

SOCIAL VALIDATION OF SERVICES FOR YOUTH WITH EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY**Kathleen M. Beaudoin****Richard Knuth****Gregory J. Benner***University of Washington, Tacoma*

This study investigated the perceptions of 302 building administrators regarding their building level programs serving students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). Comparisons were made between administrators of schools that housed self-contained programs and administrators from schools without self-contained programs on factors regarding the adequacy of academic and behavioral services for students with EBD. No between-group differences were found on administrator ratings of the proficiency of special education teachers with regard to the provision of academic services. However, special education teachers in self-contained programs were rated significantly higher than their counterparts teaching in less restrictive settings on their proficiency to determine students' behavioral needs, to make adjustments to behavioral interventions, and to measure behavioral progress. In addition, students with EBD were perceived as receiving better quality of services in self-contained programs than in the less restrictive settings.

Research to improve practices for meeting the needs of students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) continues to mount and scientifically supported practices to improve performance of students with EBD have been identified (e.g., Lewis, Hudson, Richter, & Johnson, 2004), however, outcomes for this student population in both behavior and academics remain less than ideal (Cullinan, Evans, Epstein, & Ryser, 2003; Nelson, Babyak, Gonzalez, & Benner, 2003). In an examination of federally funded studies in the United States aimed at improving outcomes for children and adolescents with EBD, Bradley, Henderson, and Monfore (2004) determined that, *Despite increased attention focused on students with emotional disorders, their educational, behavioral, and social outcomes continue to be the worst of any disability group* (p. 211). Numerous investigations highlight the need for continued work with this population in order to determine the most relevant practices for achieving better outcomes in both behavior and academics (Lane, Carter, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006; Nelson, Benner, Lane, & Smith, 2004). However, these unanswered questions coexist with the United States federal requirement to provide all students with disabilities with an appropriate public education

To complicate the process for determining how to appropriately meet the needs of youth with EBD is the fact that successful outcomes in academics and behavior have not been reliably linked to specific placement options. Yet, of the student groups with high incidence disabilities (i.e., learning disabilities, mild cognitive disabilities, and emotional and behavioral disorders), students with EBD are the most likely to require access to the full continuum of placement options (U. S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2005). Thus, even though decisions about where to best serve the individual student with EBD are a frequent occurrence for school personnel, these decisions cannot be made based on existing research. Evidence to support the determination of where and how to best serve students with EBD, be it in either inclusive or more restrictive placement options, remains unclear.

Currently, there is no set method for determining the success of one placement option over another. Nevertheless, the federal requirement to do so for every student with EBD in the United States on at least an annual basis leaves educational stakeholders facing difficult decisions with little empirical evidence upon which to base them. In this case, the addition of information relative to the social validity of the success or failure of placement options to meet the academic and behavioral needs of students with EBD can provide relevant information for decision makers. Simpson (2004) states that, *...social validity is an important evaluation consideration, including its use as a gauge of the subjective and qualitative benefits of placing students with emotional and behavioral challenges in general education settings* (p. 26). Therefore, examination of social validity can include an investigation of how stakeholders in the education of students with EBD view the success of the services and outcomes provided to this student population.

The perceptions held by the instructional leader within a school (i.e., the building level administrator) as to the adequacy of services provided to students with EBD provide important additional information to existing empirical data describing academic and behavioral outcomes of this population. However, little is known about how building level administrators view such programs. The purpose of this study was to investigate administrators' perceptions regarding their building level programs serving students with EBD in order to further understanding of the qualitative aspects of program success; that is, the social validity of services for these youth. An important distinction in program options is whether or not the option is self-contained and offered within the building. Thus, in the present investigation, comparisons were made between administrators of schools that housed self-contained programs and administrators from buildings without self-contained programs on factors regarding the adequacy of services for students with EBD. Of interest were possible differences in perceptions about the effectiveness of these program options in addressing both academic and behavioral needs of students with EBD as well as the time spent by administrators in providing additional support to these students and their teachers.

Method

Participant Recruitment

An electronic mailing was sent to 1,289 school principals or school head administrators in Washington State requesting their participation in a web-based study examining existing programs for youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBD). In every case, principals or head school administrators were initially contacted via email; they were asked to either respond to the survey themselves or forward the survey to an appropriate subordinate. The first mailing of the survey occurred on May 22, 2006, with two electronic reminders sent at 2 week intervals. Of the 1,289 messages sent, 94 were returned as undeliverable. Surveys were completed by 302 administrators (i.e., 25.3% of the 1,195 deliverable emails). An additional 38 electronic replies reported technical difficulties with accessing and/or responding to the survey. Based on the total number school principals or school head administrator in the State of Washington (i.e., 2,190, OSPI, 2006), the participants in this study represented 13.8% of lead school building administrators across the state. This total number includes all high schools, junior highs/ middle schools, elementary schools, K-12 schools, and alternative schools in the State of Washington. It does not include 85 unclassified schools, home school resource centers, bilingual orientation centers, detention center schools, and other specialty schools.

Survey Development

Development of the content of the survey was informed in three ways. First, informal discussions with building administrators were held to ascertain possible perceptions of school administrators about self-contained programs for students with EBD. Second, special education school district personnel with expertise in placement services for youth with EBD suggested input regarding the specific content of the survey. Third, a small group of building level principals and graduate interns in a certificate program in school administration completed a web-based version of the survey in order for the researchers to assess time necessary for completion of the survey as well as clarity of items and appropriateness of response menus. Average completion time for the survey was estimated between 7 to 10 minutes.

Survey Instrument

The on-line survey consisted of four sections of which each respondent was asked to complete three. The first section included ten multiple-choice items eliciting information related to the respondent's professional experience as well the demographic profile of the schools and school districts in which they

were employed. Specifically, demographic queries included the respondent's position (e.g. elementary school principal), years experience as an administrator, and years experience as a special education teacher, if any. Items pertaining to the respondent's school included student enrollment of the school building and school district, the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, and whether the school was rural, suburban, or urban.

Respondents whose schools housed self-contained programs to serve students with emotional and behavioral disorders were required to respond to an alternate section of the survey (Survey Section II) than respondents whose schools did not house self-contained programs to serve students with emotional and behavioral disorders (Survey Section III). Each of these sections consisted of 14 items on which respondents used a 5-point Likert scale (0 = Strongly Disagree, 4 = Strongly Agree) to indicate their level of satisfaction with the quality of services, resources, and outcomes for students with EBD within their school. Although the items for the second and third section were parallel in structure and similar in content, the focus of the respondent required different worded items to reflect the differences in programs offered (i.e., the presence or absence of self-contained classroom options for students with EBD).

The fourth section of the survey was an open ended response format that asked respondents to identify the resources that they perceived their schools to need to better support both students with emotional/behavioral disorders and their teachers. Additionally, a request for general comments by respondents related to the provision of educational services to students with EBD was included.

Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate building level administrators' perceptions of programs serving students with EBD in order to assess the social validity of two types of program options provided to this student population. Comparisons were made regarding the perceptions of administrators of schools that housed self-contained programs within their buildings to the perceptions of school administrators in buildings without self-contained programs. Presented first are results comparing groups on important demographic features of the schools as well as administrator experience in order to determine possible covariates for use in further analyses. Following this, group differences in perceptions of teacher proficiency, student progress, and support for teachers and programs are presented.

Demographics of Respondent Groups

Demographic data for each group (school administrators with self-contained programs in their buildings ($n = 96$) and school administrators without self-contained programs ($n = 206$) are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Respondents ($N = 302$)

| Characteristic | Self-Contained $n = 96$ | No Self-Contained $n = 206$ |
|---|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| School level assignment | | |
| Elementary | 44 (46%) | 131 (64%) |
| Middle school/junior high | 25 (26%) | 34 (17%) |
| High school | 23 (24%) | 31 (15%) |
| Other | 3 (3%) | 10 (5%) |
| Prior special education teaching experience | | |
| Special education teacher | 13 (14%) | 44 (21%) |
| Self-contained classroom teacher | 8 (8%) | 19 (9%) |
| School community | | |
| Urban | 23 (24%) | 46 (22%) |
| Suburban | 48 (50%) | 91 (44%) |
| Rural | 22 (23%) | 64 (31%) |
| School district size | | |
| Less than 1000 students | 5 (5%) | 28 (14%) |
| Between 1000 and 3000 students | 13 (14%) | 26 (13%) |
| Between 3000 and 10,000 students | 25 (6%) | 65 (32%) |
| More than 10,000 students | 52 (54%) | 86 (42%) |

Chi-square analyses were conducted to determine differences between the two groups of administrators on demographic variables. Analyses indicated that the groups did not differ significantly in terms of

$F(1, 296) = 12.75, p = .000$, to make adjustments to behavioral interventions, $F(1, 299) = 10.52, p = .001$, and to measure behavioral progress, $F(1, 298) = 10.46, p = .001$. In addition, administrators of schools housing self-contained programs for students with EBD, in comparison to administrators in schools without such programs, perceived their students with EBD as receiving better quality of services, $F(1, 296) = 11.97, p = .001$ and their special education teachers from self-contained programs were viewed as more effective than those from non-self-contained programs in working with the parents of students with EBD, $F(1, 297) = 4.91, p = .03$. In spite of these differences, perceptions of the adequacy of both academic and behavioral progress of students with EBD did not differ between the two groups of administrators. Furthermore, no between group differences were found regarding the administrators' perceptions of the amounts of time they expended to support teachers who worked with students with EBD or to directly deal with the behavioral issues of these students.

On a broader level, administrators perceived significantly higher levels of building-wide support for self-contained EBD programs that were already established than for the potential development of self-contained EBD programs in buildings where they were not already established, $F(1, 296) = 15.69, p = .000$. Moreover, special education teachers of students with EBD in self-contained programs were perceived as having more support than their counterparts in less restrictive settings for building and/or district professional development opportunities, $F(1, 297) = 4.41, p = .04$.

Discussion

Although the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEiA, 2004) requires the provision of a continuum of services for all students with disabilities in the United States, decisions regarding placement for youth with EBD may prove particularly difficult for stakeholders. To date, no clear evidence of programming outcomes can be used to support the decision to serve students with EBD in one placement option over another. Indeed, there has been longstanding concern about the quality of outcomes for these youth in both academic and behavioral arenas (see Bradley et al., 2004 for a review of national outcomes for youth with EBD), regardless of placement option. However, even in an era of evidence based standards, subjective data may be necessary to more fully illuminate our understanding of program effectiveness. Thus, a major aim of this study was to shed light on the social validity of the effectiveness of academic and behavioral programming options currently used with students with EBD. To this end, we examined building administrators' views about the adequacy of their programs for addressing both academic and behavioral needs of this population. Because within-building placement options are readily distinguished by whether or not they are categorized as self-contained, we compared perceptions about the effectiveness of self-contained EBD programs versus programs that were not self-contained in an attempt to clarify how administrators view the success of their specific program types at meeting the needs of students with EBD.

An examination of the results did not indicate differences between groups of administrators regarding their perceptions of the adequacy of their special education teachers to address the academic needs of their students with EBD. Indeed, the mean ratings ranging from 2.54 to 2.73 seem to indicate a generally positive view of teachers' adequacy to determine academic needs, adjust academic instruction, and to measure academic progress, regardless of program type. On first take, these results appear to provide some social validation for academic practices provided students with EBD. However, further examination of the mean ratings by group revealed that perceptions regarding the adequacy of academic progress made by students with EBD received the lowest rating of any of the survey items (i.e., $M = 1.94$ for those with self-contained programs, $M = 1.97$ for those without self-contained programs), indicating less than neutral satisfaction with academic progress for either group. Given the overwhelming evidence of the difficulty in achieving positive academic outcomes with this population, these results may provide another piece of social validation to the notion of resistance to intervention. That is, it may be that even when teachers are adequately addressing the academic needs of their students with EBD, outcomes remain less than positive.

Turning to behavior, these results indicate that administrators regarded teachers in self-contained programs as more proficient than those in non-self-contained programs at addressing the behavioral features of educating students with EBD. Those teachers of students with EBD in self-contained programs were rated as better at determining the behavioral needs of their students, adjusting behavioral interventions, and measuring behavioral progress than their counterparts serving students with EBD in buildings without self-

contained programs. Moreover, the quality of services provided students with EBD were perceived as better in the self-contained programs than that provided in the non-self-contained settings. Taken together, these results would seem to indicate that building administrators are more satisfied with services for students with EBD—at least in the area of behavior—when they are provided in a self-contained setting. However, as with the academic progress made by the students in their respective programs, no differences were found between the self-contained and less restrictive programming options for their behavioral progress. Again, examination of the mean ratings by group revealed that perceptions regarding the adequacy of behavioral progress made by students with EBD was low for both groups (i.e., $M = 2.27$ for those with self-contained programs, $M = 2.06$ for those without self-contained programs). Thus, although these results provide some social validation for addressing the behavioral features of a student's program in a self-contained setting, they also are convergent with longstanding outcome data on the overall success of academic and behavioral outcomes. That is, it appears that even when teachers are perceived as adequate or better at addressing the academic and behavioral needs of their students, student outcomes fall short.

As one might anticipate, students with behavioral issues appear to require a disproportionate amount of administrative time in order to support their needs. In our study, both groups of administrators responded similarly regarding perceptions of their time spent dealing with the behavioral issues of these students as well as the time required to support their teachers. In fact, perceptions of the time required to deal with these students (i.e., $M = 3.05$ for those with self-contained programs, $M = 3.12$ for those without self-contained programs) received the highest ratings of any item in the survey, followed closely by the time spent supporting their teachers ($M = 2.93$ vs. $M = 2.82$, self-contained versus not self-contained, respectively). These results provide social validation that students with severe behavioral problems, regardless of where they are served, require significant amounts of time and energy.

Implications

Currently, scientifically validated practices cannot provide the necessary evidence to fully inform decisions regarding the best placement option for students with EBD. The results of this research extend our understanding of the adequacy of services provided to students with EBD by providing a measure of social validation for placement options currently used with this population. It is especially important for administrative level stakeholders to consider the possible benefits to students, including the adequacy of academic and behavioral programming, when making decisions regarding where best to meet students' needs. Regardless of the type of program made available for students with EBD, the current results highlight the necessity for furthering the training of special education teachers to better meet both academic and behavioral needs of students with EBD. Such opportunities for professional development should be of a sustained nature in order to provide an avenue for ongoing development of teacher skill. Finally, because dealing with students with difficult behavior is time consuming regardless of placement option, it would behoove building level administrators to include evidence-based practices within their buildings to promote positive behavior across all students.

Strengths and Limitations

A number of strengths were apparent in this study. First, the design of survey items and format were heavily informed by a number of professionals who had expertise with this topic. Second, the electronic recruitment and web-based design of the survey allowed for us to contact school administrators at a time in the school year when they were most likely to have the availability of time to respond to the survey (i.e., immediately following the date administrators were required to submit personnel evaluations for the year and before commencing duties associated with the final month of school). Third, we were able to target administrators representing schools across the state serving students from rural, suburban and urban communities and representative of a wide range of socio-economic strata.

One obvious limitation of this study was that because objective outcome data of program effectiveness were not collected, a possible relation between administrators' perceptions of program effectiveness and program outcomes could not be ascertained. Therefore, no conclusions may be drawn about the accuracy of administrator perceptions of program effectiveness. We also note that some technical difficulties were encountered in this study. Thirty-eight administrators reported that they were unable to respond to the survey due to difficulty in accessing it electronically. It is likely that others may have encountered similar problems with access, but did not report this to us. Thus, we were unable to capture a higher percentage of

likely respondents. Finally, a pattern may exist regarding the demographics of those who chose to respond to the survey versus those who did not. It is possible that some unknown feature of the schools (e.g., unendorsed teachers filling the special education positions), influenced whether or not an administrator responded to the survey. As a result, these results should be interpreted with caution.

Conclusions

The federal requirement for the provision of a continuum of services to meet the needs of students with EBD is a complex matter for school personnel in the United States. There is little question that perceptions of program effectiveness provide social validation and therefore hold influence for the availability and development of such programs. Systematic examination of the benefits and drawbacks of programs as viewed by building level administrators can provide administrative decision makers in charge of program development with a picture of the impact and support of such programs at the building level, even when outcomes for students with EBD are poor. In this study, benefits of self-contained programs included greater adequacy of teachers at meeting the behavioral challenges presented by youth with EBD. As IDEiA (2004) requires an appropriate public education for all students with disabilities in the United States, and students with EBD require services in the area of behavioral planning, intervention, and monitoring in order to receive an appropriate education, it would be crucial for school personnel to consider critical factors for the behavioral success of students with EBD.

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