

## Perspectives of Pre-Service Teachers on Students with Emotional Disabilities

Andrea P. Beam,  
Liberty University

Russell G. Yocum,  
Liberty University

Elyse C. Pinkie,  
Liberty University

### Abstract

Perceptions of working with students of emotional disabilities or who are considered Emotionally/Behaviorally Disturbed (E/BD) is varied across the spectrum. However, one constant that does hold true is that all pre-service teachers have some hesitation in working with such students, especially if they lack any previous exposure to students with E/BD. This study compared pre- and post-test Likert-scale type surveys about pre-service teachers' (n = 35) perceptions regarding students with E/BD. In between the pre- and post-test, the pre-service teachers were given classroom instruction and were assigned a practicum field experience to observe and work alongside students with emotionally charged behaviors housed in an alternative educational facility. The scores were analyzed via a paired t-test and findings revealed that practical observation experience at an alternative school setting for E/BD students and instruction on behavior management strategies had a significantly positive effect on survey respondents' perceptions regarding E/BD students.

The intimidating task of educating students with disabilities is also one of a special education teacher's fundamental rewards. It is a task that few seek, but those who do, live their lives exercising patience, high standards, and a belief that all children can learn. Recent publications (Burkman, 2012; Gal, Schreur, & Engel-Yeger, 2010) have discussed the varied perceptions that teachers of special education share. Some of those perceptions debate how teachers view students with specific needs, as well as the best way to prepare teachers to work with this group (Gal et al., 2010; Rosenberg & Walther-Thomas, 2014). Of most importance was the impression that some teachers who work with students who are labeled

Emotionally/Behaviorally Disturbed (E/BD) are somewhat misguided to believe that those students need less rigor in the classroom, should live and work in special communities, or are unable to be productive in society. It was these predispositions that drove the interest for this study.

Today's reality of educating students in the least restrictive environment has become quite demanding with the inception of No Child Left Behind. Teachers no longer sit behind a desk or stand at the front of the classroom teaching with a "one size fits all" mentality. In our 21<sup>st</sup> century schools, teachers have become experts with academic rigor, character education, and have evolved into testing specialists. While doing their very best at juggling the array of demands that surrounds this profession, they are also responsible for holding the attention of 28-30 students in a classroom, all of whom might "look" very different. While the majority of the students in the classroom might fit a specific norm, still others remain outliers.

Those outliers might take on different personas and encompass different demands. Some might be identified as gifted students, while others might be identified as having a disability. Additionally, others might be "slow learners" with little to no services available for their success. The teacher of today must work through these hardships to ensure each individual need is met through differentiated academic success.

### **Review of the Literature**

In reviewing the literature and previous research on this matter, it can be understood that very little surrounds the topic of perceptions of pre-service teachers in regards to students who have emotional/behavioral disabilities (E/BD) or who are emotionally disturbed (ED). However, it has been commonly noted and accepted "that the perceptions educators hold about youngsters with disabilities may affect the way they classify and treat these children in their classes" (Garvar &

Schmelkin, 1989, p.463; Gal et al., 2010). Because teachers work with these students on a daily basis, they are the ones in the best position, many times, to determine the level and type of services that should be offered to the students (McLeod & McKinnon, 2010). In the remainder of this paper, the term ED, as stated the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), will be used to describe/define the study's population.

As new teachers enter the classroom, they are often unprepared to face the challenges that are present when working with ED (Burkman, 2012). Due to a lack of preparation or prior teaching in a classroom that houses students with ED, it is necessary that administrators provide professional development activities for their teachers that include training on working with this population (Burkman, 2012). It is, therefore, important that pre-service teachers be presented with opportunities and field experiences that will allow them to interact with the students of this nature before they obtain their first teaching assignment (Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2012; Dukes, Darling, & Doan, 2014). When arranging such experiences for pre-service teachers, it is necessary to “allow teacher candidates to observe and gain some perspective on the implementation of effective practices,” including those necessary for working with the ED population (Dukes et al., 2014, p.12). Additionally, this training will be “most effective if facilitated by learning in a community. . . to promote teacher understanding and the transfer of knowledge to practices in the classroom” (Berry et al., 2012, p.10; Albrecht, 2009).

Prior research supports that there is a shortage of teachers who are comfortable and willing to teach ED at the early stages of their careers (Albrecht, Johns, Mounstevan, & Olorunda, 2009). Because of this, it is necessary to help adjust pre-service teachers' attitudes and perceptions of students with ED before they enter the workforce. One way this can be done is through field experiences (Berry et al.,

2012). However, while the value of field experiences is understood and the necessity of proper pre-service teacher preparation is known, there is a lack of research on the specific topic of how such experiences will alter and change pre-service teacher perceptions of working with such students.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify changes in perceptions of pre-service teachers ( $n = 35$ ) enrolled in an undergraduate-level behavioral management course by conducting a pre- and post-test survey at the beginning and at the end of the course, with an intervening 18-hour course embedded practicum experience at an alternative school. The alternative school environment chosen was one with multiple locations specifically designed for students who were unable to participate in compulsory schools due to psychological, emotional, or learning difficulties. The facilities did not include a residential component.

The pre-service teachers were required to observe an alternative education special education classroom which contained students with ED and learn strategies during a 16-week course to help prepare them in the area of behavioral management. With the data collected by the research, we hoped to provide insight to both the perspectives of future educators working with students of ED, and concerns that do or do not diminish after the practicum and coursework was completed. This will provide professors of pre-service teachers with suggestions for addressing issues of concern related to instruction in this content area.

Additionally, the discussion of the research will hopefully shed some light on existing misconceptions and biases while demonstrating the need for teacher preparation programs to fully educate our teacher candidates about the realities of working with students who encompass emotional challenges.

## **Practicum Field Experience**

Each undergraduate candidate seeking Virginia licensure in special education was required to take a class on behavior management. It was within this course that professors began to identify the necessity in working hands-on with specific populations, resulting in a change in programming to include a field experience practicum. While behavior management courses focus on all behaviors, the majority of time seems to be concentrated on negative behavior and how to address, distract, and extinguish unfavorable behaviors within the classroom. It was with this concept in mind that the practicum began to take shape. One area in which few are comfortable to teach is the area of educating students of ED. To better prepare our candidates, a partnership was developed with the most restrictive environment of this population. The school environment was one with multiple locations scattered throughout the Commonwealth and its programs were developed specifically for students who were unable to participate in compulsory schools due to psychological problems, emotional or learning difficulties, but who do not require residential treatment.

The pre-service teachers were required to observe and work with the students for a minimum of three full school days (i.e., 18 hours) so a true understanding in working with ED could be established. It was the belief that if our pre-service teachers could manage this practicum, they would be better suited to work in any environment, especially for those candidates who were skeptical in working with students with disabilities (SWD). For most of the candidates, the experience was a welcomed challenge, but for others, the uncertainty caused great distress. By this, candidates without the necessary passion could be advised out of the special education program, if need be.

During the practicum, the pre-service teachers could work with multiple

teachers, counselors, and para-professionals throughout the day. They could assist with small group activities, duties, or simply observe teacher-student interactions. Throughout the day, the candidates were required to journal and reflect on his/her experiences. They were to critique the day and include suggestions that could be used in his/her classroom or cite things that would be changed with a discussion of the purpose and method of change.

## **Methodology**

### **Rationale**

As previously discussed, we know that field experiences strengthen pre-service teachers and prepare them for the classroom (Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2012; Dukes, Darling, & Doan, 2014). Additionally, we know that teachers of ED are often not thoroughly prepared to effectively instruct this population of students (Burkman, 2012). Finally, teachers' positive perceptions about their students have a positive impact on those students' academic success (Garvar & Schmelkin, 1989). Holding these *a priori* assumptions to be true led the researchers to pose the question, "Will field experiences in an alternative school setting and instruction regarding students with ED positively impact pre-service teacher candidates' perceptions about students with ED?"

### **Methods**

As stated, participants ( $n = 35$ ) were education major pre-service candidates enrolled in an undergraduate-level behavior management course at a large, private, Christian university. Participants were asked to complete the survey reporting their perceptions about working with the ED population (See Table 1) both before and after an 18-hour embedded course practicum observing at an alternative school for ED and 16 weeks of instruction in behavior management. The majority of the Likert-scale type survey questions were worded such that higher rankings

expressed a higher level of disagreement with negative perceptions and typical misconceptions associated with students with ED. Likewise, a higher mean score of answers indicates a better perception. It was hypothesized that the practical experience in working with ED in an alternative school setting and the instruction in behavior management strategies would positively affect the participants' perceptions of students with ED.

**Table 1.** *Emotionally Disabled Students Perception Survey*

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Use the scale below to identify how much you agree or disagree with each statement in the survey.

1 = I agree very much      2 = I agree pretty much      3 = I agree a little  
4 = I disagree a little      5 = I disagree pretty much      6 = I disagree very much

1. Teachers of ED children should be less strict than other teachers.
2. ED students are just as intelligent as non-disabled ones.
3. ED students are usually easier to get along with than other people.
4. Most ED students feel sorry for themselves.
5. ED students are the same as anyone else.
6. There should not be a special school for ED children.
7. It would be best for ED students to live and work in special communities.
8. It is up to the government to take care of ED students.
9. Most ED students worry a great deal.
10. ED students should not be expected to meet the same standards as non-ED students.
11. ED students are as happy as non-ED students.
12. Severely ED students are no harder to get along with than those with minor ED.
13. It is almost impossible for ED students to lead a normal life.

14. You should not expect too much from ED students.
  15. ED students tend to keep to themselves much of the time.
  16. ED students are more easily upset than non-ED students.
  17. ED students cannot have a normal social life.
  18. Most ED students feel that they are not as good as other people.
  19. You have to be careful of what you say when you are with ED students.
  20. ED students are often grouchy.
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## Results

Each participant's 20 survey responses were averaged and a paired *t*-test was conducted on the matching pre- and post-test survey means for each of the 35 participants (see Table 2, below). An analysis of the means of the responses for each individual question was also conducted to determine if there were any outliers.

**Table 2.** *Paired Two Sample for Means*

	<i>POST TEST</i> <i>AVG</i>	<i>PRE TEST</i> <i>AVG</i>
Mean	3.960571429	3.787714286
Variance	0.135023193	0.116241681
Observations	35	35
Pearson Correlation	0.545138332	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	34	
t Stat	3.019875002	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.002386575	
t Critical one-tail	1.690924255	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.004773149	
t Critical two-tail	2.032244509	

With a  $t > 3.02$ , the change in survey scores between the pre- and post-test is greater than three standard deviations, indicating a rather large scale, positive



change in the surveyed perceptions of the participants. With a  $p = 0.0024$  for the one-tailed  $t$ -test and  $p = 0.0048$  for the two-tailed  $t$ -test, the results are statistically significant, rejection of the null hypothesis is warranted. Practical observation experience at an alternative school setting for ED and instruction on behavior management strategies significantly has a large positive effect on survey respondents' perceptions regarding students with ED.

### **Limitations**

The small sample size is a limitation to the generalizability of this study, along with the population from which the sample was drawn (education majors in a large, private, Christian university). Additionally, a question-by-question analysis of the mean responses for each question revealed that five of the questions (2, 3, 5, 11, and 12) should be reworded so that the directionality of the responses corresponds with those of the remaining questions.

### **Discussion**

We believe that rewording certain questions (see Table 3) and conducting a pilot-survey to calculate a *Cronbach's alpha* would only serve to strengthen the already significant results. It would also be useful to replicate this study with a larger sample size and at other universities with similar courses.

**Table 3.** *Suggested Rewording for Select Emotionally Disabled Students*

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#### *Perception Survey Questions*

2. ED students are less intelligent than non-disabled ones.
  3. ED students are less easy to get along with than other people.
  5. ED students are different from everyone else.
  11. ED students are sadder than non-ED students.
  12. Severely ED students are harder to get along with than those with minor ED.
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## **Implications for Practitioners**

As shown by the literature and the research conducted, it is necessary to ensure that pre-service teachers are receiving field experiences prior to graduation that include time spent with students with disabilities, and in this case—students with emotional disabilities (Berry et al., 2012; Dukes et al., 2014). The time that is spent with this population will help to alter and improve the perceptions of the pre-service teachers, making them much more willing, as well as much more prepared, to work with these students in their own future classrooms. In today's teaching climate, including mainstreaming of SWD to general education settings, it is unavoidable that every teacher will work with students who receive services at some point in his or her teaching career (Monsen & Frederickson, 2004). Those who are responsible for managing field experiences and student-teaching within teacher preparation programs should ensure that pre-service teachers are exposed to experiences with a diverse array of learners in a variety of settings, including experiences with SWDs at alternative school settings.

## **Suggestions for Pre-Service Teachers**

Positive teacher attitudes regarding students with special needs have a direct impact on the academic success of those students (Monsen & Frederickson, 2004). The results of the research outlined herein evinces that field experiences and instruction regarding students with ED significantly increases pre-service teachers' positive attitudes about these students. Further, after conducting this research and reviewing the feedback presented by the pre-service teacher candidates' journal reflections, several suggestions arose:

1. It would be beneficial to continue this practicum in this restricted environment as an extension of the behavior management required course.

2. Some candidates observed the raw reality of other teachers and were discouraged by the lack of passion exhibited towards their students. As a result, many of the candidates have decided to apply to the specific school for positions that may arise with the turnover that most schools of this nature encounter.
3. Some pre-service teachers suggested having specific strategies to implement with various behaviors with the hope of developing a “toolbox” of sorts for de-escalation.

### **Implications for Future Research**

As indicated above, this research gives telling evidence about the value of practical field experiences in education programs. It would be useful to replicate this study with revised survey questions and a larger, more diverse sample. Also, by conducting similar surveys that may gauge the usefulness of field experiences in other settings where such field experiences are not often conducted might also strengthen this research. While the value of field experiences has been researched for nursing and medical school students, other fields could benefit from such inquiry.

### **Conclusion**

National survey data regarding teacher preparation program requirements in regards to ED showed that nearly 87% of the responding institutions had an ED field observation requirement for pre-service teachers (Maag & Katsiyannis, 1999), but there is no indication as to the extent and quality of those field experiences and practically no research-based data to support whether or not those field experiences improve the pre-service teachers’ perceptions regarding ED. Even without this research, one might intuitively suggest that affording pre-service teachers with practical field experiences in any number of specialized tracks can only serve to improve the pre-service teachers’ levels of self-confidence and positive attitudes

regarding the content of those field experiences. Only a couple of studies could be found that imply that field experiences with diverse populations of (including those with ED) will serve to broaden the levels of cultural competence of the pre-service health professional candidates completing the field experience (Luquis & Perez, 2003; Shaya & Gbarayor, 2006). Additional studies implied that diversified practicum field experiences for pre-service teacher candidates (including, but not solely focused on students with ED) would likewise increase awareness of pre-service teachers completing the field experience (Guiberson, 2009; Wild, Hilson, & Farrand, 2013). It is apparent from the research that pre-service teachers can only benefit from interactions surrounding the field of ED and that more exposure to the experiences and behaviors of these students will serve as a strength when entering the field of education. With such positive results of perception, it would also make sense that other educator preparation programs seek opportunities to reveal the various types of learners that teacher candidates will encounter as they seek licensure by use of practicum or field experiences. Through this research, it is anticipated that other universities will see the value in practical field experiences (targeting specific diverse student types) for teacher candidates and that they will ensure proper exposure to the types of students with whom the candidates will work as they move towards their career goals.

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