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In-Service Teachers' Perceptions of Students with Emotional Behavioral Disorder

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### Abstract

Teachers play an important role in the education of children with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). While parents and caretakers often are aware of their child's difficulties, educators witness the child's level of progress (VanGelder, Sitlington, & Morrison-Pugh, 2008). Teachers are these students' first advocates within the academic setting. According to one study, a majority of teachers working with these students are planning on leaving their positions within the next five years (Adera & Bullock, 2010). Another study found that special education teachers are more likely to leave their position than those in general education fields such as math and science (Billingsley, 2004). Therefore, it is important to examine teachers' perceptions regarding children with EBD in order to promote teacher satisfaction and decrease stress. This study examined in-service teachers' perceptions of students with emotional-behavioral disorders as well as job satisfaction. Participants were general and special education teachers working in school districts throughout Southern Minnesota. Respondents completed an online survey with questions regarding professional interests, expected career paths, and reactions to stereotypical perceptions of students with EBD. It was hypothesized that perceptions of in-service teachers would vary among years spent teaching, percentage of time spent working directly with EBD students, and differing levels of coping abilities and methods. This study revealed current perceptions in the teacher population, as well as where and when the perceptions develop. Results were utilized to determine how to improve teachers' understanding of students with EBD and to create better work environments for teachers who work with these students. Implications of these findings will be discussed to increase professional support and career satisfaction.

*Keywords: EBD, perceptions, working, teachers, special education*

## In-Service Teachers' Perceptions of Students with EBD

Teachers play a crucial role in the education of students with Emotional Behavioral Disorders (EBDs). Teachers are generally students' first advocate in the educational setting but according to research by Adera and Bullock (2008), many of the teachers actually working with students with EBD plan on leaving their current teaching position within the next five years. Due to this finding, it is important to examine in-service teachers' perceptions of students with EBD in order to promote teacher and job satisfaction.

Research shows that behavioral disorders are more often reported than emotional disorders. This discrepancy may be due to the behaviors that accompany behavioral disorders, such as aggression, rather than the less obvious behaviors that accompany emotional disorders, such as “relational peer victimization” (Ekornas, 2011). According to Rice, Merves, and Srsic (2008), teachers who work with students with EBDs prefer to work with boys instead of girls because boys are perceived as “easier” to work with while girls are perceived as “unpredictable and needing more intensive services.” Ekornas (2011) found that teachers report more trouble with peers for students with externalizing behaviors (e.g. aggression) versus students with internalizing behaviors (e.g. depression). In another study, Bloom, Karagiannakis, and Toste (2007) found that teachers rate students with EBD as deficient in social skills despite the students' academic performance. Certain groups of teachers, such as those with special education (SPED) training or those who are male, perceive disruptive behavior in classrooms as less demanding when compared to those teachers who do not have SPED training or those who are female (Drysdale, Williams, & Meaney, 2007).

Teacher stress also plays a role on the interactions and perceptions that teachers have of students with EBD. This stress, rather than lack of skill, may play a role in the high turnover

rates present in the teaching field (Adera & Bullock, 2010). Many factors in and out of the classroom can impact the amount of stress a teacher may perceive. According to Adera and Bullock (2010), some of these factors include challenging behavior from students, inconsistencies in school expectations, ambiguity of responsibilities, and lack of involvement by parents. If some of these factors can be mitigated, then teachers may be more satisfied in their position and less likely to leave.

The current study aimed at revealing the perceptions of in-service teachers (those educators currently employed and teaching) pertaining to students with EBD. These perceptions were then compared to the results from a previous study on pre-service teachers' (educators still in training to obtain their degree and licensure) perceptions of children with EBD (Shea, 2012). It was hypothesized that in-service teachers and pre-service teachers would not share the same perceptions of students with EBD, which suggests that the perceptions may develop after the in-service teacher has gained experience and has had exposure working with students with EBD. This study also functioned to determine if misconceptions about students with EBD are present in the in-service teacher population, and if so, where and when these misconceptions arise. In addition this study aimed to gather additional information about job satisfaction and teacher stress and what impacts job satisfaction and stress levels for in-service teachers.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants (n=180) were limited to in-service teachers currently working in various school districts throughout southern Minnesota. The overwhelming majority of the respondents who completed the survey were female (n=160). This sample contained teachers working within both special education (n=82) and general education (n=96) settings. Two participants elected

not to provide the setting in which they are currently placed. Respondents reported working with students from pre-kindergarten through high school. Just over 51% of the sample spent the majority of their time in a general education room, with the other half split between a resource room (n=38), a self-contained classroom (n=25) or other special education classroom (n=21). When asked to self-report how many years they had been teaching, answers varied from 6 months up to 39 years.

### **Materials**

This study utilized a survey constructed by the authors to obtain information regarding perceptions of children with EBD from in-service teachers. The survey consisted of 41 questions pertaining to demographic information, teacher stress level, and teacher perceptions of children with Emotional Behavioral Disorder. The first part of the survey contained questions addressing gender, teaching specialty, and time spent teaching. The second part of the survey contained stereotypical statements about students with EBD to which participants replied on a 4 point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Many of these questions were similar to those from the Shea (2012) study on pre-service teachers' perceptions to facilitate comparison between pre- and in-service groups. Questions were written based on common stereotypes to assess the prevalence of stereotypical attitudes regarding students with EBD. The third section of the survey contained questions about job satisfaction and coping skills. See Appendix A for a copy of the survey.

### **Procedure**

The survey was posted on an online website and permission to recruit teachers was obtained from two southern Minnesota school districts. Each school district sent a recruitment email directly to teachers working in their district. Consent was implied upon the participant

agreeing to click on the link and complete the survey. Participants were able to quit the survey and/or skip any questions at any time.

## Results

When pre-service teachers were surveyed regarding whether students with EBD experience deficits in social functioning, 68% disagreed that these students experience such a deficit (Shea, 2012). In-service teachers, however, agreed that regardless of academic performance, EBD students have social skills deficits. Pre-service teachers tended to overestimate the social competency of academically successful EBD students relative to ratings of in-service teachers with only 31.2% agreeing that these students experience social skills deficits (Shea, 2012). Conversely, 68.2% of in-service teachers agreed or strongly agreed that failing students with EBD and 53.5% agreed/strongly agreed that academically successful students with EBD tend towards lower social competency (see Table 1).

Another finding of this study revealed that stereotypical attitudes regarding the disruptiveness of boys and girls with EBD, respectively, are even less accepted in an in-service population than a pre-service population. When Shea (2012) asked pre-service teachers whether disruptive behavior was typical in boys, 59.2% disagreed; 79.6% of in-service teachers reported similarly. This difference was also found when teachers were asked about girls' disruptive behavior. Of pre-service teachers, 72% disagreed/strongly disagreed that disruptive behavior was typical in girls while 91.3% of in-service teachers disagreed/strongly disagreed with that item. While there was still a gender difference in that girls with EBD were perceived as less disruptive than boys with EBD, the typicality of that type of behavior was not overestimated.

Another result of Shea's (2012) study showed that although pre-service teachers reported feeling under prepared to work with students with EBD, this trend reversed when our in-service

teachers were surveyed. The majority of in-service teachers (63.2 %) reported feeling prepared to perform the tasks necessary to work with students with EBD. Despite this difference, both pre- and in-service teachers find negative and disruptive behaviors associated with EBD very challenging. Also, though the majority of in-service teachers reported a dearth of support within policies and the school system at large (see Table 1), the most cited coping skill by far was collaboration and communication with fellow educators, administrators, parents, and students. Of the n=82 participants who worked in special education, 87% of them planned to remain in special education for the rest of their career.

### **Discussion**

These results indicated that in-service teachers as a whole feel prepared to work with students with emotional behavioral disorders. As mentioned above, a main frustration of these teachers is a perception of a lack of institutionalized support. The policies in place were reported as inadequate to manage the situations these teachers face. Whether the policies referenced were classroom-wide, school-wide, or district-wide was not discussed. Future research may want to explore attitudes of school policy makers to discover their opinions pertaining to this population of students as well as the policies themselves. Though in-service teachers experienced frustrations and challenges when working with this population, many still managed to find their work rewarding. Most in-service teachers managed this by relying on the support available to them. Aside from collaboration with colleagues, in-service teachers also reported maintaining a healthy, balanced lifestyle as a successful coping mechanism. This support and collaboration may contribute to our finding that 87% of special education teachers surveyed planned on staying in special education for their entire career. This finding is also in direct opposition to that found by Adera and Bullock (2004).



Though the results obtained did not differ in the manner hypothesized, they indicated that in-service teachers tended towards a more realistic view of students with emotional behavioral disorders in both the academic and social realms than pre-service teachers. These differences of perspective were likely just that; in-service teachers had more experience with this population of students, therefore their opinions were likely based less on preconceived notions and more on actual interactions with or observations of these students. One interpretation of the lack of differences in many of the reports between pre- and in-service teachers could illuminate the timing of the formation of these perceptions. Since both populations had similar perceptions of these students, it is possible that their perceptions of students with emotional behavioral disorder developed earlier than during their undergraduate education. Participants may have formed opinions of students with EBD during their secondary schooling, or perhaps earlier. Future research may benefit from investigating this possibility.

One limitation of the study is related to the size of the sample of participants. The teachers who responded to our questionnaire do not represent all teachers' perceptions. Additionally, the sample was taken from rural and semi-rural school districts. Urban populations tend to be more diverse, therefore perceptions of urban teachers may differ from those of the sample. Another limitation of the study is the questions could have been more specific. That is, the Likert scale utilized left room for interpretation.

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Table 1

*Selected responses from the survey*

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Alternative plans should be in place to deal with cases in which students cannot be sent to the principal's office.	0.0	2.7	<b>56.0</b>	41.3
There are adequate policies in place to help me work with children with emotional behavioral disorders.	10.8	<b>43.9</b>	41.2	4.1
Students with emotional behavioral disorders who are failing have social skills deficits.	2.0	29.8	<b>56.3</b>	11.9
Students with emotional behavioral disorders who are doing well in school have social skills deficits.	5.8	39.6	<b>51.3</b>	3.2
I feel prepared to perform the tasks that are needed to educate students with emotional behavioral disorders.	5.3	31.6	<b>48.7</b>	14.5

*Note.* All values are percentages. Questions were selected based on implications of participants' responses as well as relation to other questions in the table. The highest value percentage for each question is bolded.

## Appendix A

Please choose the answer that best represents your opinion (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree).

1. Losing instructional time due to disruptions from students with emotional behavior disorders in the classroom is frustrating.
2. Disruptive behavior in the classroom is very challenging.
3. Boys with emotional behavioral disorders are more dramatic than girls with emotional behavioral disorders.
4. General education teachers are very willing to work with students with emotional behavioral disorders.
5. It is upsetting when individuals within the school make derogatory remarks or have negative attitudes toward students with emotional behavioral disorders.
6. Disruptive behavior is typical in boys.
7. Expressions of physical aggression are more predictable in boys with emotional behavioral disorders than in girls with emotional behavioral disorders.
8. It is very challenging that students with emotional behavioral disorders must be taught at a lower level than other students.
9. Working with girls with emotional behavioral disorders is too difficult.
10. Students with emotional behavioral disorders who are failing have social skills deficits.
11. Boys with emotional behavioral disorders have less trouble developing friendships than girls with emotional behavioral disorders.
12. Students with emotional behavioral disorders who are doing well academically have social skills deficits.
13. Children with emotional disorders have fewer problems with peers than children with behavioral disorders.
14. Boys with emotional behavioral disorders are easier to identify than girls because their behaviors are more visible.
15. I feel prepared to perform the tasks that are needed to educate students with emotional behavior disorders.
16. Disruptive behavior is typical in girls.
17. Negative behaviors associated with emotional behavior disorders are very challenging.
18. I prefer to work with girls with emotional behavior disorders than boys with emotional behavior disorders.
19. Alternative plans should be in place to deal with cases in which students cannot be sent to the principal's office.
20. I am very willing to work with students with emotional behavior disorders.
21. When boys with emotional behavior disorder become physical, the fights are easier to break up than fights between girls with emotional behavior disorder.

22. I feel that I have adequate support from the school system when educating children with emotional behavior disorders.
23. There are adequate policies in place to help me work with children with emotional behavior disorders.
24. Working with students receiving special education services causes me stress.
25. Most students with challenging behaviors have an IEP.
26. I greatly enjoy working with students with emotional behavior disorders.
27. I can effectively educate students with emotional behavior disorders.

### **Biographies**

Cassandra M. Schreiber began her educational career in Albert Lea, MN. She graduated in May of 2010 with an AA from Riverland Community College in Austin, MN and again in May of 2013 with her BS from Minnesota State University, Mankato. She majored in Psychology with a minor in Philosophy. Ms. Schreiber will continue her education as a doctoral student in the School Psychology Doctoral Program at Minnesota State University, Mankato. After earning her doctoral degree, she hopes to work in the field of school psychology. Eventually, Ms. Schreiber anticipates teaching psychology at the university level.

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Ashley M. Kuemper resides in the Mankato area. She graduated from Minnesota State University, Mankato in 2008 with a B.S. in Law Enforcement. More recently, she earned a B.A. in Psychology from MSU, Mankato in 2013. Ashley is a fan of physical fitness and is currently interested in continuing her education in the field of sports psychology.

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Carlos J. Panahon, Ph.D., joined the faculty at Minnesota State University, Mankato as an Assistant Professor in the School Psychology Doctoral Program in 2009. Dr. Panahon earned his Ph.D. in School Psychology from Syracuse University and his B.S. in Human Development and Family Studies from Cornell University. Previously, Dr. Panahon was an Assistant Professor at Gwynedd Mercy College from 2004-2009.