

University of Washington Bothell

The Impact of Teacher Perception Regarding Administrative Support and Retention of Behavior Teachers

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5/31/2013

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Purpose of the Study

Students categorized under the disability category of Emotional/Behavioral Disorder are currently struggling to find success in today's school system. The current research suggests that current graduation rates for students with EBD are astoundingly low (28% of African-American students) (Sinclair, 2005). There are several contributing factors to this population's challenges and the teachers that work with them. While the challenge that these students face are numerous, a factor that can be controlled and improved upon is the retention of the teacher at the front of the classroom. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the factors that are causing teachers to leave this specific area of education and to identify ways that this retention rate can be improved upon.

Statement of the Problem

Within the category of special education, there is a section of the population that functions drastically differently than the typical public school population. Relatively few people are aware of the complexity of the issues and behaviors that these students demonstrate on a regular basis and the challenges that staff members working with them face. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, a child with an Emotional/Behavioral Disorder (EBD) is defined as

“a student who demonstrates an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers/teachers and an inability to learn which cannot be adequately explained by intellectual sensory or health factors. Included in this definition is, a consistent or chronic inappropriate type of behavior or feelings under normal conditions, a pervasive mood of depression, or a displayed

tendency to develop physical symptoms, pains, or unreasonable fears associated with personal or school problems” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

Children categorized under EBD will at times manifest their disabilities through the expression of mal-adaptive behaviors. These behaviors can be internalizing behavior or externalizing behaviors. Internalizing behaviors are defined as “an over control of emotions—include social withdrawal, demand for attention, feelings of worthlessness or inferiority, and dependency” (Katarina Guttmanova, 2007). Externalizing behaviors are defined as “behaviors characterized by an under control of emotions—include difficulties with interpersonal relationships and rule breaking as well as displays of irritability and belligerence” (Guttmanova, 2007).

When these problematic behaviors consistently demonstrate a pattern that interferes with the student’s access to their education they are addressed through Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBA), Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP), and Aversive Therapy Plans (ATP) within the student’s current Individual Education Plan (IEP). The student’s special education teacher, or case manager, is responsible for implementing and monitoring these plans throughout the school year in addition to providing the student with a free and appropriate public education in accordance with a provision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) known as FAPE.

Students with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders whose behavior impedes their learning or the learning of others to a significant extent are currently being educated within the public school system through the use of self-contained and inclusion based programs. Students with EBD are typically restricted to self-contained classrooms for the majority, if not entirety, of their day depending on the severity of their behaviors and the impact that the student’s behaviors have on

their peers. While some programs are embracing the idea of inclusion, or integrating students with EBD into the general education population, the toughest cases are left in a self-contained classroom throughout the day.

Students labeled under the category of EBD demonstrate significantly higher rates of risky behavior. Demographically, students in this category are over represented in low-income, single parent households, where the parent is less likely to be employed or a graduate from high school themselves (Wagner, 2003). They also demonstrate higher levels of maladjustment later in life. There have been long-term associations between childhood externalizing behavior problems and substance abuse, smoking, antisocial outcomes, underachievement, and lower graduation rates from high school (Guttmanova, 2007). Internalizing behavior problems are linked to major depression in adolescence, illegal substance use in early adolescence, and increased risks of dropping out of high school (Guttmanova, 2007). This affects teachers in the sense that they are dealing with these students on a daily basis not just in the area of providing an education, but also in addressing and managing the behaviors and stress that comes from the students' home and social environment. Students categorized under EBD tend to demonstrate more verbally and physically aggressive behaviors in the classroom setting and roughly 66% find little meaning in engaging in academic work (Cheney, 2012). This leads to a classroom environment where teachers face very little success with working with extremely difficult students.

When a student has demonstrated a pattern of behavior that is harmful (to self, peers, or staff), school districts implement aversive therapy plans in order to protect the safety of the student, peers, and staff. The use of restraint and isolation is typically addressed within these plans. As behaviors manifest themselves, staff members are expected to monitor the situation

and intervene physically when appropriate. This definition of what constitutes a crisis situation requiring restraint or seclusion is left up to the discretion of the teacher. These instances of crisis often pose a high level of stress on the teacher and their team. The teacher not only has to respond to the crisis situation, but they then have to take responsibility and account for the actions and consequences of the intervention. This pressure can come through administration, parents, impacted relationships with students, physical injury, and/or a loss of confidence in their abilities as an effective teacher (Cheney, 2012) (Mcdouagh, 2012) (Nelson, 2001).

With the presence of mental health concerns in the Emotional Behavioral Disordered student there is often a demonstrated lack of interest in obtaining an education. According to current sources, 58% of Emotional Behavioral Disordered students do not meet the minimum requirements for high school graduation and only 28% of African-American students categorized under EBD graduate (Sinclair, 2005). This concurrent with a tendency to engage in risky behavior sets this particular population up for higher rates of criminal activity, lower rates of employment, and lower rates of positive life outcomes defined by healthy family or personal relationships (Guttmanova, 2007). Research indicates that due to the environmental and physical factors influencing the outcomes of these students, consistency in teachers, schools, and programing is one of the most important factors to student success (Cheney, 2012). Yet, a large percentage of EBD teachers (38%) leave the profession within two years and the average burnout rate for these teachers is five years (Schwartz, 2006). David Center reported “an annual attrition rate for EBD teachers of 13%” per year. This only addresses those teachers who were able to find employment outside of their current assignment (Center, 2001). Due to the high attrition rate, EBD classrooms currently rank number four in the areas experiencing teaching shortages.

With all of these factors to consider, one could understand why making an impact with this population would be exceedingly rewarding, however, teachers themselves have little to no impact on the successful life outcomes or graduation of students with EBD (Cheney, 2012). Rather the systemic processes of programing on a district level are what contribute to a higher level of overall success amongst students with EBD. In any other area of education, teacher effectiveness is often isolated to be a consistent and powerful factor in helping even the toughest students succeed. However in EBD programs, Cheney asserts that this is not the case. Strong teachers are needed to build relationships with and manage students, but having an effective teacher will not overcome a district with a weak transition plan which is currently a struggle for many school districts facing budget cuts (Cheney, 2012) (Mcdouagh, 2012). This creates a situation where even effective teachers who are prepared to deal with the EBD population are not a significant factor in a positive outcome to their student's lives. Understanding the perspective and reality of these teachers becomes paramount in understanding what their internal motivation is to continue in their field and avoid burn out.

Literature Review

In order to better understand the reasons for attrition, one must first understand the common job stressors associated with an EBD teaching position. Attrition in EBD programs was isolated to the following areas through the analysis of Center and Steventon's 2001 study. The list of stressors included 1) the amount of time spent on paperwork, 2) lack of administrative support for EBD program, 3) external factors such as parent involvement and expectations, 4) increased professional responsibilities, 5) lack of motivation and respect from the students, and 6) disturbing behavior from students.

Teachers avoid these particular placements due to high stress levels and job dissatisfaction (Mcdouagh, 2012) (Schwartz, 2006). Part of this is attributed to the lack of quality training that these teachers receive and feelings of not being prepared to enter the profession successfully (Center, 2001). However, the action of such a high number of teachers leaving the profession affects the quality of education that students with EBD receive. This inconsistency in teachers and programs further exacerbates the cycle of challenging behavior and undermines the value of education in these students' eyes. This cycle of attrition leading to inconstancy, leading to behavior that ties back to turnover attributes to the lack of retention in the profession (Schwartz, 2006).

While the attrition rate in the realm of special education is currently accepted to be between 8-10% (Wasburn-Moses, 2005), the attrition rate for EBD teachers is much higher at 36% (Schwartz, 2006). Special education attrition in general is often linked to caseload sizes, feelings of isolation from the building staff, and a lack of building support (Wasburn-Moses, 2005). Teachers of students with EBD on the other hand are dealing not only with the caseload stress, isolation, and building support but because of the high level of occupational stress that is present when working with this specific population the burn-out for this population is increased (Schwartz, 2006). Experts and researchers in the field consistently cite the working environment of teachers as a significant variable in retaining effective teachers (Cheney, 2012) (Mcdouagh, 2012) (Nelson, 2001) (Schwartz, 2006). Nelson cited the following specific aspects, "excessive paperwork and lack of administrative support were consistently cited as sources of stress, dissatisfaction, and attrition, while positive working environments were often indications of satisfied teachers of EBD students" (Nelson, 2001). These variables were also supported by the

national survey conducted by David Center (Center, 2001). These areas of job stress are strongly correlated with the nature of the job description of an EBD teacher.

Stressors unique to EBD teachers that can lead to attrition start with the organizational structure of the district they are employed through. Due to the intensity and risk associated with working with students with EBD, “an ineffective administrator can horribly affect the work life of a teacher” (Schwartz, 2006). When teachers feel a lack of support at the administrative level, the feelings of isolation from the school environment set in making an already stressful and difficult job more so (Cheney, 2012) (Mcdouagh, 2012) (Schwartz, 2006). EBD teachers feel higher rates of isolation as a result of working in a classroom that requires their constant attention and presence (Cheney, 2012). Teachers self-report that they opt out of (or are unable) to take lunch breaks or planning periods because of the extent of behaviors and incidences that occur within a given school day, despite being encourage by their support teams to do so (Mcdouagh, 2012). Due to the size of programs (typically twelve students) at the secondary level, most high schools offer one behavior program within the school reducing the teacher’s ability to connect with other EBD teacher leading to feelings of further isolation.

There are several distinctive characteristics that stand out amongst teachers who appear to be more adept at handling the working environment. Teachers who are able to establish relationships with other teachers in their building through collaboration and communication are more likely to feel a reduction in feelings of burnout (Cheney, 2012) (Mcdouagh, 2012). Those same teachers find ways to avoid isolation through building strong team relationships with their para-professionals and finding ways to establish positive relationships with their student’s parents (Cheney, 2012). On a surface level, these teachers come to the position with a tendency to be involved with and aware of outside agencies and resources (Cheney, 2012). Teachers also

come to the classroom with an affinity for the specific challenges of youth diagnosed with emotional behavioral disorders (Cheney, 2012). They approach behaviors as a detective and are able to disassociate the behavior from the child themselves (Cheney, 2012). They are naturally consistent and flexible and maintain a curiosity for mental health, often times seeking professional development in these areas (Cheney, 2012).

These characteristics (Table 1) help teachers process and remain resilient to the typical set up of an EBD classroom. The students qualified in these programs by definition of their placement present challenging behaviors on a regular basis. Teachers are constantly utilizing classroom management skills, de-escalation techniques, and are often the target of verbal and physical aggression by students. These instances of stress are then compounded when dealing with administration, parents, discipline, and special education law; which can limit and convolute the discipline options available to the school. Teachers often are unable to leave their classroom and often times do not have opportunities to connect with other teachers that share the same job description. This can often times create feelings of isolation amongst educators which leads to burnout (Cheney, 2012) (Schwartz, 2006) (Mcdouagh, 2012).

The specific attributes listed by Douglas Cheney during a 2012 interview are reasons why prepared applicants enter into the classroom prepared for the challenges they will face as an EBD teacher, but there is another population of teachers that may be negatively impacting the retention of teachers. In a national survey of special education directors, one of the issues presented addressed the availability of qualified EBD teachers. Of the Special Education directors surveyed, only 53% of the teachers placed in EBD programs were fully certified (Katsiyannis, 1997). Emergency certification status accounted for 25-33% of EBD teachers (Katsiyannis, 1997). Literature on teacher certification in EBD consistently indicates that the

current system “as a whole is not adequately meeting either the need for EBD teachers or the EBD teachers' needs” (Wrobel, 1993). Wrobel also states that “a clear need remains for studies focused specifically in the field of EBD. This includes preparation of classroom management as well as effective crisis management skills (de-escalation and self-care). At a minimum, training programs must ensure that individuals seeking a career in EBD are aware of the significant potential for burnout and failure so they can make informed career decisions” (Wrobel, 1993).

The overarching question left unanswered when researching job stress, teacher retention, and EBD teacher attrition specifically relates to understanding the perspectives and experiences within individual programs that cause teachers to stay in the field. If teachers are not experiencing high levels of student success then why do they continue to work in the field of Emotional Behavioral Disorders? Is it about feeling supported by their district and their building? Or do they stay because they feel that they are making an impact on their students? Is this impact restricted to their perception or is student success measurable in these programs?

Methodology

This study focused on identifying the perceptions of teachers of students with EBD on their own career longevity, and in particular on why they are continuing/or not continuing to work in this challenging career.

I began by looking at the five largest school districts in Washington State. I determined it appropriate to gather data from this specific sampling frame because districts of greater size (129,842 to 609,471 students) have specialized programs specific to students with EBD. In smaller districts, students with EBD are typically either moved to private placements or

integrated into other special education programs. The top five districts that I contacted were Seattle, Spokane, Tacoma, Lake Washington, and Kent School District.

I drafted my survey and went through the human subject review process with the University of Washington. I then reached out to the special education departments at each of the following school districts; Seattle, Spokane, Tacoma, Lake Washington, and Kent. Lake Washington was the only district that responded to my request and they agreed to let me survey their teachers and provided me with their names and contact information. I then contacted the given teachers through an informational email and provided them a weblink to my online survey. I determined that an online method would allow participants to respond to survey questions in a private manner on their own time.

Initially, I only intended on contacting high school programs because of the ability I would have to gather data on high school dropouts and other risk factors (Cheney, 2010). High school programs have the highest turnover of students (due to dropouts and incarceration) and most students placed in EBD programs have been in a program for multiple years (Sinclair, 2005). I also felt it was important to look at high school programs in order to measure the successful life outcome for the students in program; this information would not be available at the middle or elementary level. After experiencing a very low response rate (one out of five) from the districts contacted, I made the decision to expand my survey to all teachers of students with EBD in the responding district.

Respondents answered the survey questions online and their identity remained anonymous. Lake Washington employs four elementary level teachers of students with EBD, two middle level, and three high school level educators. I sent out eight surveys and received

responses from two elementary level teachers, one middle level, and three high school teachers, for a total of six responses. I was able to identify who taught at which level based on the link they received and the date range of their Responses. Survey questions addressed why the teacher entered into their current position to establish any common trends in characteristics or philosophy of educational approach (Cheney, Professor, Special Education, 2012) (Schwartz, 2006). Questions also addressed the reasons and factors that have encouraged or caused teachers to continue working with this population. This allowed me to compare the teacher responses to the work environment factors that are considered to reduce work place stressors, specifically avoiding feelings of isolation and positive outlooks on communication, support, and collaboration (Cheney, 2012) (Mcdouagh, 2012) (Schwartz, 2006). Teachers were asked to provide a brief description of their program and how it operates at the district and individual level to assess the availability of community supports as well as to gain an understanding of the level of contact the teacher has with students on a daily basis (self-contained verses inclusion based model) (Cheney, 2010) (Cheney, 2012). Finally, the survey asked teachers what challenges they perceive in hindering successful outcomes for students (Cheney, 2010) (Cheney, 2012). I then conducted a theme analysis of the responses from the participants and compared their responses to the characteristic of effective teachers (Table 1).

Results

Out of the five districts contacted Lake Washington was the only district that agreed to participate in the survey. There were three high school level teachers of students with EBD employed within two behavior programs in the district. The following background was provided via the first two questions of the survey (Why did you choose to begin working with Emotional/Behavioral Disordered teens in the context of education? and Please briefly explain

your career history in relation to EBD students.). Alex¹ stated that they enjoy working the population and being a positive person in their young life. They had previously worked with adolescents at a private mental health hospital before becoming a teacher. After completing their Masters in Education they began teaching in a high school behavior program they are currently finishing their 5th year of teaching.

Participant Chris also teaches with Alex and stated that they had previously worked in a Transition classroom (self-contained learning center). In order to remain in their preferred employment status of part-time, they had taken the behavior position to maintain their desired work schedule. Chris stated that all of their previous experience had been with students/people with developmental disabilities and that they had completed a Master's Degree in Special Education Moderate, Severe and Profound disabilities. Chris immediately volunteered the following statement at the beginning of the survey, "Knowing I was coming into this program last school year, it would have been extremely beneficial to have been provided some training to prepare me for this type of classroom."

Bobbie was the final participant at the high school level to participate in the survey. They work at another high school in the district and are the only behavior teacher in their building. They stated that their initial interest in working with behavior students was that they really "took" to working with students with EBD. This attachment occurred when they were assigned to a 5 year old male who was non-verbal and had significant behavioral difficulties. Bobbie demonstrated an interest in learning about ways to help this child and gaining an understanding about the reasons behind the behaviors. This participant decided to attend graduate school to earn a Masters in Special Education and during that time was able to student

¹ Participant names have been changed to protect privacy

teach in an EBD classroom part-time. Bobbie's first teaching job was in a multi-age middle school resource classroom working with students with high behavioral and social emotional needs. They remained in that position for two years before taking on a high school behavior placement where they are currently finishing their 4th year of teaching EBD.

Due to the low response rate from the remaining districts, I determined that it would be appropriate to expand my survey to all teachers of students with EBD in the responding district. I received one response from a middle school level teacher, Dylan, stated that they have been working with EBD students since fall 2002. Initially they were hired on an emergency certification, but earned their Master's Degree in Education with an emphasis in SPED and certification in SPED while teaching. During their employment they expressed that they experienced a strong desire to leave the profession of education and work in law enforcement and they actively worked toward that goal. However they found that while perusing that career change they renewed their satisfaction in their current job placement.

The remaining two responses came from the elementary level. Participant Erin stated that they began their career working as a para-educator in an EBD classroom during their student teaching and enjoyed the experience. Erin self-reported that they felt they had the temperament to work with the population. They have worked in Elementary EBD classrooms as a graduate student and teacher for four school years now. The final respondent, Participant Francis, stated that they began working with students with behavioral challenges because they wanted a challenge and they gained a sense of enjoyment from helping students overcome their hardships. They have been teaching students with special needs (including EBD) for 11 years but did not identify anything more specific.

The most prominent theme present from the survey responses supported the educator's willingness and ability to present an affinity for the specific challenges of students with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders. This was identified as important because the teacher's understanding of how the student's behaviors and disability manifest in the classroom allows the teacher to disassociate the behaviors from the student. There is also an increased tolerance for the behaviors as the teacher finds satisfaction in mastering and overcoming the challenging behavior. The third question in the survey addressed the theme of expressing an affinity for this distinct population (What inspires you to return to your EBD classroom every year?), Respondents Alex, Bobbie, Dylan, Erin, and Francis all expressed an affinity for the population. Respondent Chris reported differently stating,

"I do not think I will be returning to this position next year. As much as this amazing group of students have found a place in my heart (they have really grown on me!) I feel that my skills are much better suited for a contained learning center of students with significant disabilities. This is what I plan to go back to next year."

Bobbie's statement best summarized the sentiment and the theme of this characteristic within the survey respondents. Their statement clearly outlines the satisfaction they experience from building relationships with students with EBD and similar sentiment was expressed through the other respondents. Bobbie stated,

"I enjoy the constant day to day challenges and trying to help students in need overcome obstacles in their lives and try to teach them/empower them to be successful in their own ways. I also enjoy building relationships over the years"

with students and families and trying to provide as many resources as possible. I am constantly learning new strategies and best practices to implement into the program and enjoy working with my intervention program colleagues.”

The fourth question of the survey addressed the theme of isolation that is common in contributing to not only the burnout of Teachers of students with EBD, but Special Education teachers in general. In response to the fourth question in the survey (What do you do to avoid feelings of isolation?), the following themes were presented. At the high school level, the teachers (Alex, Bobbie, and Chris) responded a need and focus on reaching out to other teachers in their building. Alex and Chris taught within the same school and mentioned that the collaboration with each other helped. Teachers at the elementary and middle level reported that they found outlets for their feelings of isolation outside of the school setting. They engaged in activities outside of work that helped to relieve and reduce stress. Dylan expressed an approach that allowed him to own and address the isolation feelings. They stated,

“I don't avoid [feelings of isolation]. Educators are lonely individuals that are constantly surrounded by people. We are with people every day, all day, but we are the only adult (in most settings). I counteract feelings of isolation through team interactions, making sure that my needs are met (both in and out of school), physical activity is essential to me, in addition I engage in other hobbies/activities that bring me joy such as cooking, reading, and family.”

The fifth question asked participants to respond to the following question, “How does your district or building support you in the following areas? 1. Developing positive communication systems, 2. Providing program support through staffing or building support, 3.

Opportunities for collaboration with: EBD specialists, special education staff at your school and general education staff, paraprofessionals, and students' parents at your school". Each responded expressed a very different perception of what they saw as supportive. Some commonalities across the responses expressed the theme of their building being supportive of Behavior students attending general and resource setting classes. There is a separation between building support (which was reported relatively positively) and administrative support (respondents mentioned budget cuts and themes of a reactive response, i.e. if we need support it is provided).

The respondents reported the following answers;

- Alex: "My building is welcoming of EBD students in their classes. Having positive communications is the only way to best support EBD students. We offer collaboration through student staffing, IEP meetings, round table discussions and open communication."
- Bobbie: "I feel very supported by my department and administration, especially in this past year. I would like to collaborate more, but am aware of the schedule restraints. I do feel that my building administrators are in support of me collaborating with EBD specialists."
- Chris: "I think the building could have supported us significantly better for our program. Our building has not had a school security officer for a significant portion of the year. If a student needed to leave the classroom, there was no place for them to go, or a person to supervise them for a period of time. We created spaces / consequences for this to occur. The district did then provide an additional staff person to our program for part of the day. This was a substantial help. The district could provide additional time for collaboration

with EBD specialists. SPED staff at our school we meet frequently, but mostly for school stuff--EOC's, HSPE's, caseload balancing, etc.”

- Dylan: “Communication Systems: My building administration was integral to the development of my data collection and communication systems. This was done through use of Team meeting times during Wednesday LEAP time. Program Support: My building has been inconsistent on building support over the years. Until recently the administration wanted me to deal with all aspects of the program up to and including disciplinary referrals, (detentions, suspensions, and/or home placements). This is shifting of late to include the building more. That being said, the building is supportive of the program and has constantly strived for excellence within the program and supported us in moments of crisis and ensuring that we are physically/emotionally sound/healthy. Collaboration: This has always been a challenge. I am able to collaborate relatively easily with SPED staff and Gen Ed staff within by building through the use of WAC time, LEAP time and "stolen" moments in the day. I meet daily with the paraprofessionals that are connected to my program and I use traditional meeting times (before/after school, planning time, etc.). Meeting with "job alike" staff has proven especially difficult as we are all on separate schedules during our days and during times that might be used for this such as Wednesday LEAP times. This has fostered a sense of isolation and needing to create all aspects of the program without knowing what/how the other programs are doing or handling similar situations.”
- Erin: “My district leaves communication systems up to me to create. There is building behavioral support for me if needed, but there is not a school district plan for building support. There is grade level team collaboration time; however many times there is a

different activity for Special Education staff centered around legal/paperwork rather than teaching, but that just comes with the territory.”

- Francis: “Support has been cut this year. But when needed, the district tries to support my program.”

In response to the sixth question in the survey (Would you consider yourself a self-contained or inclusion based model or a hybrid of the two?), the respondents reported a common theme of being inclusion-based, but able to restrict the student’s environment more if behaviors presented warranted. A theme of providing behavior support across all educational settings was apparent. Participants reported that they utilize their resources such as para-educators to support student in general education as well as within their program.

In response to the seventh question in the survey (What educational policy challenges do you perceive in hindering successful outcomes for your specific demographic of EBD students in your program?), the respondents answers supported the theme of community support and connection as well as consistency and flexibility in programing. The high school teachers all mentioned their struggles with helping students meet academic requirements and building opportunities for vocational skill building. Chris expressed the following challenges with the current educational policies regarding students with EBD,

“Some of our students are struggling so much with their home life: lack of sleep, need for food, influence of drugs, etc., sometimes they come to school and just need a place with some stability. Academics is not at their forefront and therefore graduation seems very far away as they struggle to get through each day. Many of

our students are IEP determined graduation requirements. The strive for "all students future ready" or in our school "all students college ready" does not fit..."

The middle and elementary level teachers expressed a theme of building common expectations at the district level. They saw the district facilitating this as developing a connection for resources. There was also a common theme of overarching programmatic approaches from a philosophical level such as the use of seclusion rooms and zero tolerance policies.

Following the survey I then sent out a final question. Given that some of my participants had taken the survey in early March, I wanted to give them an opportunity to reflect or account for any changes that may have occurred over the course of the school year. I contacted each participant and asked them if there was anything else that they would like to share that they were not able to include in the survey. I received two responses from Alex and Bobbie.

Alex submitted the following response,

"I am leaving my position after 5 years to teach in resource and continue as team leader (department chair). The high needs of the students and number of students placed in my building made being team leader was a huge stressor. My admin team would like to use my skills to help more students and promote my future dreams of being a special education administrator.

Having 2 para educators, 1 full time teacher and 1 part time teacher with 18 students to track through the day puts a strain on resources. The lack of not having a security guard for 2 months also didn't help the situation. Our two associate principals were doing an amazing job but were stretched thin as well.

An increase in mental health issues and drug issues with the students has also put a strain on the program. The lack of planning due to student issues has also been problematic.”

Bobbie submitted the following statement,

“Since taking the survey, I have applied for a resource position in Maine that opened up. This would allow me to be closer to friends and family. I plan on staying in the intervention program for one more year, if I don’t get the position in Maine. That would be my 5th year in EBD, if I do stay.”

Alex’s statement clearly states how the increase in student behaviors and the perception of not having adequate support changed the willingness for a teacher who previously reported very positive states to continue in their current position.

Discussion

Given the responses of the participants in the survey, it is interesting to note how the role of district and building support influence a teacher’s willingness to stay. The characteristics mentioned in developing an effective teacher with longevity were distinctly apparent. All of the participants mentioned their affinity for behavioral students, their curiosity with addressing behaviors, the sense of accomplishment with overcoming challenge, and the self-care steps that they personally take to preserve their stamina. On top of that, all but one participant responded by mentioning their graduate work (one participant did not mention whether they had a graduate

degree or not). This also supports the evidence that successful EBD teachers pursue professional development.

One interesting result of my survey was that out of the six participants, three are actively leaving or attempting to leave and one had previously seriously considered leaving. This results in four out of the six participants voicing a consideration of leaving. One of these teachers not returning is leaving after their first year and the other two are leaving at or by their 5th year thus supporting the pattern of the 5 year career span. The reasons for leaving typically follow a theme of feeling a lack of support from administration, as stated in Alex and Chris' responses. It is important to note that as evident in Alex's statement it is not the solely the students behaviors that causes the teacher to seek new employment, rather it is how the district or the administration support the teacher in handling the student behavior. Alex stated that the lack of security in their school and adequate para resources impacted their ability to handle and manage the increase of student behavior as the year progressed. If the teacher feels a strong level of support from the district, they are better able to handle the stress and the intensity of the job. This would suggest that the most important factor to retaining EBD teachers is directly related to the teacher's perception of support and even with the other indicating factors are met they only serve to extend the longevity of the teacher's career to the five year span (Chris' one year of experience verses Alex's five years). To move a teacher beyond that five year span, the teacher needs to feel that they have administrative support.

It is interesting to note that the level of support or the means of the support is different for every teacher. It is not about what systems are currently in place, but rather whether that particular teacher perceives those supports and systems as supportive to them and their program. For example the high school perceived very different needs regarding supports, they focused

more on community supports like vocational programs and alternative graduation pathways. The other participants looked at other issues like philosophical alignment of values (seclusion rooms and zero tolerance policies) and common foundations set at a district level. Chris expressed a need for more training and professional development in order to feel prepared for the job where Alex expressed a need for increased staffing.

All of the high school teachers cited academic expectations as a hindrance to the success of their students and their programs. They felt there was a need for community supports (also cited in characteristics of effective EBD teachers) and vocational programs that would help students meet personal achievement levels outside of the college bound track. Middle and elementary school teachers, cited administrative structures as an area needing development. It was very clear from the responses that these levels want more clarification on district programs and policies that are cohesive across all levels. One teacher mentioned the use of seclusion rooms (de-escalation rooms) and their feeling that they were not needed mirroring a response from several districts in the area. I also noticed a trend of the educators five out of six respondents had Master's degree (one did not report).

Conclusions

In conclusion, the results of the survey indicate and support the literature that asserts that the students are not the reason participants stay or leave their professions. The results support the literature that the level of perceived support from the district is a strong influence in whether a teacher remains in a behavior program or moves on. There were also difference between the program level and the perceived level and nature of support. When administrative support is not perceived to be present, teachers who feel ill-equipped to handle the position leave quickly and

teachers who have the professional background to lend them the skills needed to be successful are able to endure the occupational stress longer, but still eventually leave when they feel they have exhausted their resources. Ultimately increasing the retention of these teachers depends upon a district's ability to increase the teacher's endurance through supporting teachers of students with EBD at an individual level.

Limitations:

Initial limitations in the study begin with the small sample size of participants. All of the participants came from the same school district and therefore the similarities in the perception could be related to the district and not the profession as a whole. However, I think it is important to note that the reasons the participants cite regarding their perceptions of support were backed by the literature in studying teacher retention. Furthermore, because participants were surveyed the only information available to use was limited to what the participants volunteered. If the study had been conducted in an interview style there may have been more opportunity for participants to elaborate or clarify their meaning.

Suggestions for Future Investigation:

Future research would benefit from studying the specific differences in levels of support between elementary, middle, and high school. It would be advantageous for the community to understand the difference in how student behaviors are presented as they mature and how schools can respond with community and district supports to grow with students in an attempt to meet their needs as well as adjusting the support to appropriately support the individual teacher.

Appendix:

Table 1: Characteristics and Stressors of Effective Teachers

Characteristics of Effective Teachers	Challenges in implementing	Benefit to the Program
Avoid isolation (Cheney, Professor, Special Education, 2012) (Mcdouagh, 2012) (Schwartz, 2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amount of contact time with students • Inability to predict crisis situations • Students difficulty with authority shifts • Staff perception of program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher feels connected and invested in the school/district • Students are better understood by other staff members • Teacher has outlets to express stress or frustration in a productive manner
Establish positive relationships with their student's parents (Cheney, Professor, Special Education, 2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents are unresponsive • Parents have unrealistic expectations • Parents present challenging behavior as well 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistency between home and school • Parents have an investment in their child's success
Community Support and Connection for resources (Cheney, Professor, Special Education, 2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding from state and school district • Finding willing agencies to work through transition plans • Student investment/interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students demonstrate an increased investment in their future • Wraparound services provide support to teachers and programs
Present an affinity for the specific challenges of EBD youth (Cheney, Professor, Special Education, 2012) (Schwartz, 2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers enter the position unaware of the disabilities manifestations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding the behaviors and disabilities allows one to disassociate the behavior from the child
Approach behaviors as a detective (Cheney, Professor, Special Education, 2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reactive approaches do not allow for reflection or preparation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers are able to be proactive in their approach both physically and emotionally
Consistency with programing and flexible in adjusting routine for behaviors. (Cheney, Professor, Special Education, 2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily routines are difficult to manage through crisis or behavior manifestations • Multiple subjects are taught throughout the day, this can be difficult to organize and manage on a regular basis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are able to predict staff responses in both positive and negative situations
Desire to seek professional development in mental health areas (Cheney, Professor, Special Education, 2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of district support financially or through release time • Teacher's motivation/energy to take on more responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater understanding of the population and new research regarding the specific disabilities

Table 2: Survey Questions Administered to Participants

Educator Perception Survey:

1. Why did you choose to begin working with Emotional/Behavioral Disordered teens in the context of education?
2. Please briefly explain your career history in relation to EBD students.
3. What inspires you to return to your EBD classroom every year?
4. What do you do to avoid feelings of isolation?
5. How does your district or building support you in the following areas;
 - a. Developing positive communication systems
 - b. Providing program support through staffing or building support
 - c. Opportunities for collaboration with: EBD specialists, special education staff at your school and general education staff, paraprofessionals, and students' parents at your school
6. Would you consider yourself a self-contained or inclusion based model or a hybrid of the two?
7. What educational policy challenges do you perceive in hindering successful outcomes for your specific demographic of EBD students in your program?

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