

GENERAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATORS' LEVEL OF PREPAREDNESS IN SUPPORTING  
STUDENTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH AND BEHAVIORAL CHALLENGES

by

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### **Abstract**

Students with EBD and/or mental health challenges require access to sound behavioral support from “bell to bell”. However, due to lack of educator training, this need is often unmet. The purpose of this study is to obtain current data on the preparedness of general and special educators in order to better recognize and move toward filling in these support gaps. This is to benefit students with, or at-risk for behavior and/or mental health disorders, and teachers responsible for providing support. With the inadequacy of pre-service teacher training on supporting students with any sort of behavior challenge, a lack of resources including individuals with knowledge for consultation, and overall general education classroom hardships, it is not surprising that students with EBD and those with some of the highest level of behavioral needs would remain on an unchanged trajectory. A survey was conducted to gauge educators’ preparedness in supporting students requiring behavior support. Results, implications, and suggestions for future research will be provided.

*Keywords:* emotional behavioral disorder, mental health, evidence-based practice, classroom management, general educator, special educator, survey

## **General and Special Educators' Level of Preparedness in Supporting Students with Mental Health and Behavioral Challenges**

In recent years there has been a significant increase in mental health related symptoms and disorders among adolescents as tracked by a long-term study published by Keyes, Gary, O'Malley, Hamilton, & Schulenberg (2019). This study demonstrated a steady increase of depressive symptoms and mental health problems in adolescents between the years 2012 and 2018. The 27-year study characterized these symptoms as “mood-related changes that affect behavior, cognition, and physiological changes” (Keyes et. al., p. 987, 2019). In 2016 it was noted that one in six youths (age six to 17) experienced a mental health disorder of some kind (NAMI, 2019). Along with these increasing statistics it is estimated that only around 50% of these youths receive treatment and that the gap between onset of mental health diagnosis and treatment is nearly 11 years (NAMI, 2019).

In conjunction to this, studies as recent as 2018 have tracked the simultaneous increase of emotional and behavioral disorders, a common comorbidity of mental health related symptoms. 7.4% of children ages three to 17 have been diagnosed with a behavioral disorder (CDC, 2020). In accordance with this nearly, one in six children (17%), ages two through eight, had a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder (CDC, 2020). These statistics only represent those cases that have been identified, diagnosed, and reported to such organizations. It is estimated that up to 20% of adolescents in the United States have an emotional or behavioral health concern that significantly impairs functioning in at least one social setting. Behavioral health disorders are now considered among one of the top five chronic pediatric conditions causing functional impairment (Slomski, 2012).

The estimations for both mental health disorders and emotional/behavioral disorders are continually changing based on the source that is cited. A literature review conducted in 2006 by Brauner and Stephens showed that sources dramatically varied in their estimations, some detailing that five percent of children suffer from serious mental health or emotional/behavioral problems, while others state up to 26% of children face these issues (Brauner, C. B., & Stephens, C. B., 2006). This research highlights the disconnect and lack of an appropriate “standard” to both diagnose and treat the children affected by such disorders. Both the underutilization of resources as well as lack of education for educators and families are contributing to an unsteady estimation, therein leading to a vicious cycle of underrepresentation, underutilization, and lack of continued research (Brauner, C. B., & Stephens, C. B., 2006).

Mental health, along with behavioral and emotional challenges, among school aged children is an area of increasing concern. Educators and administrators play a crucial role in the lives of these children and are in fact a primary source of authoritative contact for adolescents of school age. The supports currently in place to assist these teachers with the management of troubled students are minimally taught, maintained, and enforced across the board.

Although educators are often an initial line of influence in the lives of these children, they are not being properly equipped for the increasing emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs of their students. In a study conducted by Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, and Goel (2011), it was noted that 44% of surveyed teachers were unaware or unsure if they knew what the term “evidence-based practices” were in relation to supporting mental and behavioral health needs. In addition to this only 17% of the surveyed teachers felt that they received “substantial education and/or training” in regard to behavioral interventions (Reinke et. al., p.7, 2011). A number of studies have indicated both general education teachers as well as special education

teachers are severely underprepared when asked to deal with problem behaviors and mental health related issues in the classrooms (Flower et. al., 2017; Reinke et. al, 2011; Landau, 2001; Oliver, R., & Reschly, D., 2010). The aim of this research is to understand educator preparedness and confidence in supporting students with behavioral challenges and mental health issues as well as further identify where the gaps may lie in teacher education and implementation of said education.

According to Davis (2019), general education teachers have shared their concerns and stressors associated with evidence-based practice, and how to effectively deal with both emotional/behavioral and mental health issues within their classrooms. The results from a study conducted in 2019 showed that most teachers have an idea of what evidence-based practices are but feel they are poorly equipped in implementing such procedures (Davis, 2019). The primary training that general education teachers receive in dealing with difficult students typically falls back on classroom management. With understanding that general education teachers receive little to no training in classroom management and dealing with problem behaviors, it is not surprising to hear of hesitancy to act from these teachers (Greenburg et. al., 2014). The problem is then intensified as general education teachers typically look toward their special education teachers for advice in dealing with such cases, but they are sparsely equipped themselves.

Similar to their general education peers, it has been noted specifically in the realm of emotional and behavioral disorders, special education teachers are also lacking the appropriate intensive and extensive training needed to effectively help their students (Cooley-Nichols, 2004). Cooley-Nichols (2004) noted such under-preparation has been due in part by the generalization of special education rather than the increased specialization of such education. Particularly, the increasing need for special educators has led to generic preparation rather than categorical. This

has since led to an overload of information that must be incorporated into the education of these young teachers. As a result, focus on emotional and behavioral issues has been slighted over in the process (Cooley-Nichols, 2004). Similarly, Oliver and Reschly (2010) echoed these thoughts; “Little research has been conducted to determine the extent to which special education teacher preparation programs provide teachers with adequate instruction on classroom organization and behavior management techniques.” (Oliver, R., & Reschly, D., 2010). Concluding that, most programs emphasized the use of reactive rather than proactive procedures, and that only 27% of surveyed programs had courses dedicated to proper classroom management for special education teachers.

It is clear from numerous studies that gaps persist throughout pre-service and in-service preparation of both general and special education teachers in regard to emotional/behavioral disorders and mental health issues. Without a resolution to these gaps’ students with-or at-risk for behavior or mental health disorders will continually fall through the cracks. Similar to this, teachers alike are bound to experience quicker burnout and less job satisfaction without increased support and education (Brown, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to obtain current data on the preparedness of special educators and general educators in order to better recognize and move toward filling in these gaps to benefit students with or at-risk for behavior and/or mental health disorders, and teachers responsible for providing support.

### **Methods**

Once the research question had been established, “What is the level of preparedness and confidence of educators in regard to supporting students with behavioral and mental health challenges?”, it was decided that the primary data collection was to be done through means of a survey. The survey questions were developed and refined over the course of a month. Once a

final list of questions was established a Redcap survey was created with the assistance of the team statistician. The survey was distributed via email and social media. Connections through establishments such as DPI and educational organizations were utilized to widen the area of reach. The final survey included 26 questions with an aim to take no longer than 15 minutes to complete.

### **Participants**

Participation in this survey was completely optional and was sent to participants via email, social media, or QR code. General educators, special educators, curriculum support staff, behavior support staff, administrators, and other related personnel were encouraged to partake in this questionnaire. Participants' education and years in service ranged from beginner to veteran. The survey was distributed across the state of NC as well as multiple other states.

### **Design**

The survey was designed with “teacher preparedness” being the primary focus. The aim of the survey was to address educator level of preparation and comfort in their classroom. Furthermore, the survey was utilized to gain information regarding pre-service education and teaching programs. The final survey included 26 items including drop down options, Likert scale questions, and open-ended free response areas. Areas of interest within the survey included: level of expertise, location, types of student served, teacher training and resources, and confidence, knowledge and experience. The target time for completing the survey was 1-15 minutes. Time was an important factor in creating the survey, if it was too lengthy or there were too many open-ended questions the response could have been limited. A statement to participants, the purpose, and common definitions were listed prior to the start of the survey. Ensuring complete participant understanding and compliance is necessary for survey effectiveness.

## **Procedure**

Participants were told that the survey was being conducted to “gain valuable information about pre-service education and training programs”. The participants were informed that the survey was completely optional, and no demographic or personal information was to be provided in order to maintain confidentiality. Participation was voluntary and decided based on profession. The main target audience for participation included educators, administrators, behavioral support staff, and other related services (i.e., mental health professionals). The survey was typically completed between 10 and 15 minutes. Participants were thanked for their involvement in the survey and dismissed. Once participants completed their survey the results were relayed back to our systems. From there the statistician was able to convert the results and feedback into quantitative.

## **Results**

### **Preliminary Research**

Preliminary research was completed prior to survey production and distribution. Ensuring that previous research had not been completed on this topic and gathering foundational information on mental health and behavioral challenges was vital in the success of the survey. Findings from this indicated that areas of mental health and behavior challenges are becoming one of increasing concern (CDC, 2020). In conjunction with this, several other studies indicated educators are aware of supports to aid these students but are often unsure of how to implement them (Davis, 2019). Pre-service education programs seem to be lacking comprehensive education for new teachers, specifically in preparation for handling difficult behaviors in their classroom. Courses such as classroom management in pre-service often lack basis in research



and rely heavily on what is “thought” to be right or most effective (Greenburg et al., 2014).

Information obtained through preliminary research was used as a basis for the survey conducted.

### **Educator’s Preparedness**

Initial results are slim but provide immense insight into the understanding and gaps in teacher education across the board. Among those who responded to the survey n=26 for general educators and n=29 for special educators, the remaining participants n=27 came from varying related backgrounds. Five questions from the key areas of interest were pulled out and examined individually. First, the area of interest was confidence, knowledge and experience. When asked, “I know what to do when an intervention is not working”, 56% of those who responded as a general educator agreed, while 71.4% of those who responded as a special educator agreed. This leaves 44% and 28.6% of general and special educators, respectively, who do not feel confident in locating additional resources when an intervention does not work. In addition to this, when asked, “I can locate research and evidence-based practices to promote behavioral improvements for individual students”, 60% of general educators and 67.9% of special educators agreed. This left 40% and 32% of general and special educators unaware or not confident in locating appropriate measures for students. This is concerning and proves a gap in education, while the majority of educators feel that they can seek out and find resources (question 2), only around half feel they can confidently implement them (question 1).

Next, a question regarding pre-service education and preparation was examined. When asked, “To what extent do you feel your formal education (i.e., Bachelor's degree) prepared you to support students with emotional behavior or mental health disorders in the classroom?”, across both general and special educators only 7.5% of those surveyed felt that their formal education prepared them “very well”. Of the general educators surveyed, 56% claimed that their formal

education “did not prepare me”, while the remaining 44% said it “somewhat prepared me”, leaving 0% of general educators who felt “well prepared” by their formal education to handle emotional behavior and mental health challenges. Among special educators the results were slightly better. 35.7% said former education “did not prepare me”, 50% responded it “somewhat prepared me”, and only 14.3% claimed that their formal education “prepared me well” to handle emotional and mental health challenges.

In addition to this teacher burnout was also recorded. Increased stress based on lack of education and resources was shown to have a significant impact on teacher retention. When posed with the statement, “I have considered leaving the field of education due to the challenging behavior that I face”, 30.2% of those surveyed (n=82) agreed. Furthermore, among those same participants 23% agreed that, “I have left an educational position due to behavioral challenges I have faced in a particular setting”. Based on these initial results it is clear that teacher education and pre-service courses are insignificant in preparing them to handle problem behavior and/or mental health challenges.

### **Educator Testimonies**

Additionally, a couple educator testimonies were acquired via the free response items. One participant stated, “I feel you learn in college, but nothing prepares you like student teaching and just teaching.”. Looking toward future research, narrowing down effective ways of preparing educators for what a day in a real classroom looks like is an important factor. Hands-on and an upfront approach to teaching may be more effective than the typical classroom management courses seen in many pre-service programs. Another participant stated, “I feel like once they [EC students] become an EC student all of the support systems stop, and it is up to the individual teacher to make it better. I feel like the admin could use training on how to interact with students

with disabilities.”. Again, the point driven here is increased support and education for students who need additional help and support throughout the day.

## **Discussion**

### **Implications**

Based on the current results that have been received via survey, the majority of educators do not feel that their pre-service education (i.e., Bachelor's Degree, lateral entry) adequately prepared them to handle mental health and/or challenging behaviors in their classrooms. Overall, special educators did feel they were slightly more prepared in areas such as locating resources when it came to behaviorally challenging students. Although, there were still a large number of teachers who did not feel that way. The primary way to increase and foster positive change in this area is by ensuring access to further research and evidence-based practices. While many educators indicated they agreed with the previous statement, only a little over half (64%) of them stated they felt confident in locating said resources. While the survey is ongoing, the current results are alarming. General educators and special educators are lacking the necessary education, information, and resources to properly handle and benefit the students in their classrooms. Pre-service education programs are not adequately preparing their teachers for the realities of the classroom. The preliminary findings from this research correlate closely with other similar research on pre-service teaching for educators. The data obtained creates a clearer understanding for the increased need for research and resources regarding mental health and behavioral challenges encountered in general education and special education settings alike.

### **Limitations**

Due to the incomplete status of this survey limitations are undeniable. In addition to the data being incomplete it is important to note that convenience sampling was utilized to gain

participation in this research. This can lead to results that are disproportionate and may not provide a well-rounded representation of the groups involved. Along with this, the results and survey would be difficult to replicate since the recruitment was widespread. Majority of participation was received from NC (78.5%, convenience sample), while the remainder of participation was scattered across the US. Reproduction of the results gained would be nearly impossible. Next, this survey could not be generalized across all special and general education teachers. Again, convenience sampling was utilized as a distribution tactic, and groups of educators may be disproportionately represented due to this. Finally, survey results could be potentially biased based on the reason that some participants responded while others did not. Personal connections were used to issue the survey so the incentive for participation could have potentially skewed the results received.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Based on results obtained from the preliminary research, suggestions can be made to ensure future improvements and move forward from this point. Future studies and information should be obtained on those teachers who feel and report that they are confident and competent in terms of preparedness to handle challenging behaviors and mental health. Locating characteristics and commonalities among their pre-service training, examining resources that have been valuable to them, and pinpoint why they feel more confident in these areas will lead to progress in ensuring more competent educators. Based on this, along with other current research, better ways to prepare educators in their pre-service training should be sought out. Figuring out what resources, events, trainings, etc. are most effective for educating and preparing in classrooms with mental health and behavioral challenges. With a specific focus on general education teachers, who felt they were less prepared, seeking out what practices will best prepare

them is necessary, practicum, collaboration, specific trainings, continuing education courses etc. Overall, since the preliminary results point toward the unpreparedness of educators, future research should engage a focus on locating and equipping these teachers with necessary training and resources to help them feel more confident.

### **Conclusion**

Lack of pre-service education for teachers can not only lead to detriments in their work and success, but that of their at-risk students as well. Support and resources are vital to educators and students alike to reach optimal levels of teaching and education for all involved. Increasing levels of mental health and behavioral challenges amongst students in addition to decreasing levels of preparedness and knowledge amongst educators is evident, and in need of intervention. Locating appropriate resources and ensuring that educators are properly equipped when entering their classrooms can help lead to better outcomes for themselves and their students. While this research proves that those resources are not in place, it is a step toward finding and implementing said successful practices. Further research is needed to interview and pinpoint effective strategies to equip and encourage educators where they are.

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