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Interactions Between Students With Emotional/Behavioral Disorders and Teachers in the Mainstream Setting

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Running Head: EBD STUDENT/TEACHER INTERACTIONS

Abstract

The author assessed the self reported behaviors of mainstream academic high school teachers who teach students with emotional/behavioral disorders with respect to preferred consequences for inappropriate student behaviors. Teachers were surveyed from four counties and asked to respond to an inappropriate student behavior with 1) positive reinforcement of the appropriate student behavior, 2) punishment of an inappropriate student behavior, 3) consequence which resulted in student escape from the academic task (negative reinforcement) or a free response of the teacher's choice. Results indicated that 49.6% of teacher responses were examples of positive reinforcement, 25.4% negative reinforcement, 6.4% punishment and 18.6% other responses. A chi squared test demonstrated a significant difference between the observed responses and the expected responses for the overall results. Positive reinforcement was chosen more frequently than expected, while negative reinforcement was chosen as often as expected. These findings suggest that both reinforcement techniques are being chosen by mainstream academic teachers who teach students with emotional/behavioral disorders, despite research which suggests that negative reinforcement is ineffective for reducing inappropriate student behaviors.

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Interactions Between Students With

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Recently, many school systems have begun placing students with emotional/ behavioral disorders in mainstream academic classes. Typically, these students demonstrate inappropriate behaviors which may prove difficult for a mainstream teacher to manage (Cullinan, Epstein & Kauffman, 1985). Teachers who have difficulty handling students' behaviors may develop poor attitudes about students with emotional/ behavioral disorders. This will have a direct effect on the quality of teacher instruction (Larrivee & Cook, 1979). As a result, students and teachers may find themselves in an unproductive relationship maintained by negative interactions. Furthermore, both teachers and students may display inappropriate behaviors which are maintained by a cycle of negative reinforcement and escape factors (Carr, 1991; Landrum, 1992; Patterson & Reid, 1970).

Characteristics of Students with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders

Students with emotional/ behavioral disorders are often characterized by inability to learn in school, inability to establish satisfactory relationships, display of inappropriate behaviors and/or feelings, unhappy or depressed mood

and display of physical symptoms and/or fears . These types of behavior problems are significantly more prevalent in students with emotional/ behavioral disorders than in non-disabled students and are likely to involve peers and have long-term legal consequences (Cullinan et al., 1985).

Several factors which may prove to be predictors of emotional problems in students have been identified in current research. According to Mullen and Wood (1986), poor peer relations were highly correlated with later adult maladjustment and peer ratings often predicted later psychiatric difficulty. Coutinno (1986) stated that low reading achievement was correlated with behavioral disorders at the secondary level. Though achievement factors may not necessarily indicate a behavioral problem, academic difficulties are certainly an important issue when discussing students with emotional/ behavioral disorders.

According to Epstein, Kinder and Bursuck (1989), students with emotional/behavioral disorders achieve significantly below expectations on standardized achievement tests. Also, discrepancies between students with emotional/behavioral disorders and their peers in the area of academic achievement increase significantly at the secondary level (Coutinno, 1986). This finding may be related to the large number of special education referrals that are made at the secondary level (Hutton, 1985).

Though referrals are made for lack of academic progress, most referrals completed by teachers are related to other issues. Hutton (1985) suggested that the most frequent reasons for referral include poor peer relationships, frustration of the student, below academic expectations, withdrawn behavior, disruptive behavior, fighting , refusing to work and short attention span. From this list of referral reasons, poor peer relationships, frustration and not meeting academic expectations accounted for seventy-five percent of all referrals (Hutton, 1985). This is of concern to educators because reasons given for referral can bias the evaluation process for special education placement (Hutton, 1985).

Teacher Attitudes

According to Larrivee and Cook (1979), teacher attitude has a significant effect on instruction and the teacher's attitude may be directly affected by the teacher's perception of his/her degree of success with a particular student. Perception of student success is affected by information level, knowledge attainment, attitude, specific skill acquisition and contact and experience with exceptional children (Larrivee & Cook, 1979). Similarly, Knoff (1988) found that teachers' attitudes toward mainstreaming and students who are mainstreamed may vary due to state laws and regulations and the

child's special education label. Other variables which may affect teacher attitude include grade level taught, amount of administrative support, availability of supportive services and amount of participation the mainstream teacher has in the mainstreaming process (Kauffman, Lloyd & Mc Gee, 1989; Larrivee & Cook, 1979; Myles & Simpson, 1989; Schneider & Byrne, 1984)

According to Myles and Simpson (1989), involvement of the regular education teacher in the mainstreaming process is crucial to success of the student. Teacher involvement in this process can help strengthen the willingness of teachers to accept students with emotional/behavioral disorders into their classrooms, as they can have more control over modifications used to meet the students' needs (Myles & Simpson, 1989). Furthermore, the regular education teacher and the special education teacher should communicate during the mainstreaming process and coordinate services for the student. The amount of support that the teacher has is one important factor in determining what kind of attitude the teacher will have toward students with special needs (Knoff, 1985).

According to Mullen and Wood (1986), the teacher's attitude towards the mainstreamed student will have a direct effect on how the teacher views the student's behaviors. Most teachers report that there are significant differences in the behaviors of students with emotional/behavioral disabilities

when compared to their nondisabled peers (Downing, 1990). Teachers from Mullen's 1986 study on disturbingness of behavior problems reported that the most disruptive behaviors were those involving acting out, aggression to self or others and destruction of property. Similarly, in 1986, Kerr found that teachers reported rule following, listening to teacher and compliance as three of the most important behaviors that a student can display. Unfortunately, these are behaviors which are not characteristic of emotionally disturbed individuals without intervention from an effective teacher.

An effective teacher was defined by characteristics such as has high standards and expectations for students, is likely to maximize achievement gains of students, is willing to receive assistance in dealing with classroom problems and utilizes effective classroom management techniques (Gersten, Walker & Darch, 1988). However, teachers who were labeled effective were also those most likely to resist placement of a student with emotional/ behavioral difficulties (Gersten, Walker & Darch, 1988). Kauffman (1991) suggested that teachers with characteristics of effectiveness are those who will be effective in dealing with exceptional students; however, these teachers are often not willing to accept these students into their classroom and may have negative attitudes about educating students with special needs.

Interaction Theory

Many theories have been proposed explaining why effective teachers are reluctant to accept students with emotional/behavioral disabilities into their classroom. Much of the current research has focused on the interactive relationship between students and their teachers and how these interactions affect both student and teacher behaviors and long term effects of these interactions on behaviors of the student.

It is a common misperception that students play a passive role in the intervention process (Carr, Taylor & Robinson, 1991). However, research suggests that students can actively affect the behavior of others and can, in fact, change adult behavior. Behaviors such as language and communication skills can affect adult responses. These child effects, in turn, play an important role in producing adult reactions that maintain the child's inappropriate behaviors (Carr et al., 1991).

Coercion theory was originally described by Patterson and Reid (1970) and was applied to family interactions, specifically those between parent and a behaviorally disordered child. In essence, the coercion theory states that behavioral interactions deteriorate into a negative cycle of coercive responses in which participants attempt to gain control by pain or aversive stimuli (Patterson & Bank, 1986). Research suggests that children with behavioral

disorders can affect the functioning of the entire family with coercive interaction patterns (Corr, 1991). In the reciprocal/coercive interaction hypothesis presented by Patterson, both reciprocal and coercive interactions are operationally defined (Patterson & Bank, 1986; Patterson & Reid, 1970). Coercive interactions are characterized by aversive behavior of one of the interactants to either escape the interaction or to gain something. On the other hand, reciprocal interactions are characterized by positive, mutually reinforcing behavior in which the positive behavior of one reinforces the positive behavior of the other (Patterson & Reid, 1970). More recently, researchers have begun to apply this theory to the teacher/student interactions in the mainstream classroom.

According to Landrum (1992), both teacher and child characteristics and behaviors contribute to the development of negative relationships. Research showed that teachers were more likely to interact with students engaging in inappropriate behavior than those engaging in appropriate behavior. Furthermore, teachers were more likely to use methods involving coercion than to use positive intervention techniques. Positive intervention techniques, such as teacher praise, are not implemented frequently enough when compared to negative interaction approaches. Both positive and negative interactions are necessary for effective classroom management; however,

positive interactions should outnumber the coercive interactions for successful

behavior management (Shores, Gunter & Jack, 1993).

According to Carr (1991), "some instances of serious misbehavior are

maintained by negative reinforcement produced by the termination of academic

task demands" (p 531). These negative reinforcements strengthen those

behaviors that result in escape or avoidance of aversive stimuli (Gunter,

Penny, Jack, Shores & Nelson, 1993). Research suggests that adults are likely

to avoid task demands which result in a high rate of misbehavior as the student

and the teacher both avoid negative stimuli (Carr, 1991). These findings

provide one explanation for why teachers prefer not to teach students with

emotional/ behavioral disorders. The teacher's teaching behaviors are being

punished using aversive stimuli (Carr, 1991). Thus, traditional methods for

instructing students with emotional/behavioral disabilities may fail as there is a

high rate of teacher punishment, or child effects, produced by coercive

interactions between students with emotional/ behavioral disorders and

teachers.

The main goal of most coercive interactions is to maximize the short-

term payoff, thus to remove the negative stimuli (Landrum, 1992). If this is

the case, inappropriate student behaviors lead to negative teacher reactions and

these interactions develop into a cycle. These cycles often result in an

increase in negativity and inappropriate behaviors become increasingly difficult to change (Landrum, 1992). Furthermore, these coercive interactions often lead to escape and avoidance behavior by both the teacher and the student (Shores et al., 1993).

Carr (1991) suggested that professionals should "address the issue of escape factors directly while maintaining a meaningful and constructive curriculum" (p 533). Classroom teachers should choose a method of management which produces the fewest child effects and school systems should provide training in these methods for both special and regular educators (Carr, 1991; Landrum, 1992).

In a recent research study, Kauffman (1991) suggested that further research is needed to determine the specific attitudes and skills needed to teach students with emotional/behavioral disorders. Research in the area of reciprocal/coercive interactions in the classroom is also limited. Therefore, this research will focus on the regular classroom teachers' perceptions of the most appropriate ways to respond to coercive behaviors in regular classrooms.

Method

Participants

 High school teachers who teach mainstream academic classes were selected from four rural school divisions in the state of Virginia. Each of the teachers surveyed had a minimum of one student with emotional/behavioral disorders participating in mainstream classes this school year. Within each school division, all of the teachers who met the criteria were surveyed; however, only 27 of the 48 responded (56%). The questionnaire for this research was designed to ensure that all teachers and school divisions remain anonymous.

Instrument

 The questionnaire for this study was designed to determine what teachers believe to be the most appropriate way to handle a classroom situation with a student who is using coercion in order to avoid an academic task. Furthermore, there was an opportunity for the teachers to add any responses they felt were more appropriate than the choices given on the questionnaire. (see Appendix A).

 The questionnaire provided ten classroom situations in which a student

was using coercion to avoid an academic task and four choices for teacher response. The choices were examples of 1) positive reinforcement of an appropriate student behavior, 2) punishment of an inappropriate student behavior or 3) negative reinforcement of an inappropriate student behavior. An area for free response was provided for teachers who did not agree with any of the suggested responses. All suggested responses were placed in random order. The free response was always the last choice.

This questionnaire was designed for use in this study and was field tested prior to distribution to the sample population.

Field Testing

In order to determine that this questionnaire was valid for use with this study, the questionnaire was distributed to and reviewed by expert judges. Fifteen judges were asked to rate each of the response choices as 1) positive reinforcement of an appropriate student behavior, 2) punishment of an inappropriate student behavior or 3) consequence for an inappropriate student behavior which involves escaping from academic participation (negative reinforcement of an inappropriate student behavior). Judges responses indicated a validity coefficient of 88.33% based on these definitions given by the researcher.

Results

Of the respondents, 70% were female and 30% were male. The group mean for years of experience was 13.3 years and respondents had a mean of 3.33 students with emotional/ behavioral disorders mainstreamed into their classes this academic school year (median=3; mode=2) (see Appendix D). The teacher responses were first calculated as percentages (N=27) (See Appendix E). Positive reinforcement accounted for 49.6% of the total responses. Negative reinforcement and punishment accounted for 25.4.% and 6.4%, respectively. Finally, "other" responses accounted for 18.6% of the total. Responses which were included in the "other" category include consequences such as conferences/meetings with parents, administrators, special education teachers, case managers and school psychologists and taking the student aside for a private discussion outside of the classroom.

The data were also analyzed using the one-sample chi squared test (See Appendix F). Results showed that the frequencies of positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, punishment and other responses were significantly unequal (p< .001). Based on the differences between the observed and expected frequencies, positive reinforcement was chosen more than expected, negative reinforcement was chosen as frequently as expected and punishment was chosen fewer times than expected.

Discussion

The results demonstrated that the three types of consequences were not chosen by teachers equally. Previous research has suggested that consequences which involve escape from an undesirable situation (negative reinforcement) are used more frequently than consequences which promote positive interaction patterns (Shores et al., 1993). This research has suggested, however, that teachers who teach mainstream academic classes believe they would use positive reinforcement techniques more frequently than negative reinforcement techniques. Carr (1991) stated that "some instances of serious misbehavior are maintained by negative reinforcement produced by the termination of academic task demands". Similarly, Gunter (1993) suggested that negative reinforcement which involves escape or avoidance of an undesirable stimulus can actually strengthen the inappropriate behavior. Given that students with emotional/behavioral disorders are particularly prone to demonstrate inappropriate behaviors such as failure to establish satisfactory relationships and inappropriate display of emotions, it is important for a behavioral management program used with these types of students to be effective in eliminating, not aggravating, these inappropriate behaviors (Carr et al., 1991; Cullinan et al., 1985; Hutton, 1985).

The results of this study demonstrated that positive reinforcement is used more frequently than negative reinforcement techniques by teachers who teach mainstream classes which include students with emotional/ behavioral disorders. The high frequency of positive reinforcement responses is indicative of reciprocal interactions between teachers and students in mainstream classes, which researchers suggest is the most appropriate way to obtain desired student behaviors. On the other hand, research supports that negative reinforcement is an ineffective means for decreasing inappropriate behaviors. According to this study, teachers in mainstream academic classes are using negative reinforcement techniques almost as frequently as expected. Though positive, reciprocal interactions appear to outnumber negative, coercive ones, negative reinforcement should be avoided as a consequence for inappropriate student behaviors, as it is likely to result in an increase in frequency of inappropriate behaviors (Landrum, 1992, Shores et al., 1993, Carr, 1991).

Finally, the research discussed in this section was subject to several limitations. Due to factors such as low response rate, limited student population and time factors, the research was limited by the small sample size (N=27). Also, due to the categorical nature of the obtained data, results are limited to the conclusion that there is a significant difference between the

observed frequencies of the responses and the expected frequencies of those responses. The data do not provide a statistical explanation for which of the variables were responsible for that significance, though positive reinforcement was chosen more times than expected, negative reinforcement was chosen almost as frequently as expected and punishment was chosen fewer times than expected.

Further research is needed in the area of coercive interactions between EBD students and teachers in the mainstream setting. Also, it may be helpful to know if these students engage in these types of interactions in other settings such as with peer groups and in self contained classrooms. It may also be useful to know if teachers engage in these types of interactions with other types of students such as students with learning disabilities or mental retardation or with students who are non-disabled.

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Appendix A

Teacher Questionnaire

Dear Teacher:

I am a graduate student from Longwood College in Farmville Virginia. I am currently working toward a Masters Degree in Special Education and hope to teach in the public schools very soon. In order to complete my graduate work, I must complete a thesis in which I propose and conduct original research.

I have enclosed a questionnaire which deals with common situations which may arise in any classroom, especially those with students with emotional/behavioral disorders. I am interested in your opinions about the most appropriate and effective ways to deal with these types of situations. Please take a few minutes to fill out this questionnaire and return it to your principal in the enclosed envelope.

In closing, I would like to remind you that this survey is entirely voluntary and all information obtained in this research study will be anonymous.

Thank you again for your time.

Sincerely,

Susan Palese
Longwood College

Background Information:

School division _____   Subject taught_____

Gender_____   Years of experience _____

Approximately how many students with emotional/behavioral disorders are mainstreamed into your classes? _____

_____

Please choose the response that you think is the most appropriate and effective way to obtain a desired student behavior.

1. **Joe has been in your classroom for twenty minutes. During this time, he has had his head on his desk and his eyes have been closed. When you approach Joe to ask him to sit up and participate, he refuses to sit up and insists that he was not sleeping. You:**

    A. **Send him to the office.**

    B. **Keep him after school and have him do the work that he missed in class.**

    C. **Encourage him to participate and hope to reward him when he does.**

    D. **Other** _____

    _____

2. **Susan has not turned in her homework for today. This is the third of four opportunities this week. When questioned, Susan replies that she doesn't need to listen to you because you can't make her do what she doesn't want to do. You:**

    A. **Give her an after school detention in which she can do her work.**

    B. **Tell her that her grades will certainly be boosted by homework participation.**

    C. **Send her to the hall while you review the assignment with the rest of the class.**

    D. **Other** _____

    _____

3. Tim failed the unit test that you just returned to your class. During the test review, Tim calls out frequently in a loud voice . He insists that this was an unfair test and refuses to hold his comments until after class. You:

    A. Assure Tim that you are open to discuss the test with him after class.

    B. Send him to his guidance counselor to discuss his study habits.

    C. Give him a lunch detention for his inappropriate classroom behavior.

    D. Other _____

          _____

4. Lisa has been talking to the students around her for ten minutes. When asked to be quiet, Lisa does not respond and continues to talk to those around her. You:

    A. Send her to the office.

    B. Have her turn in a typewritten copy of the notes from today's class.

    C. Inform her that good notes from today's class will surely pay off on the next quiz.

    D. Other _____

          _____

5. Todd has continued to use inappropriate language in your class in spite of requests to find more appropriate words. Finally, Todd refuses to censor himself, claiming that he can say whatever he wants in your class under the first amendment. You:

    A. Have Todd stay after school to research three court cases which are related to the first amendment.

    B. Encourage him again to consider others when he speaks and compliment him the next time he speaks without using swear words.

    C. Have him step into the hallway until he can control his tongue.

    D. Other _____

          _____

6. Jill has refused to participate in a group project that you have assigned to the class. You:

      A. Reassure Jill that her group will benefit from her contribution and encourage her to participate.

      B. Send her to the office for the class periods in which the students will complete their projects.

      C. Have her stay after school to serve a detention.

      D. Other _____

          _____

7. Chris has been complaining that his report card grade was inaccurate and that you are an unfair teacher who has no business in a classroom. You:

      A. Put him in the hallway until he can speak to others with respect.

      B. Give him an after-school detention for his defiance.

      C. Assure him that you will recalculate his grades with him if he will speak in a more appropriate manner.

      D. Other _____

          _____

8. Carrie has been late to your class five times in the past two weeks. When asked why, she tells you that it is none of your business what she does outside of your room. You:

      A. Have her stay after school to receive an extra assignment for all of the class time that she has missed.

      B. Inform her that students who are in class on time for five consecutive days will receive extra credit points on the next test.

      C. Send her to the office to discuss her attitude with an administrator.

      D. Other _____

          _____

9. **Bill has refused to complete the classwork that you assigned for today. He just isn't in the mood to work. You:**

    A. Assure him that today's assignment will help him do well on the final exam and praise him if he completes the assignment.

    B. Send him to his guidance counselor to discuss his attitude problem.

    C. Have him complete today's assignment and an additional homework assignment in order to pass for the semester.

    D. Other _____

10. **Jane has not turned in her semester term paper, which was due four days ago. When you approach her about it, she tells you to back off, she will give it to you when she finishes. You:**

    A. Send her to an administrator who will deal with her defiance.

    B. Have her complete the entire paper and an additional one about respect by the end of the week.

    C. Encourage her to turn in her paper by the end of the week, as her grade will surely reflect it.

    D. Other _____

Thank you for your time in completing this questionnaire.

Appendix B

Sample Letter to School Superintendent

February XX, 1995

Dear Superintendent,

I am a graduate student from Longwood college in Farmville, Virginia. I am currently working toward a Masters Degree in Special Education and hope to teach in the public schools very soon. In order to complete my graduate work, I must complete a thesis in which I propose and conduct original research.

I have submitted a research proposal to the Longwood Human Subjects Research Review Committee and they have approved this proposal. I am interested in the attitudes of mainstream teachers who teach students with special needs. More specifically, I would like to know their preferences for consequences which follow situations in which the student is behaving inappropriately. I plan to use the enclosed survey to determine if teachers prefer to use methods which involve positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement or punishment. This survey is entirely voluntary for all teachers and all names obtained through the interviewing process will be kept confidential. Furthermore, the names of all school districts which choose to participate in the study will also be held in the strictest confidence.

I would like your permission to conduct this research in the this County's high school and I have enclosed a copy of the survey I plan to use. In the interest of confidentiality, I would like the principal to distribute and collect the surveys from mainstream teachers in the high school who teach students with emotional/behavioral disorders. If you have any further questions, please call me at 395-3646 or write to Box 1734, Longwood College, Farmville, Virginia, 23909. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Susan Palese Page
Longwood College

Appendix C

Sample Letter to School Principal

March XX, 1995

Dear Principal,

I have enclosed the survey that we discussed on the phone this week. Please distribute this survey to all teachers who teach mainstream classes which include students with emotional/behavioral disorders. I have instructed the teachers to please return the survey to you in the envelopes attached to the survey packet. Please return all surveys in the self-addressed, stamped envelope that I have enclosed.

Your cooperation is vital to me for completing my thesis and graduation requirements. I appreciate your time and your support. Please feel free to contact me at Box 1734, Longwood College, Farmville, Virginia, 23909 or (804) 395-3646 if you have any further questions or comments. Thank you again for your cooperation.

Sincerely,
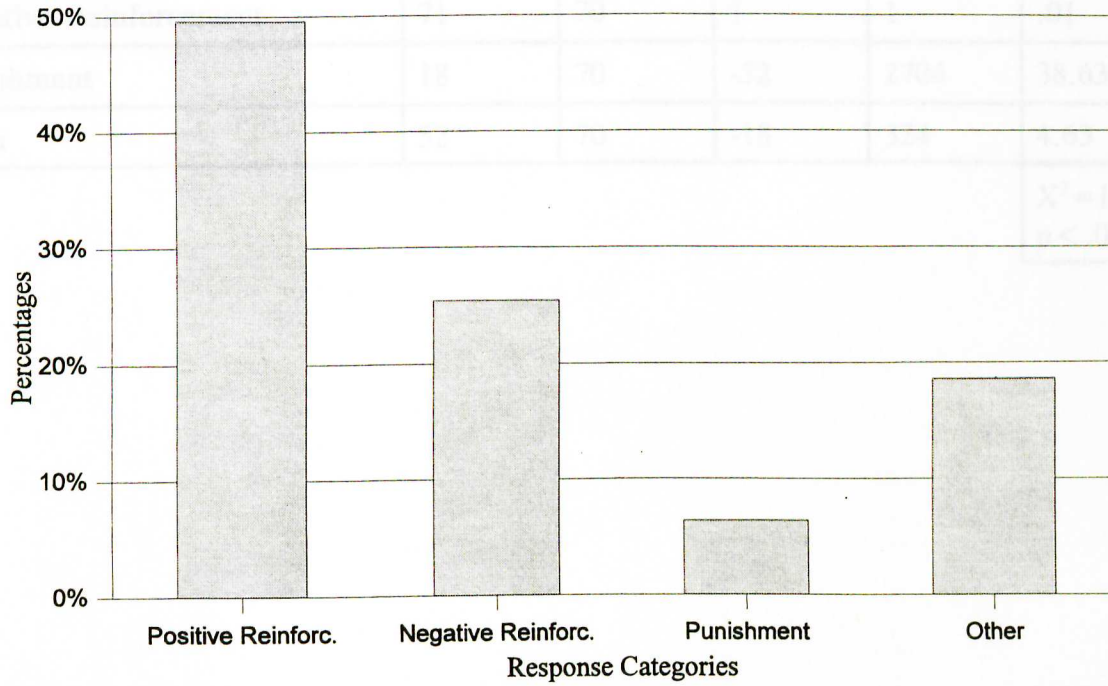

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Appendix D
Participant Demographics

Counties	n Size	# Female	# Male	Ave. Yrs. Experience	Ave. # EBD Students
1	3	2 (67%)	1 (33%)	7.3	4.7
2	5	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	15.2	2.2
3	11	8 (73%)	3 (27%)	17.6	2.8
4	8	5 (63%)	3 (37%)	8.5	4.8
Total	27	19 (70%)	8 (30%)	13.3	3.33

Appendix E

Frequency Distribution
of Teacher Responses

Appendix F

Chi Squared

Goodness of Fit Test

Response Catagories	Observed	Expected	(O-E)	(O-E)^2	(O-E)^2/E
Postitive Reinforcement	139	70	69	4761	68.01
Negative Reinforcement	71	70	1	1	.01
Punishment	18	70	-52	2704	38.63
Other	52	70	-18	324	4.63
					$X^2 = 111$ $p < .001$

Author Biography

Susan Palese Page was raised in Chesterfield County where she graduated from Monacan High School in 1990. She received her Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology from Longwood College in 1994 and continued on to receive her Masters of Science in Special Education in 1995. Susan plans to join her husband in central Texas and secure a job as a special education teacher in the fall of 1995.