the participants often included the use of visual supports. Other specific

adaptations to lesson plans included simplifying language, consistent practice through multiple opportunities, modeling, and prompting. A number of comments included breaking down the behavioral expectations into smaller steps and using modifications.

3.3 | Barriers

Participants identified low expectations ($n = 5$) and student-specific characteristics ($n = 5$) as barriers to involving students with ESN in SWPBIS. These largely focused on low expectations held by school members and student characteristics that affected the accessibility and benefits of participating in SWPBIS.

3.3.1 | School members have low expectations

Participants reported low expectations held by school members in terms of students' ability to understand and/or benefit from learning the school-wide expectations and receiving a public acknowledgement. Low expectations were almost always directly related to student characteristics, with expectations often based upon broad generalizations about students with ESN. For example, one administrator indicated that their school's SWPBIS social–emotional learning groups are "just not appropriate for them [students with ESN]" and, as such, special educators in the "severe autism classrooms are trained to do the social, emotional lessons" to provide specialized instruction. In another example, a special educator suggested that learning the school-wide expectations "would be too difficult" and "just a little over their heads."

3.3.2 | School members perceive student characteristics as barriers

In other cases, participants mentioned the specific characteristics exhibited by students with ESN including cognitive functioning, physical disabilities, and sensory needs. In many cases, participants perceived student cognitive abilities as impeding their access to and understanding of SWPBIS. As an example, a general educator indicated that students with ESN "don't have the cognitive ability to understand the [SWPBIS] system" and that "kids in the [ESN] class can't control their responses or can't control their actions or can't control their behavior." One special educator noted "there's a comprehension piece that's kind of difficult" in including students in Tier 1 instruction. Several participants suggested that, because students with ESN engage in different forms or intensity levels of behavior compared to other students and often require one-on-one support, they are less likely to benefit from SWPBIS. In terms of physical characteristics, a few participants acknowledged that students with physical disabilities may not be able to fully access supports (e.g., posters in the hallway) or reward events like a party at the roller-skating rink or bowling alley. A special educator also indicated that school and family members might be hesitant to include students who have unique sensory needs in certain SWPBIS activities: "Especially [for] our students with autism, the noise in the crowd and being in the gym … it's just a lot for them sometimes."

3.3.3 | Less common barriers

Participants mentioned other less common barriers that included school members' misconceptions about the inclusive nature of SWPBIS, students with ESN receiving instruction in segregated classrooms, limited personnel training and competency related to students with ESN, challenges with or limited to no family communication, and negative peer perceptions of students with ESN.

3.4 | Educators' likelihood of using EBPs

We asked educators to describe the likelihood of implementing four EBPs (i.e., social narratives, systematic instruction, task analysis, video modeling) to support participation in SWPBIS among students with ESN. A majority of participants (range: 9–10) reported already using these practices or that they were likely to adopt these practices in the future. Interestingly, several educators were hesitant about adopting video modeling given strict video recording guidelines in their schools or districts.

4 | DISCUSSION

The purpose of this exploratory interview study was to investigate (a) how students with ESN are included in SWPBIS systems procedures, practices, and data collection activities, (b) specific strategies used by schools to involve students with ESN within this framework, and (c) potential barriers faced by schools. Although experts have emphasized the importance of including students across the three tiers of SWPBIS (Zagona et al., 2021), limited research has been conducted to explore the involvement of students with ESN in SWPBIS. Findings from this study add to the limited research base in several ways. First, although previous survey studies have offered preliminary information about how students with ESN are involved in SWPBIS (e.g., Kurth & Zagona, 2018; Walker et al., 2018), interviewing school members allowed us to explore specific strategies for involvement in greater detail. Second, only one study to date has specifically investigated the potential barriers faced by schools related to students with ESN and SWPBIS (Walker et al., 2018). Our findings provide additional insight into these obstacles and also confirm previous ideas offered by experts in the field (e.g., Hawken & O'Neill, 2006; Snell, 2006). Finally, we explored perceptions concerning the application of EBPs for students with ESN to promote involvement in SWPBIS, an area that has not yet been addressed in the literature. Collectively, our findings provide important information that can inform future research directions and offer practical implications for educators and others involved in SWPBIS implementation.

4.1 | Implications for practice

One important implication from our findings is that schools should seek to systematically include students with ESN in all tiers of SWPBIS in such a way that focuses on students' meaningful benefit rather than solely on their physical inclusion. The educators in this study mentioned commitment to inclusion as being critical. However, they did not describe the systems (i.e., staff development, teaming, data-based decision-making) their schools used to promote inclusion. Furthermore, most of the examples of inclusion centered around nonacademic settings and the physical accessibility of SWPBIS to promote participation. Experts within the field of SWPBIS have emphasized the inclusive and cumulative nature of the SWPBIS framework and the importance of including students with ESN within the preventative tiers (Tiers 1 and 2) of SWPBIS (Zagona et al., 2021). Our participants identified a number of promising strategies to enhance and/or adapt existing supports at Tiers 1 and 2, including adapted lesson plans, visual supports, and adapted reward systems, among others (e.g., Walker et al., 2018). Many of these reported strategies align with existing EBPs for students with ESN (Browder et al., 2014; Wong et al., 2015) and, importantly, addressed the unique support needs of students with ESN in participants' schools, thus demonstrating their potential to alleviate many of the accessibility challenges noted by participants. In addition, a majority of educators indicated they were either already using or would be likely to use four EBPs (i.e., social narratives, systematic instruction, task analysis, video modeling) that have been used previously to promote greater accessibility for students with ESN (Loman et al., 2018). When SWPBIS is adapted, for example, through universal design for learning and

EBPs, and delivered in inclusive contexts, students with ESN are likely to benefit and may not require more intensive support (Loman et al., 2018).

Another implication is that, for schools to effectively include students with ESN in SWPBIS, they should create systems that ensure special and general educators consistently collaborate in the design, implementation, and monitoring of SWPBIS. Educators in our study identified barriers to including students with ESN that were found in previous research (Shuster et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2018), including low expectations held by personnel regarding student characteristics such as their cognitive ability to understand and benefit from SWPBIS. To address these attitudinal barriers and encourage an inclusive experience for all students, schools will need to establish policies and develop an implementation action plan to address the needs of all students, much like planning efforts around culturally responsive SWPBIS (Leverson et al., 2021). In our study, this planning process was largely driven by special educators of students with ESN. Although special educators often served as members of the SWPBIS team, our findings suggest that special educators of students with ESN provided limited input during SWPBIS planning activities, a problem reported by others (Kurth & Zagona, 2018; Shuster et al., 2017). We recommend that special educators with expertise in ESN play an active role in planning activities, whether as an official team member or "consultant," to encourage decision-making around accessibility and inclusion and that SWPBIS teams proactively consider the needs of all students (see, e.g., guidelines offered by Walker & Loman, 2022). Interdisciplinary teaming can play an important role in this process, with school psychologists and counselors lending their expertise in developing and implementing supports (e.g., McCurdy et al., 2016).

A final noteworthy implication relates to data collection activities. Only four participants mentioned involvement in data collection and did not report using data to inform decisions concerning the effectiveness of supports, eligibility to receive supports at a higher-level tier, and implementation fidelity. Although these findings are discouraging, they raise important questions and present implications concerning data-based decision-making, a central aspect of SWPBIS implementation (Lewis et al., 2016). It is unclear whether existing SWPBIS data collection practices are appropriate for students with ESN, a notion that recently has been questioned by some SWPBIS experts (Zagona et al., 2021). As an example, Walker et al. (2018) found that, although students with ESN were often included in office discipline data collection, these data were not always reviewed during team meetings and the systems in place for problem solving were not always effective for these students. Given these ongoing concerns and lack of guidance around data collection for students with ESN, it will be critical for experts in the field to revisit existing SWPBIS data collection practices and guidelines in an effort to reach a consensus on how to best collect and use data specific to students with ESN. Likewise, SWPBIS teams will need to evaluate their current practices to identify meaningful approaches for collecting and making decisions based on data across all students. For example, if office discipline referrals are not issued or used for problem solving in meaningful ways, the team might identify other useful sources of data that can be used to make informed decisions (e.g., behavioral incident data, restraint and seclusion data). These efforts will require collaboration among SWPBIS team members and other school personnel who support students with ESN.

4.2 | Limitations and future research

There are a few limitations to address that may inform future research efforts. First, our recruitment process resulted in a small number of participants from elementary schools in one state in the southern region of the United States. Although we reached out to a large number of schools, it was likely that a majority of schools on the list did not include students with ESN, and given that these students are considered a low incidence population, the small number of responsive administrators is not surprising. Future investigations should examine the involvement of students with ESN in SWPBIS across the United States in schools and districts with a diverse range of characteristics.

Second, our recruitment strategy relied on administrators identifying educator participants who had experience working with students with ESN and involvement in SWPBIS initiatives in their schools. It is possible that administrators selected educators with similar perspectives not representative of other educators in the school. Similarly, our conclusions were based on perceptual data, an inherent limitation of interview methodology. Although we collected information from school members in different roles and overall responses did not differ based on role, more research is needed to explore multiple stakeholder perspectives and whether their role influences perceptions, as was the case in Kurth and Zagona's (2018) study.

Third, due to the descriptive focus of the study, we did not explore the underlying reasons for student involvement (or lack thereof) in various systems procedures, practices, and data collection activities; specific strategies to promote involvement; or barriers that made it difficult to include students with ESN in SWPBIS. As an important next step, future research must begin to unpack the conditions that contribute to or prevent meaningful access and involvement to ensure that SWPBIS is a fully inclusive and meaningful framework that benefits all students in a school.

5 | CONCLUSION

Although SWPBIS has been widely adopted in the United States, there has been little research on how students with ESN participate in SWPBIS. Findings from this study suggest that some schools may teach school-wide expectations and deliver public acknowledgment to students with ESN at the Tier 1 level, with some students receiving adaptations and additional supports. Likewise, school members noted that students with ESN were often considered for Tier 2 supports. Although these findings are promising, additional research is needed to explore the participation of students with ESN in SWPBIS and effective strategies for overcoming barriers schools may face in including students from this population. We encourage schools to closely examine their systems procedures, practices, and data collection activities to ensure that students with ESN are considered across each of these fundamental SWPBIS elements.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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