Article

An Examination of Reading Specialist Candidates' Knowledge and Self-Efficacy in Behavior and Classroom Management: An Instrumental Case Study

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Abstract: Today's reading specialists are faced with students who not only present reading problems but, the likelihood of behavior problems. Thus, reading specialists must be prepared to implement behavior management strategies that de-escalate these problems. Reading specialists' training programs are budding with the potential for innovative practices that could be launched for ground-breaking learning. However, current trends display training programs still utilize traditional methods for training. This qualitative instrumental case study examined a purposeful sample of reading specialist candidates at a small, private university in the United States. The study explored the effects of utilizing simulation as a new way to train and prepare reading specialist candidates with behavior management strategies when teaching children with reading problems. During the study, simulated exercises were utilized to train the candidates and explore their ability in identifying behavior, and their knowledge and use of appropriate strategies, and self-efficacy before and after the training program. The post-knowledge gained through the simulation classroom experience revealed, that not only did reading specialist candidates expand their arsenal of strategies, but they also gained understanding of the background knowledge and diagnostic implications that can contribute to various behaviors or disorders. Candidates reported that after training, they felt prepared to implement behavior strategies when faced with children who may display behavior problems.

Keywords: reading specialist; teacher training; behavior management; simulation; self-efficacy

1. Introduction

Dating as far back as 1931, Burt examined the connection between reading and behavior problems [1]. Reading specialist candidates are teaching professionals who typically return to the university seeking additional teacher preparation in order to better instruct young children who struggle in reading and writing. This unique skill set can be attained at the graduate level where university programs are designed to help practicing teachers learn the necessary pedagogies to instruct, assess, and intervene when working with children in schools who have reading differences or reading disabilities. Many universities boast an integrated and progressive curriculum, but traditional approaches in teacher training programs often do not arm teachers with effective and therapeutic approaches for behavior or classroom management strategies. More than 90% of teachers need more training to handle classroom misbehaviors and desire to have additional training to help manage classrooms [2]. Teachers need training programs that provide space to create authentic situations. Using simulation would allow teacher candidates to run-through newly learned classroom skills safely as they are learning [3]. More specifically, this type of innovative training is needed because teachers

are often ill prepared to address diverse classrooms containing students with a myriad of externalizing behaviors, which could derive from attention deficient and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), conduct disorders (CD), and aggression [4].

In a time of intensified accountability and standards-based education in the United States, teachers are bombarded with obligations including managing misbehaviors in the classroom [4]. Classroom and behavior management may be one of the most arduous concerns novice and veteran teachers face in today's classrooms. General education teachers deem that they are not equipped to manage students with challenging behaviors, and are therefore apprehensive about having students with behavior problems in their classrooms [5]. However, by 1999, almost 80% of American students with special needs and/or behavior problems were placed in inclusive classrooms [6]. Teachers have expressed attitudes of irritation, weariness, and remorse due to the time that is taken away from instruction in order to accommodate students with behavioral support needs [7].

Research posited that by not offering recurrent and substantial teacher training brings about "tension, stress, and strain for both teachers and students alike in inclusive settings" (p. 189) [8]. Moreover, a case study explored the unique perspectives of teachers and theorized that in order for teacher training programs to have noteworthy relevance, they must prepare future teachers with management skills for diverse classrooms [9]. These diverse classrooms are rich in student populations with a plethora of management challenges.

2. Review of Related Literature

Teachers describe disruptive behavior in the classroom as having a significant bearing on daily work, energy, and planning time to meet the needs of children with special needs [10]. Disruptive behavior is defiance of authority, lying, and aggression, which includes verbal or physical attacks, as well as, disobeying school rules [11]. Children who display misbehavior breed major management problems in schools and interfere with the learning environment of their peers [12]. Unquestionably, the significance of teachers who acquire effective behavior and classroom management strategies is of great importance [13]. Through effective professional development, classroom teachers and other educational specialists can learn strategies to deal with these disruptive behaviors.

2.1. Reading and Behavior Problems

Students with behavioral problems often struggle academically. Correlational studies provide support that found there is a transactional relationship between behavior problems and reading disabilities [14]. Likewise, an article exploring academic achievement reported that 83% of their sample of students with emotional and behavior disorders scored below the norm on a standardized measure for reading skills [15]. Reading and behavior problems commonly co-exist and place students at risk for poor academic performance that are both short and long term [16]. Furthermore, other studies reported that children in kindergarten who displayed low reading skills and high externalizing behavior problems were significantly more likely to continue with those problem behaviors in grades three and five [17]. These findings are especially relevant to those teachers who work specifically with students in response to intervention (RTI) models and Title I programs. It is imperative that intervention teachers, who work specifically with children who struggle in literacy, are trained to deal with behavioral problems that may interfere with literacy learning.

2.2. Simulation and Teacher Training

Although innovative and progressive teacher training programs exist, many university education programs rely upon traditional methods of instruction to prepare teachers for today's classrooms [18]. Universities must find innovative ways to integrate behavior management into the current curriculum. Over the past decade, simulation has become increasingly popular to create realistic environments in which teacher candidates can practice their newly learned skills [3]. Creating simulation opportunities

that provide "teachers in training" with the tools to assess their classroom management decisions in a non-threatening environment have proven to be useful [3].

Simulations can assist students in the ability to foster problem-solving and decision-making proficiencies in a risk-free atmosphere [19]. Simulation is an innovative means in which universities can provide teachers with opportunities to practice behavior management in staged scenarios. Having teachers who are prepared to implement instruction and discipline hold an urgency in today's schools [20]. Behavior problems have an impact on learning and correlate with reading problems, thus specifically equipping reading specialist candidates with training in classroom management can improve self-efficacy and instructional delivery, which can positively impact student achievement.

2.3. Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined as one's beliefs about their proficiencies and competences in one's performance [21]. That is, self-efficacy attitude encompasses one's feelings, thoughts, and motivation, all of which affect behavior. A strong sense of efficacy heightens human achievement and individual well-being in many ways. Those who have great self-confidence in their proficiencies and competencies handle challenging tasks as encounters to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided. It is recognized that such an efficacious outlook fosters intrinsic interest and deep engrossment in activities [22]. Building one's self-efficacy will positively affect performance, and sound performance will improve, in turn, one's self-efficacy. Therefore, equipping reading specialist candidates with opportunities to improve self-efficacy, through simulation learning, is one way to help them feel confident to handle challenging classrooms and improve their performance with students who are at risk for reading failure.

2.4. The Purpose of the Study

Classroom teachers and reading specialists can prepare their classrooms for learning in many ways, and classroom management can raise the likeliness of student engagement and learning [23]. Some teachers respond to students' misbehavior with poor classroom management skills [24], and this mismanagement of behaviors can escalate students with behavioral problems, making learning an almost impossible task. Teachers' belief systems, attitudes, perspectives and/or training and knowledge influence what occurs in the classroom and the way behavior is managed [25,26]. Likewise, the manner by which a person perceives behavior determines his or her response or reaction to it [27]. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact that behavior management simulation had on reading specialist candidates' knowledge and self-efficacy in dealing with students' behavioral issues. Although various factors play a role in fostering quality teachers, teacher preparation programs have the major responsibility and opportunity to make a difference in how they train pre-service and novice teachers [28].

2.5. Research Questions

Since research shows a strong correlation between behavior modification and improved reading achievement, it was the researchers' hypothesis that training reading specialist candidates would have a positive effect on their knowledge of strategies to deal with misbehaviors and their self-efficacy, which in turn could improve student outcomes. This study explored the following research questions:

1. What effect does a professional development simulation-based training have on reading specialist candidates' knowledge of dealing with children with misbehaviors?
2. What effect does professional development simulation-based training have on reading specialist candidates' self-efficacy in the application of appropriate behavior management techniques?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The researchers employed a qualitative methodology with an instrumental case study design. Case study research served as a means to gain an in-depth understanding of the attitudes and competencies in behavior management implementation of a cohort of reading specialist candidates. By utilizing a case study design, the researchers were able to explore, describe and examine a phenomenon using multiple data sources. [29] described case study methodology as a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in-depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals. The data were collected via observations, semi-structured interviews, participants' journal reflections, and a pre and post interview regarding candidates' attitudes of competency and self-efficacy relative to behavior management. Triangulation of data via observations, interviews, and artifacts ensured credibility. The study was implemented at a small, private university in Western Pennsylvania in the United States with a purposeful cohort of reading specialist candidates. The researcher ensured participant confidentiality and privacy through password protected files on a password protected computer.

3.2. Simulation

The researchers created six modules (as seen in Table 1) to teach reading specialist candidates the behaviors often associated with conduct disorders and externalizing behavior that often manifest in classrooms. Each module consisted of the following: pretest, instruction (lecture, discussion, case studies), simulation, debriefing, and posttest. Simulation lasted one hour and utilized a trained child actor. The child was trained through an outside behavioral modification program. Reading specialist candidates were required to teach a pre-determined literacy concept to the child and respond to misbehaviors appropriately. The researchers intervened when appropriate. Table 1 illustrates the modules by topic.

Table 1. Module topics and interventions.

Module	Week	Lesson Topic	Intervention
One	One	Overview/Introduction: What is behavior and disabilities? What is behavior modification?	FBA Functional Behavioral Assessment
Two	Two	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) What is the difference between subtypes of ADHD?	Redirection/Direct Instruction
Three	Three	Trauma Informed Care	Sanctuary Model: Safety, Emotions, Loss, Future (S.E.L.F) Toolkit [30]
Four	Four	Emotional Disabilities, Anxiety Affective disorder Disruptive Behavior	Specific Praise Planned Ignoring Proximity
Five	Five	Learning Disabilities/Differences	Probing, Token Rewards/Positive reinforcement
Six	Six	Misbehavior/Aggression	Review interventions from modules one through six.

4. Findings

The findings revealed that reading specialist candidates' knowledge of behavior management techniques and strategies increased with the implementation of a simulation-based training program.

4.1. Before Simulation

Results revealed that participants possessed little knowledge relative to behavior management techniques prior to the implementation of simulation training. That is, reading specialist candidates had limited knowledge of ways to deal with misbehavior. This finding is consistent with [31] who found significant training gaps for classroom teachers in the domain of knowledge and evaluation of behavior assessment. The participants' pre-knowledge responses revealed they collectively reported three behavior strategies, which included: (1) redirection, (2) one-on- one attention, and (3) ignoring. All participants' responses indicated that they used redirection in their prior interactions with children dealing with misbehavior. An emphasis on talking with individual students without shaming the child was primarily the redirection technique used. Speaking with a child one-on-one to build rapport was also cited by all participants as a way for managing behavior. This practice of building rapport is extremely important when dealing with at-risk students [32]. Planned ignoring was the third strategy reported by reading specialist candidates, which is a form of extinction intended to diminish, lessen, or remove a behavior [33]. The theory is that by withholding reinforcement, the student will discontinue to engage in the misbehavior. In some occurrences, behaviors do dissipate. This data revealed essentially that participants had three strategies for dealing with behavior, either from previous training or from classroom experience.

4.2. After Simulation

The post knowledge gained through the behavior simulation experience revealed that not only did teachers expand their arsenal of strategies, but they also gained understanding of the background knowledge and diagnostic implications that can contribute to various behaviors or disorders. The participants reported increased knowledge in new strategies such as implementing a behavior modification plan, establishing a clear protocol, creating and using a functional behavior assessment (FBA), identifying triggers in children, and how to implement the use of a specific praise and proximity, as well as a token economy.

In addition, participants reported increased background knowledge about various disorders. Although the participants were aware of terms such ADHD and ODD, they reported increased knowledge of the different types of ADHD and diagnostic criteria, ODD, types of trauma, and disabilities. Having this additional background knowledge of disorders created empathy in participants that extended beyond perceiving certain symptoms that manifest in classrooms as just misbehavior. At the conclusion of each lesson, post knowledge in all areas was reported among participants.

Other post knowledge gathered included participants' ability to describe behavior in more specific terms rather than in generic terms such as defiant, bad, or misbehave. Participants, in their post knowledge, were able to describe behavior as "bouncing in seat," "under the table," "shouting out answers." These responses can be directly linked to the training implemented.

The ability of the participants to articulate specific misbehavior helped teachers to better identify misbehavior and the appropriate intervention. Participants moved from the idea of simply completing paperwork to understanding that providing better descriptions of behaviors, identifying triggers, in useful planning as a team and for their personal classroom management. This will help participants select strategies.

There was one major theme that was discovered among participants regarding the challenges that they face with students who misbehave is the loss of "instructional time." All participants viewed misbehavior as a challenge to instructional time and loss of learning for students. This is consistent with literature that suggests children with misbehavior and conduct problems generate major management problems in schools and interfere with the learning environment of their peers and their own achievement [12]. Since misbehavior typically results in loss of instructional time, and thus, deters learning, interventions that recoup and maximize instructional time should yield progress in academic areas [34].

4.3. Simulation

The data revealed that simulation had a positive effect on reading specialist candidates' self-efficacy in the application of appropriate behavior management techniques. All participants reported that additional training for teachers could increase or improve teachers' confidence in implementing behavior management strategies. They reported that the training increased their confidence level in their ability to handle such issues in the classroom. Participants also reported that they felt confident in implementing behavior strategies when faced with children who may display behavior problems. This is of utmost importance because there is evidence that teacher efficacy is associated with academic achievement and teacher behaviors known to foster academic achievement [35–38] as cited in [39] in relationship to student intellects such as performance and appraisals [40]. Bandura asserts that teachers will employ more eagerly in a task when they feel competent that they are able to execute the task successfully [41]. In other words, teachers will utilize more strategies and more confident in their ability to use such strategies. All participants reported that the simulation helped them implement and understand using behavior strategies. In addition, simulation helped them feel more confident in this regard. Educational practices can be integrated into simulation teaching approaches and design, which affects student learning (knowledge), skill performance, critical thinking, satisfaction, and self-confidence [42]. Simulation fosters students' ability for problem-solving and decision-making proficiencies in a risk-free atmosphere [19]. The simulation for reading specialist candidates provided an atmosphere that was conducive to learning in a supporting environment.

4.4. Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study. The sample size is relatively small, as is the number of participating institutions for this study. With this, transferability and generalizability is not possible. Self-reported data always presents the risk of not being fully accurate because the respondents are analyzing themselves and may want to present themselves in a positive light [43].

4.5. Implications

Most participants had limited behavior training in their coursework, and it might be important to examine how experiential learning opportunities can be implemented into teacher training programs. Traditionally, k-12 schools have addressed challenging behavior by increasing the number and intensity of punitive disciplinary procedures [34,44], yet potential exists to change the way we train preservice and in-service teachers. Consequently, a mounting body of research validates the functionality and usefulness of proactive and preventative intervention to dealing with misbehavior in schools [45].

It is important for administrators and teachers to stay well-versed in best methods involving behavior management, particularly in light of placing students with such varied needs in inclusive classrooms [46]. As our classroom demographics change, teachers and specialists need necessary skills to deal with students in positive ways. Implications for inclusive classrooms suggest that for educational reform to have an impact on schools, social and behavioral standards must be included when identifying effective strategies for improving behavior [47]. This is still true today.

4.6. Summary

There is no doubt that children who display disruptive behaviors in classrooms are a concern for teachers, school administration, and other students [12]. Whether they are the children who are misbehaving or their classmates, there is an equal risk for problems in academic problems in students [48]. Although teacher training of behavior management programs exists, most teacher education programs rely upon traditional methods of instruction to prepare teachers for today's classrooms [18]. Simulation has the potential to change how we prepare those teachers.

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