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RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Urban Special Education Leaders for Tomorrow



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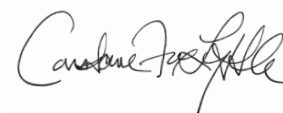
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The Urban Special Education Leaders for Tomorrow Project (USELT) is a 5-year (2014-2019) OSEP funded Special Education Leadership Personnel Training Grant (CFDA 84.325D). USELT fulfilled its mission, to prepare diverse urban special education leaders to improve outcomes for children with disabilities and their families; and its purpose, to address the gap between traditional preparation of special education administrators and the unique skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed to be effective special education leaders in urban settings.

Specifically, USELT prepared ten (10) Philadelphia, PA, Washington, DC, and Montgomery County, MD special education professionals (the USELT Scholars) through Drexel University's Doctorate of Education (EdD) degree program in Educational Leadership and Management with a Special Education Leadership Concentration, for urban special education administrative positions in diverse settings. These new doctors, who are highly trained leaders, are improving outcomes for high need children with disabilities. Throughout each of the 5-year funding period, the USELT Scholars engaged in coursework, internships, mentorship, national faculty academy and summer institutes.

All 10 Scholars successfully defended their dissertations and completed their Doctoral Program within the Grant period; some three, two, and one term early. This Monograph is a compilation of the USELT Scholars' dissertation research, all of which will have a lasting positive impact on outcomes for students with disabilities in urban settings.

Sincerely,



Constance Fox Lyttle, PhD, JD
USELT Project PI and Director



Kristen Betts, EdD
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Office of Special Education Programs
U.S. Department of Education

The contents of this Monograph were developed under a grant from the US Department of Education, #H325D140081. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the US Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. Project Officer, Dr. Selete Avoke.

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On December 20, 2014, 10 amazing urban educators opened an email inviting them to become a USELT Scholar....five years later, having completed their EdD Coursework, Special Education Leadership Courses and Internships, Mentoring sessions, National Faculty Academy Presentations, and Five Summer Institutes; as planned; these 10 Scholars have become the “Urban Special Education Leaders For Tomorrow.”

It has been our sincere honor, pleasure and privilege to have created and facilitated this project with our colleague and dear friend, Dr. Michel Miller. We know her spirit has been with us throughout our journey, is with us today, and will be with us always. It is for this reason we dedicate this Monograph to her.

“Congratulations Doctors!”

► **MISSION:** USELT’s mission is to prepare diverse urban special education leaders to improve outcomes for children with disabilities and their families. The mission is driven by our values of social justice for children with disabilities and their families.

► **PURPOSE:** USELT is designed to address the gap between traditional preparation of special education administrators and the unique skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed to be effective urban special education leaders implementing fully the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004).

► **USELT PROVIDES FOR FOUR MAJOR OUTCOMES:**

- Graduate 10 high-quality scholars from urban/suburban regions with educational doctoral degrees with a concentration in special education leadership to serve as special education leaders in their respective school systems.
- Offer an EdD degree program with a concentration in Special Education Leadership that can be completed by scholars in the five-year grant period.
- Replicate the NUSELI model that is proven to be effective in preparing urban special education leaders.
- Deliver a model that will provide scholars the competencies needed as a future special education leader.

► **PARTNERS:** USELT is a collaborative initiative among Drexel University’s School of Education, four partner schools, the National Urban Special Education Leadership Initiative (NUSELI), and national and international special education leaders.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE VISIT

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The Voices of Leaders: A Qualitative Examination of Urban Principals' Perspectives Regarding the Reintegrating of Students with an Emotional Disturbance Back into the School Community

By Dr. Charlotte Brickhouse

► ABSTRACT

Reintegrating students with an Emotional Disturbance (ED) back into the school community from an alternative placement has been a major issue for school teams for decades. Students transitioning back to their former schools often face significant challenges when they return to a traditional school setting. When these challenges go unaddressed they often result in poor grades and attendance, regression and recidivism. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research was to understand the perceptions and lived experiences of urban high school principals as it relates to the reintegration of students from an alternative placement such as approved private schools, residential treatment facilities, and juvenile facilities back to their neighborhood public school. The research was conducted in an effort to gain insight into the planning and support, or the lack thereof, for students with ED. In addition, the research focused on uncovering barriers and challenges, best practices, and components for successful reintegration of students with ED. Through interviews and reflective journal responses related to the research questions, the study revealed a need for additional central office support, specialized training, formalized reintegration meetings, comprehensive transition plans, and the development of reintegration-transition programs.

► INTRODUCTION

School leaders across the country are continuing to struggle with the decision of appropriate educational placement for students with disabilities, and finding the most suitable placement for a student with an emotional disability is still arguably one of the most challenging, contentious, and complex issues in special education. Although, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) established guidelines for educators concerning a student's educational needs and the least restrictive environment it is still difficult to determine the least restrictive environment placement for students with significant emotional, social and behavioral needs (Becker, Paternite, Evans, Andrew, Christensen, & Kraan, 2014; Simpson, 2004).

Students with ED who exhibit behaviors that disrupt the school and classroom environment, impede the learning for themselves and others, or pose a threat through verbal and physical aggression are often placed in an alternative setting (Atkins & Bartuska 2010; Kleiner et al., 2002; Simpson, 2004). However, these students eventually return back to a less restrictive environment in a neighborhood school without the appropriate supports needed to help them reintegrate successfully. Upon their return they are confronted with barriers such as lack of resources, poor transition plans, and teachers who are ill-equipped to meet

their needs (Trout, Tyler, Stewart, & Epstein, 2012). As a result, there is a great need to address this issue to improve student outcomes and ensure a successful reintegration back to their school communities.

► PROBLEM STATEMENT

Students with ED who return to their neighborhood school from an alternative placement such as approved private schools, juvenile facilities, or residential treatment facilities are more likely than their peers to experience significant challenges that result in severe academic and behavior regression. These challenges include limited emotional or mental health support at the receiving school, insufficient or no transition plan, and inadequate academic knowledge and skills (Trout et al., 2012). Such students also have an approximately 75% higher rate of suspension or expulsion, poor attendance, recidivism, and dropping out (Wagner, Kutash, Duthnowski, Epstein, & Sumi, 2006). A study in urban districts found that students with emotional disabilities, minorities, and the disadvantaged are overrepresented in school discipline (Losen & Gillespe, 2012; Losen & Martinez, 2013). In addition, the recidivism rate is 4.5 times higher for this population (Losen, 2012). Research also shows that these problems have long-lasting effects that span beyond the school walls. According to Courtney and Dworsky (2006), students with ED have an increased chance of involvement in the criminal justice system. As adults, they also have higher rates of unemployment and economic challenges (Bernstein, 2000; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). In addition, students with emotional and behavioral disorders face housing displacement and homelessness, along with problems with substance abuse (Bernstein, 2000; Conner, Doerfler, Toscano, Volungis, & Steingard, 2004; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008). Despite these dismal and alarming facts, schools do not plan for students' transition back into their neighborhood school. It is imperative school districts seek out and implement best practices or specific programs to help students successfully reintegrate into a less restrictive environment.

► PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the perceptions of school principals as they relate to the reintegration of students from an alternative placement back into their neighborhood public school in an effort to gain insight into the planning, or lack thereof, and support for students. This study focused on school principals' experiences in an urban public school when students with ED and behavioral disorders transition back into a less restrictive environment. The research also sought to understand and identify effective practices for inclusive reintegration and barriers to transition planning for returning students to develop a transition program and implement best practices in an urban setting.

Students who transition back to their neighborhood schools after being placed in a more restrictive setting often face significant challenges. Research shows that these students are suspended more frequently, perform poorly on academic achievement assessments, and are more likely than their peers to be retained after their return back to school (Trout et al., 2008). Such outcomes have a devastating effect on academic and behavioral progress, urban communities, and the economy (Trout et al., 2012). Without a viable solution, this vicious cycle will continue to increase recidivism to alternative placements, perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline filling correctional facilities with disabled adults.

Although a plethora of research exists documenting the dismal outcome of students who reintegrate back into a less restrictive environment, there are no best practices to help them transition successfully.

Transition programs and the evaluation of such programs have not been well documented. The lack of a comprehensive, transition program leaves many school principals and educators searching for ways to implement effective practices that support returning students (Savina, Simon, & Lester, 2014). Schools are faced with the challenge of meeting the needs of the students; however, in many cases, there are inadequate resources and training (Wolf & Wolf, 2008). Although the development of a transition program will help students reacclimate themselves into a less restrictive environment, it is a daunting and complex task for school personnel. Therefore, it is imperative for multidisciplinary teams to create a framework to improve student outcomes. Developing a framework and a vision to inspire and embrace inclusive practices begins with the school principal(s). Identifying needs, creating goals, and developing a plan to improve practices are the first steps to change.

The absence of a solid plan and transition supports to guide a school team to reintegrate students will inevitably lead to low grades, an increase in negative behavior, and a regression in social and emotional gains (Trout et al., 2012). Many schools are unprepared to offer support, guidance, and the resources needed for students to successfully transition back to their neighborhood schools (Trout et al., 2012). Such supports and services are critical to maintain academic and behavioral gains and prevent returning back to alternative placements (Guterman et al., 1989). This research is significant because there are no best practices that currently exist to support students with ED that reintegrate into a less restrictive environment. It is also imperative to improve student readiness and student outcomes through transition supports or a transition program to ensure a successful reintegration.

► CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The researcher examined the phenomenon of the reintegration of students with ED from an alternative setting with an interpretive constructivist lens. This approach allowed the researcher to gain a greater understanding from the principal's perspectives to uncover why appropriate planning is lacking for students that reintegrate from alternative settings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). It also allowed the principals a voice to share their concerns regarding student reintegration, barriers, and best practices for reintegration that addresses the unique need of students in an urban setting. Three areas of research that served as a basis to further understand the phenomenon were: special education and supports for students with emotional disabilities in the least restrictive environment and alternative placements, leadership practices of principals as it relate to inclusive practices, and reintegrating students with an emotional disturbance back to their neighbor school.

► METHODOLOGY

Phenomenological research methodology was used to collect qualitative data using three data sources. Semi-structured interviews, researcher field notes from the observation, and participant journals were used to construct meaning of the phenomenon. According to Creswell (2011), a phenomenological study "describes the common meaning of several individuals of their lived experience of a concept or a phenomenon" (p. 130). Understanding the principals' experiences gave insight into their idea of inclusion, and the reintegration of students with an emotional disturbance. It also allowed the participants to share what they believe are components needed to develop a transition program, and possible solutions to support students with ED when they return from an alternative setting.

The target population of this study was comprised of high school principals of comprehensive neighborhood schools in a large urban district. The participants' experience as a school administrator ranged from 4 to 10 years. However, their years of experience as educators were between 7 to 30 years in the education field. The study was conducted in an urban district that serves more than 130,000 students throughout the area. Of which, approximately 19,487 are students with disabilities who receive special education supports and services within the district. The participants in this study had special education populations in their schools that ranged from 13% to 23%. Additionally the students with ED were comprised of 13% to 23% of the student population in their respective schools.

► RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research sought to understand and gain insight into the experiences of school principals as it relates to reintegrating students with an Emotional Disturbance. In order to identify the barriers and components needed to successfully transition students back into their school communities the following questions guided the research:

1. What factors (i.e., events, circumstances, and conditions) influence school principals' willingness to accept and support students with an emotional disturbance who have returned to school from an alternative placement?
2. How do principals provide support for students with an emotional disturbance when they return from an alternative placement to a less restrictive environment?
3. What are the challenges and barriers that principals identify as a hindrance to support students with an emotional disturbance when they return?
4. What supports do principals identify as essential to successfully reintegrate students with emotional disturbance upon their return from an alternative placement?
5. What supports do principals believe are necessary to help them feel confident in developing and implementing a transition program in an urban school district?

► FINDINGS

Data collected from participant interviews, reflective journals, and field notes from observations revealed 4 themes and 12 sub-themes. The themes include: challenges impacting student reintegration, needed district support, school-based internal support, and program development for successful reintegration. Challenges identified in the research are directly correlated to the absence of a standard transition process, lack of emotional support programs, social injustice that interfered with their ability to provide adequate services to all students, and the lack of principal confidence.

The 2nd and 3rd themes focused on support needed for principals to successfully reintegrate students. The sub-themes uncovered a need for resources and specialized transition programs in their schools, teacher training and awareness to support students with ED that return from alternative settings, improved communication with central administrative office and schools, and school based supports, student connection, rapport and environment. Lastly, the 4th theme described the essential functions for successful reintegration. Sub-themes are essential programming with a focus on transitioning ED students, school based mental health support, and essential resources needed such as additional staff, processes and adequate materials.

► CONCLUSIONS

Students with ED that reintegrate back to their neighborhood school from an alternative placement, such as approved private schools, juvenile facilities, or residential treatment facilities, are more likely than their peers to face significant challenges that result in academic and behavior regression. Additionally, providing support that fosters success for students who transition back to a regular school setting is a major problem that still in most schools. The research indicates that while principals are aware of the mandate to provide students with the LRE and a free and appropriate education for students with disabilities, they are continuing to struggle to support students with ED that transition back. The purpose of the study was to understand the lived perceptions of principals as it relates to the reintegration of students with ED in order to identify current practices, barriers to helping students transition, and essential components of an effective transition program.

The results showed that principals are not willing to accept with ED that reintegrate to their schools without appropriate central office support that include resources and training. Principals do not feel confident supporting students with ED that return, but they recognize the importance of building relationships with students with ED to assist with a smooth transition. Also, principals believe that building internal systems in the school that provide mental health support for students that include a de-escalation space is an essential component to help students successfully reintegrate. Lastly, principals believe it is critical to develop a formalized step-down transition program with a focus on collaborative articulation meetings with all stakeholders to develop strong transition plans and on-going central office support from the special education director or other experts.

► SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTIONS

There is little research regarding the reintegration of students with an emotional disturbance from alternative settings and best practices to support students when they transition. This study contributes to the field of current literature by providing principals a voice to share their perspectives and insight in order to identify current practices, barriers to transition, best practices, and ideas related to the development of a transition program in an urban school district. Additionally, the study results indicate the need for central office administrative support, principal and teacher training with a focus on supporting students with ED, and a comprehensive, therapeutic transition program for ED students reintegrating back into their school communities.

► RESEARCHER BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Charlotte Brickhouse is a passionate advocate for students with disabilities, and Pennsylvania's Children and Youth Action Network Coordinator. Her research interest is on reintegration of students with emotional disabilities, inclusion, and educational equity and equality. As a director of special education instructional programs and services in the School District of Philadelphia, she oversees the instructional programs for 220 schools. Providing expert support and consultation to school teams, she ensures students receive quality educational programs that addresses student's academic and social, emotional and behavioral needs. As a USELT scholar and a leader in the field she is currently leading the charge with a district initiative on High Leverage Practices. Dr. Brickhouse has provided district wide professional trainings on these research-based practices to support special education teachers in providing effective instructional practices.

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Urban High School Educators' Perceptions of the Effects of Trauma on Students Identified with Disabilities that Require Learning Support: A Grounded Theory Study

By Dr. Guy Desjardins

► ABSTRACT

The effects of complex trauma on students diagnosed with disabilities from low socioeconomic urban schools have become increasingly recognized as a serious issue involving students' academic and behavioral performance. Research is lacking at the educator level for what the perceived effects are on these students and how they may be better served with supports additional to special education learning supports. The specific purpose of this grounded theory study was to explore the perspectives of urban educators on the academic and behavioral challenges of students diagnosed with disabilities who receive learning support. Of particular interest was whether these deficits may indicate a prevalence of symptomology associated with complex trauma, and if the diagnosis of learning disability or related diagnosis provides these students with adequate supports to meet their academic and social-emotional needs. As reported by the educators in this study, these students have learning, attention, memory, and behavioral problems that are seriously impeding their academic progress and socioemotional development. All the educators interviewed in this study recommended additional, school-based mental health supports to help mitigate these problems.

► INTRODUCTION

A recent study by Compton, Fuchs, Fuchs, Lambert, and Hamlett (2012), conducted in the southeastern United States, found that about 72% of their children with learning disorders come from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. Research reveals that many of these students may not be receiving appropriate or sufficient special education services (Schifrer et al., 2011) due to exposure to multiple trauma. Exposure to traumatic events can lead to a potential diagnosis of a stress-related disorder such as complex posttraumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD). Students with stress related disorders that are not recognized or diagnosed may not be receiving the necessary supports for their academic and behavioral performance (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). The lack of support may be because behaviors resultant from trauma can be misinterpreted in the classroom as disinterest, avoidance, or rejection of academics (Hertel & Johnson, 2013).

This grounded theory study examined the perceptions of special educators at a large southeastern Pennsylvania urban high school on the effects of complex trauma on their socioeconomically disadvantaged minority students diagnosed with disabilities who receive learning support in order to generate a substantive theory on how the learning and developmental progress of these students is affected and what recommendations these educators have to better support their students.

► PROBLEM STATEMENT

Given the documented evidence of the prevalence of traumatic events in the lives of poor urban students, and the fact that a high percentage of these students may be suffering from the effects of complex trauma, this study focused on the perceptions of urban special educators about how the learning and developmental progress of such students is affected by traumatic stress and what recommendations these educators have to better support their students.

► PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this inductive grounded theory study (Charmaz, 2013) was to explore the perspectives of urban educators on the academic and behavioral challenges of their students diagnosed with disabilities who receive learning support, whether these deficits may indicate a prevalence of symptomology associated with complex trauma, and if the diagnosis of learning disability (LD) or related diagnosis provides these students with adequate supports to meet their academic and social-emotional needs, in order to generate a substantive theory from the data collected and analyzed using grounded theory methods that addresses the problem. Despite its widespread prevalence and potentially devastating effects, trauma has not always been in our collective consciousness as a major problem in public schools. According to Cole et al. (2009), teachers have been dealing with trauma's impact for generations, often without realizing it. What is new is that trauma researchers can now offer insight into the possible causes of several classroom difficulties plaguing our educational system (Cole et al., 2009). Therefore, it is critical to bear in mind how trauma-sensitive school environments can benefit those children whose trauma history is known, those whose trauma will never be clearly identified, and those who may be impacted by their traumatized classmates (Cole et al., 2009).

► CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This researcher's stance is a social constructivist approach. Researchers are a part of the process, and their perspectives and interactions affect it (Charmaz, 2000, 2006; Clarke, 2005). This researcher also espouses the social justice inquiry method of Charmaz (2011a), which takes into account inequities, injustices, poverty, lack of access, and their potential implications for suffering and aspires to join a new generation that seeks to "reclaim the tools of the method, to form a revised, more open-ended practice . . . that stresses its emergent, constructivist elements" (Clark, 2005, p. xxiii), for "advancing social justice studies" (Charmaz, 2005, p. 507).

The conceptual framework for this study is supported by four research streams: (a) disproportionate identification of learning disabilities among urban minority students, (b) the neurological deficits caused by PTSD, (c) the effects on students of living in a community that has high poverty and crime rates, and (d) how urban minority students potentially suffering from PTSD, but diagnosed with a specific learning disability, may not be receiving appropriate special education supports and services.

► METHODOLOGY

Using grounded theory methods, the researcher identified themes that converged on the proposed research questions. These themes were grounded in the interview data by the participants sharing their experiences of teaching, counseling, evaluating, and disciplining students with disabilities. The resultant interviews were transcribed and analyzed to acquire cogent data representative of the perspectives of the educators pertaining to the negative effects of trauma on students with disabilities that require learning support. Faithful to a grounded theory approach, coding and memo writing using constant comparative analysis were undertaken until inclusive categories and resultant themes emerged.

Interview participants were special educators in various capacities in a large urban high school in southeastern Pennsylvania. Special education teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, psychologists, and administrators were invited to participate in the individual active interview process. The number of respondents/participants was 14.

► RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The specific purpose of this grounded theory study was to explore the perspectives of urban educators on the academic and behavioral challenges of students diagnosed with disabilities who receive learning support. Of particular interest was whether these deficits may indicate a prevalence of symptomology associated with complex trauma and if the diagnosis of learning disability or related diagnosis provides these students with adequate supports to meet their academic and social-emotional needs. The ultimate study goal was to generate a substantive theory from the data collected and analyzed using grounded theory.

The study explored the following questions:

1. What behavioral and academic commonalities do urban high school educators observe in their students with disabilities who receive learning support?
2. What are urban educators' perceptions of the negative academic and behavioral effects of the environmental and economic disadvantages their students experience?
3. What additional supports do urban educators think their students with disabilities who may have experienced trauma need in order to mitigate their trauma-related academic and behavioral challenges?

► FINDINGS

The findings were resultant from data collected from interviewing several urban educators, including nine special education teachers, a counselor, school psychologist, special education liaison, climate manager, and the dean of discipline. The data were coded and analyzed using constant comparison, memo writing, and thematic development. The themes developed show that the majority of the urban students diagnosed with disabilities with whom these urban educators have contact in their various capacities have suffered from significant traumatic exposure. There also appears to be a demonstrable connection between students' traumatic exposure and academic deficits, behavioral issues, and memory and attention deficits as observed by these educators.

Given the apparent prevalence and severity of these trauma-related problems in the school environment, it has been recommended by these educators en masse that there needs to be an effort to promote and develop school-based mental health supports, including trauma supports, for these students diagnosed with disabilities suffering from trauma exposure. There also needs to be an increased trauma awareness training for educators as recommended by several educators for those who may not have experience dealing with traumatized students.

► CONCLUSIONS

Socioeconomically disadvantaged urban students diagnosed with disabilities are subject to a high prevalence of traumatic events in their lives. This study provided more evidence of this traumatic exposure through the perceptions of the urban educators who were interviewed. The educators also provided demonstrable evidence of academic and behavioral deficits that can be linked to such exposure to trauma. The students come to school on a regular basis having been exposed to abuse, neglect, and community violence. In addition, the school itself, far from being a safe haven, can also be a source of traumatic violence. This study shows that students diagnosed with learning disabilities and other health impairments are not receiving the appropriate services to mitigate their academic and behavioral deficits. To provide significant relief for these students, mental health services that include trauma therapy must be implemented within the school. Otherwise, the cycle of disadvantage, abuse, and violence will continue in this community.

► SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTIONS

There is an increasing body of research indicating that a significant number urban students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are suffering from complex trauma that negatively impacts their academic and behavioral performance in school. Many of these students are identified as having disabilities that require learning support. This study adds the voices of urban special educators to this growing body of research. These educators report a preponderance of behaviors and academics deficiencies in their students identified with disabilities that are indicative of a high exposure rate of complex trauma. Also reported were a perceived lack of training, resources, and support for these teachers in their efforts to deal with these traumatized students. The recommendations of this group of urban special educators include in school mental health services, trauma training at the school and university level, trauma sensitive school approaches, and a recognition of the important role that complex trauma plays in the ongoing inequity of opportunities for urban students identified with special education disabilities.

► RESEARCHER BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Guy Desjardins has been a special educator in various teaching and administrative capacities in a large urban school district in southeastern Pennsylvania for almost 16 years. Over the course of these 16 years, the stories, behaviors, and academic challenges presented by students diagnosed with disabilities as experienced by the researcher has led to a belief that trauma is a major contributing factor in the ongoing inequality between disadvantaged students from urban centers and their non-urban counterparts. Dr. Guy Desjardins' dissertation research centered on making a contribution to the slowly expanding field of trauma research as it applies to urban students diagnosed with disabilities.

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A Case Study Exploration of School-Based Mindfulness Instruction Through the Voices of Middle School Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities

By Dr. Danielle Heeney

► ABSTRACT

As socio-emotional learning has increasingly gained attention in education, the incorporation of mindfulness practices within the school setting has emerged as an avenue schools are exploring to support students' emotional capacities and well-being. This qualitative case study examines the internalizing and externalizing effects of school-based mindfulness instruction with middle school students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Mindfulness instruction, adapted from the Mindful Schools curriculum, was facilitated in thirteen sessions over a six-week period in a special education classroom with students identified with emotional disturbance under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Five students' voices, through their journal responses written throughout the course of the program and post-instruction interviews, served as the primary source for examining the program's impact. School and classroom-based behavioral data provided additional insight into the observable behavioral effects. The finding of the study revealed that engaging in mindfulness practices gave students space to think as opposed to responding impulsively, improved emotional regulation, and enhanced self-care and self-esteem. Additionally, a sense of calmness, decreased incidents of verbal and physical aggression, and an increased ability to respond with cognitive awareness to emotionally charged situations were identified as externalizing benefits.

► INTRODUCTION

Emotional disturbance (ED) is one of the 13 disability categories in the individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA defines emotional disturbance as a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance:

- (A) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
- (B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
- (C) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
- (D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
- (E) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems. (IDEA Regulations, 34 CFR §§ 300.8 (c)(4))

Students identified ED experience a myriad of behavioral, emotional, academic, social, and interpersonal characteristics and challenges that impact their education, mental health, and involvement in their communities and society.

As utilizing mindfulness practices for socio-emotional learning in the school setting has gained traction in educational research and practice, this study explores the efficacy of mindfulness instruction with students with emotional disturbance. An operational definition for mindfulness is "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). The rationale for incorporating mindfulness instruction in the school setting is grounded in research in clinical settings, which found that engaging in these practices can alleviate psychological distress and self-esteem (Tan & Martin, 2013) and improve executive functioning, attention, and emotion regulation skills (Beauchemin, Hutchins, & Patterson, 2008; Malow & Austin, 2016; Singh, Singh, Singh, Singh, Lancioni, & Winton, 2011; van de Weijer-Bergsma, Formsmma, de Bruin, & Bögels, 2011; Van Vliet et al., 2017) in students with academic and behavioral disabilities.

► PROBLEM STATEMENT

Students who have been identified with ED are more likely to experience disruptions in their education and, ultimately, be involved with the criminal justice system than their nondisabled peers (Constantine, Ansel, Robst & Givens, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Wagner & Newman, 2012; Wagner, Kutash et al., 2005; Walters, 2017). They are twice as likely to be expelled or removed to an alternative placement setting, four times more likely to be suspended, and almost twice as likely to drop out of school than other categories of IDEA-eligible students (NCES, 2016b; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Furthermore, 11% of students with ED in the 12- to 13-year-old age bracket are reported to have been arrested, and 60.5% of young adults who had received services as students with ED have had contact with the criminal justice system by the age of 25 (Blackorby, 2002; Wagner & Newman, 2012; Walters, 2017). This is a significantly higher trajectory compared with students who have been identified with other disabilities, as well as their nondisabled peers (Constantine et al., 2013; Wagner & Newman, 2012; Walters, 2017). Considering these dire outcomes and federal and state special education laws and regulations, schools are tasked with the responsibility of coordinating and implementing programming that not only addresses the academic needs of students with ED, but their socio-emotional needs as well (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2018, 22 Pa. Code § 14.131; IDEA, 2004).

► PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

The characteristics and challenges associated with the emotional disturbance disability affect students in school and beyond its walls. Given the research that expounds the benefits of mindfulness practices, mindfulness instruction may serve as an additional tool for schools to address the socio-emotional needs of students who are identified within this disability classification. The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of a six-week school-based mindfulness instruction program on the internalizing (how students cope with and process a variety of unfavorable emotions, such as frustration, stress, anxiety, anger, and embarrassment) and externalizing (observable behaviors, such as noncompliance, physical and verbal aggression, impulsivity) behaviors of middle school students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

► CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of this study was rooted in three distinct streams of research: (a) The educational classification of emotional disturbance, (b) The concept of mindfulness, and (c) Mindfulness interventions. The educational classification of emotional disturbance stream delved into the academic, social, and emotional characteristics of students who have been identified within this IDEA disability category and their school and long-term society outcomes. The second stream, the concept of mindfulness, explored the theories of mindfulness and the neuroscientific and psychology effects of its practices. The final stream examined was current studies concerning the efficacy of mindfulness intervention. Underpinning these streams and this study is the theory of resiliency. Resiliency is “the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development” (Masten, 2014, p. 6). As research has found a positive relationship between mindfulness and resilience (Tan & Martin, 2016), the conceptual framework and impetus for this study is grounded in the objective of equipping students with tools to support their socio-emotional well-being and resiliency and consequently improve outcomes, despite the challenges associated with the emotional disturbance disability.

► METHODOLOGY

This study implements a qualitative case study design to explore the perceived value of a six-week, 13 lesson school-based mindfulness instruction program based on the Mindful School curriculum. Table 1 outlines the session topics and practices. The study’s central focus was the students’ perspectives, derived from journal prompt responses recorded throughout the course of the program and the students’ responses to post-instruction interviews. School and classroom behavioral data was utilized to provide additional insight and context into the students’ observable behavior during the pre- and post-mindfulness instruction period.

The site for this study was a special education classroom in a school in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The school serves grades 6-12 and had a student body population of approximately 550 students at the time of the study. There were eight students who took part in the mindfulness instruction program. Five students participated in this study: Daniel, Gerald, Rafi, Alex, and James. The remaining three students were excluded from consideration due to lack of lesson attendance due to truancy or hospitalization, resulting in participation in three or fewer sessions. The five student participants were African American males in grades six to eight who had been identified with the primary disability of emotional disturbance.

Table 1

Mindful Schools (2015) Curriculum Sessions

Session	Focus, Topic, and Practice
1	Introduction
2	Emotions/Mindfulness of Sound
3	Response vs. Reaction
4	Emotions
5	Thoughts
6	Breath Counting
7	Mindfulness of Breathing- Staying with your base
8	Breath
9	Body Awareness
10	Heartfulness toward others and self
11	Pleasant/Unpleasant
12	Past/Present/Future and Letting Be: Mindfulness of Emotion
13	Gratitude and Appreciation

► RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To explore the impact of the mindfulness instruction, the researcher used the following research questions to drive the study and as a lens to frame the findings:

1. How do mindfulness practices affect the externalizing behaviors of students who participate in a school-based training as perceived by the students?
2. How do mindfulness practices affect the internalizing behaviors of students who participate in a school-based training as perceived by the students?
3. How do mindfulness practices affect the externalizing behaviors of students who participate in a school-based training as measured by school-based behavioral documentation?

► FINDINGS

The researcher explored the data of this study through two explicit lenses, the internalizing and externalizing impact of the mindfulness instructions. Due to its personal nature, the effects on internalizing behaviors were derived from the students’ own words in their journal entries and interview responses. Three themes emerged from this data and are evidenced in Table 2. The first theme was space to think and was prevalent in all five students’ data. This theme can be described as a cognitive pause to process information, emotions, or feelings before taking action. This finding suggests that engaging in mindfulness practices supported a myriad of executive functioning skill such as assessing a situation and the options for responses, controlling and inhibiting impulsive actions and thoughts, and planning and executing action. The second internalizing theme was emotion regulation. Emotion regulation is defined as “the process of modifying the intensity, the duration or the type of a given emotional response in

order to maintain an adaptive behaviour” (Sperduti et al., 2017, p. 13). Four of the five students described using mindfulness practices, particularly attention to the breath and breath counting, during moments of unfavorable emotions, such as anger, frustration or embarrassment. The final internalizing theme was self-care and self-esteem, a less prevalent but significant theme. Three students detailed the benefit of focus on and care for the self while engaging in mindfulness practices.

Due to its observable nature, the impact on externalizing behaviors were analyzed using school-based behavioral documentation in conjunction with the student-generated data. Two themes were derived from the students’ data, as delineated in Table 3. The first theme, response versus reaction, was noted in four of the five students’ responses. Students expressed that mindfulness practices were a tool to avoid physically aggressive behaviors. This is significant considering school-based behavioral data indicated that the all student participants had a history of engaging in physically aggressive behaviors in the school setting, such as include physical fights with peers, assault on school staff, throwing objects, and property destruction. Behavioral data analyzed during the pre- and post-mindfulness instruction time period, detailed in Table 4, coincided with the students’ data and revealed a decrease in incidents of both physical and verbal aggression in four of the five students’ data. The second externalizing theme was calm, a concept noted in all the students’ interview responses or journal data. This theme refers to a general comportment of being at peace or at ease as a result of participating in mindfulness practices.

Table 2

Cross-Case Analysis: Internalizing Themes and Examples of Evidence

	Daniel	Gerald	Rafi	Alex	James
Space to Think					
<i>Interview responses</i>	“Think and take space out if you need it.”	“[Being mindful means] think before you react.”	“It gives me time to think.”	“[Mindfulness] helps your brain so it can just think about what would happen if you hit the person. ... So it helps you think before you act.”	X
<i>Journal entries</i>	“Think before I react.”	“[Being in the present moment helps] so our mind won’t do the first thing in our mind.”	“Mindfulness can change my reaction by giving me time to think.”	X	“[Focusing on the present moment is valuable,] so I won’t do the wrong thing.”
Emotional Regulation					
<i>Interview responses</i>	“I was mad ... That’s when I got inside mindfulness position. I did it for two minutes. That’s when it made me feel better.”	“In school when I get frustrated... I’ll just pay attention to the teacher or I’ll try to count my breaths. Or when I’m home if I get frustrated, I just go upstairs and do my [mindfulness] position.”	X	“Paying attention to your breath. You can count them if you want to. And calm down. It helps you.” “[Mindfulness taught me] to actually pay attention to yourself before you do something that you don’t want to do.”	“I learned that you can control your anger a lot more.”
<i>Journal entries</i>	X	X	X	“I kind of learned how to calm down when someone bothers me.”	X

(Table 2 continued on the following page.)

Table 2 (continued)

Cross-Case Analysis: Internalizing Themes and Examples of Evidence

	Daniel	Gerald	Rafi	Alex	James
Self-care and Esteem					
<i>Interview responses</i>	X	X	X	<p>“You don’t have to worry about the other person because you are focusing on yourself.”</p> <p>“[You] don’t worry about everything. Just worry about you and take a deep breath. And just do you. Be you.”</p> <p>“It made me feel...like it makes me feel good about myself. It made me feel like I’m somebody. ... Nobody can take that from me. I feel like so good about myself.”</p>	<p>“[You] don’t worry about everything. Just worry about you and take a deep breath. And just do you. Be you.”</p> <p>“It made me feel...like it makes me feel good about myself. It made me feel like I’m somebody. ... Nobody can take that from me. I feel like so good about myself.”</p>
<i>Journal entries</i>	X	X	<p>“Being mindful of my body is helpful in different ways. Like if I am in pain, I can find out where it is coming from or being helpful with rebooting my body.”</p>	X	<p>“I learned how to breath.”</p>

Table 3

Cross-Case Analysis: Externalizing Themes and Examples of Evidence

	Daniel	Gerald	Rafi	Alex	James
Response Versus Reaction					
<i>Interview responses</i>	<p>“Mindfulness can prevent so many fights from happening.”</p>	<p>“You learn to not be all crazy and wanting to fight everybody if they say something to you.”</p> <p>“I was about to shove her,” Gerald said, referring to his sister. “But I calmed myself down. I did some mindfulness.”</p>	X	<p>“[More students should learn mindfulness so they] won’t be thinking about hurting that person that made them mad and make them actually pay attentions and not get in fights and stuff.”</p>	<p>“Because [mindfulness] could spread all over the world and help a lot more people. ... Everybody could get together and stop. Stop what they are doing.”</p>
<i>Journal entries</i>	<p>“When I am upset and mad that’s when it is a good time to use mindfulness. When I’m about to fight.”</p>	<p>“[From mindfulness class, I learned] how to not react before I think.”</p>	X	X	<p>“Being mindful of our bodies will keep us from getting in a fight. I’d take a walk and a deep breath to take all the anger out of my body.”</p>
Calm					
<i>Interview responses</i>	<p>“I feel calm. ... [My body] feels relaxed.”</p>	<p>“[When focusing on my breath,] I am much more calmer.”</p>	X	<p>“[My mind felt] calm.”</p>	<p>“[Mindful breathing] made me feel relaxed and all that.”</p>
<i>Journal entries</i>	<p>“[When focused on my breathing], I felt chill.”</p>	X	<p>“[When practicing mindfulness, I am] finally able to relax.”</p>	<p>“[When I am focused on my breathing,] I feel good and calm.”</p>	X

Table 4

Comparison of Students' Classroom-Based Daily Reports with Incidents of Verbal or Physical Aggression Pre-Mindfulness Instruction and During/Post-Mindfulness Instruction

	Pre-Mindfulness Instruction		During/Post-Mindfulness Instruction	
	Verbal Aggression	Physical Aggression	Verbal Aggression	Physical Aggression
Daniel	44%	13%	29%	3%
Gerald	33%	17%	30%	12%
Rafi	22%	5%	11%	3%
Alex	7%	3%	7%	7%
James	43%	27%	19%	8%

► CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to examine the perceived impact of engaging in mindfulness instruction and practices in the school setting through the students' perspective, a voice that is often not utilized in examining the efficacy of an intervention. As expected, the students ascribed varying value and meaning to their participation in the mindfulness instruction. However, the findings indicate that mindfulness offered the students space to think, a tool for emotion regulation, an opportunity for self-care, enhanced self-esteem, increased responsiveness, and a sense of calm. This suggests that incorporating mindfulness instruction can support the socio-emotional needs of students with emotional disturbance by equipping them with tangible strategies to help them make sense of the strong emotions and stressors they face each day.

► SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTIONS

Mindfulness instruction in the school setting has gained increasing focus and attention. However, there is a noticeable gap in the literature concerning the effect of this type of intervention for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. This study aimed to address this gap and explore mindfulness instruction, using the students' perspective to measure efficacy. The findings indicated positive internalizing and externalizing effects. The implication for the field is that mindfulness instruction can be one tool in a school's proverbial toolbox to support the behavioral, emotional, and social needs of students with emotional disturbance. Schools and institutions can use a number of strategies to use mindfulness practices to support students' socio-emotional well-being, such as: Incorporating short mindful breathing exercises at the onset of class periods, implementing mindfulness training sessions based on an evidence-based curriculum, and providing a safe space for students to engage in mindfulness practice.

► RESEARCHER'S BIOGRAPHY

Danielle Heeney has been a special educator in the Philadelphia School District for 15 years, working with students with learning disabilities, emotional/behavioral disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and autism in grades six to twelve. In her current capacity as Special Education Liaison, she works with a team of special and general education teachers to coordinate and deliver special education services for students in an urban public middle/high school.

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A Mixed Methods Study Examining the Integration of iPads and their Usage as an Instructional Tool for Special Education Teachers in Self-contained Special Education Classrooms

By Dr. Justin Lien

► ABSTRACT

The integration of iPads in classrooms evolved throughout the twenty-first century. While students were motivated to use the iPad in their everyday coursework and throughout their daily school experience, there were still some gaps in equity among. Based on the research of this study, it is evident that the procurement of technology varied in urban school districts despite their overall evidence of global educational benefits and the overall expenditures. A greater concern revolved around students in self-contained special education classrooms and their unique needs. Self-contained classroom teachers are responsible for the global educational needs of students in these classrooms to support their unique deficit areas based on their individual disabilities. The integration of iPads in the self-contained classrooms was found to be instrumental in educating students with special needs throughout these numerous domains. Additionally, the study unveiled that teachers in self-contained classrooms struggle to fully support their students without the proper inventory while the administrator struggled to evaluate the use of iPads in the classroom. The researcher created an assessment tool, which was implemented by the administrator to evaluate the integration of the iPad in the classroom. The name of this tool is the Technology Assessment Checklist or TAC. The TAC tool was deemed to be an effective tool in guiding the school administrator in the evaluation of technology integration practices in the self-contained classroom. Overall, this study yielded benefits for both the administrator and teachers of self-contained special education classrooms to improve their practice revolving around the evaluation and integration of iPads in the self-contained special education classroom.

► INTRODUCTION

Technology has dramatically changed the K-12 education system into becoming an integral need for preparing our students for a technology-driven society and beyond. Over the past 10 years, students have shifted from searching for books in the library to searching for information on the Internet through desktop computers and now utilizing tablets and mobile devices to seek information. According to Herold (2015), public schools have spent more than \$3 billion on digital content and up to an additional \$8 billion dollars for hardware and software technology annually. Across the United States, districts have continued to invest millions of dollars annually in technology. Since 2013, spending on technology has been exorbitant at the school level (Koba, 2015). From 2013-2017, Congress was only dedicating 400 million to states and districts which rose to approximately one billion, one hundred thousand dollars in

2019. Schools then take that funding and enhance the expenditures to meet overall needs of their schools from school budgets and grants making this a multi-billion-dollar investment (Johnston, 2018; Morris & Hobbs, 2019).

Apple Inc. has been a leader in this technology revolution with the introduction of the iPad. The use of the iPad as an assistive technology is transforming education for students with special needs (Hart & Sutcliffe, 2019; "iPad in Education", 2017; Lorah, Karnes, Miller & Welch-Beardsley, 2019). Despite the massive amounts of spending on technology, there remains a great disconnect between the research of self-contained special education teacher's technology integration, such as the iPad, in the classroom and specific technology tools that benefit students in the self-contained special education classrooms. While iPads are becoming more prevalent in the classroom, both in budgetary spending and crowd funding sources, school leaders are tasked with determining the appropriateness of these devices as instructional tools in conjunction with their teachers' skill sets. Further research specific to monitoring self-contained special education teachers' level of iPad integration is needed to ensure that administrators are making equitable decisions to fund iPads and ensure that teachers are trained in the hardware.

► PROBLEM STATEMENT

While school districts have continued to invest in iPads to support 21st century skills since its inception in 2010 ("iPad in Education", 2017), there continues to be limited research on how special education teachers in self-contained classrooms are utilizing iPads as effective learning tools in public urban elementary schools and how administrators are evaluating the way the iPad is used for learning. Existing research on iPad effectiveness and implementation in elementary schools has been examined by many studies and indicates a positive relationship to the iPad being an effective tool for learning year after year (Bonnington, 2012; Crichton, et al., 2012; Helps & Herzberg, 2013; Herold, 2015; Ok, 2017; Aspiranti, Larwin & Schade, 2018; Ebert, 2018; Kellems, Frandsen, Cardon, Knight & Andersen, 2018; Klein, 2018; Barone, 2019; Larwin & Aspiranti, 2019; Nissen, 2019; Somerton, 2019).

► PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

The purposes of this mixed method study were to examine how self-contained special education teachers utilized iPads in the classroom and to explore how administrators evaluated iPad integration within the classroom in an urban school district located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Currently, there exists a significant gap in the research concerning the accountability and oversight of iPad integration in self-contained classrooms because of the variance in intellectual functioning and the various needs unique to each student. This research is significant since technology integration is an essential focus point for school districts nationally as they prepare for a technologically driven world and future. Furthermore, school districts continue to invest billions of dollars in hardware, software and media to support this vision yet not every student has 1:1 technology (Martín-Gutiérrez, 2016, Morris & Hobbs, 2019). However, there is limited research related to training provided for technology integration in the self-contained special education classrooms. While research is limited for self-contained classrooms as a whole, the iPad remains an effective tool for instruction year after year.

► CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study was completed by exploring three streams to convey the conceptual framework of this study. These streams included: (a) instructional technology utilized with elementary-aged students with disabilities (b) financial aspects of funding instructional technology in urban elementary school budgets, and (c) characteristics of a self-contained classroom in an urban elementary school. The initial stream of research focused on the instructional technology that is embedded into the classroom to present curricula in the self-contained special education classroom. The secondary stream honed in on a decrease in flexible spending options from the federal government, schools must weigh the need to meet the demands of providing a quality education while integrating technology to prepare their students for the 21st century and beyond. Many schools are spending exorbitant money on technology but seem to lack support for the monitoring, integration of and training revolving around the technology. The third and final stream delved into research that investigates the impact and benefits of integrating technology in special education. Studies probed and clarified how instructional technology is changing the lives of students with special needs and how it amplifies their potential for equal access in the free and appropriate public education.

► METHODOLOGY

This exploratory sequential study measured self-contained special education teachers' training and mental modals on iPad tablet-based technology integration in their classrooms. The mixed-methods research began by gathering data in two stages: quantitative followed by qualitative (Creswell & Guetterman, 2008). The quantitative methods included two sets of data. For the quantitative methods, the researcher first reviewed and analyzed previous archival data from technology surveys completed by self-contained special education teachers from academic years 2017-2018 at Elementary School A. Second, the researcher gathered quantitative data from the participating self-contained special education teachers from a survey the researcher developed based on the archival data review and the first qualitative interview with the school administrator. The archival data sets and the completed survey data were compared and analyzed to create the administrator tool: Technology Assessment Checklist (TAC) tool. For the qualitative methods, the researcher first conducted an interview with the administrator who oversaw the self-contained special education teachers. Based on the administrator interview and the completed survey data from the participating self-contained special education teachers, the researcher developed the TAC tool for the school administrator to use in the self-contained classroom. The designated school administrator administered the TAC tool to assess self-contained special education teachers' integration of the iPad tablets in their classrooms. Second, the researcher interviewed the same school administrator a second time after the implementation of the TAC tool to gather data on the integration of the iPad tablet-based technology, the effectiveness in monitoring the self-contained teacher's technological pedagogy, and student reception and appropriateness of iPad application use.

This study focused on one of the 37 elementary schools with self-contained special education classrooms in this urban Mid-Atlantic school system. The population included special education teachers who oversaw and instructed in self-contained classrooms within a Pre-K to fifth-grade elementary school within an urban school district in which there were a total of 37 elementary schools in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Each self-contained classroom contained at least one special education teacher for a total of 37 teachers and two paraprofessionals or a paraprofessional and a behavior technician for a total of 74 support staff members. Snowball sampling was used to enlist participants. The sample included six self-contained classrooms in an urban public elementary school in the Mid-Atlantic area of the U.S.: two BES classrooms and four CES classrooms.

► RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aims of this mixed method study were to examine how self-contained special education teachers utilized iPads in the classroom and explored how administrators were evaluating iPad integration within the classroom in an urban school district in an elementary school located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The findings and results from the collected data were used to answer the overall study's research questions:

1. How are self-contained special education teachers in an urban elementary school integrating iPads into the classroom?
2. How are self-contained special education teachers in an urban elementary school trained to utilize iPads for teaching, learning, and assessment?
3. How are administrators evaluating the integration of iPads in self-contained classrooms in an urban elementary school?

This research study was conducted in an urban school district in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. According to the U.S. Department of Education's most recent Child Count by state level data ("IDEA Section 618", 2018), this urban school district had 3,962 Pre-K to grade five students that receive special education services 80% or more outside of general education. There were an estimated 152 self-contained special education classrooms in effect throughout this urban school district in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Seventy of the self-contained special education classes support Pre-K to grade five supports within 37 elementary schools. This research study focused on one of these schools from the total 37 elementary sites with programs, which was referred to as Elementary School A. The study included six teachers working in self-contained classrooms and one administrator in this urban Mid-Atlantic public-school system.

► FINDINGS

The findings gathered from the mixed methods study included: (a) archival data, (b) a survey with six special education teachers, and (c) two interviews with an administrator. This study reviewed and collected archival data from previous completed surveys by self-contained special education teachers from academic years 2017-2018 at Elementary School A. The data provided insight on the six self-contained special education teachers' demographics, self-contained teachers' experience using technology, and existing technology supports in the self-contained classrooms. The researcher analyzed this data and coded it for emerging themes. The researcher then

created a new quantitative survey based upon the researcher's findings from the archival data, which analyzed the pedagogical and technological skills of teachers, and the pre-interview with the school administrator. Based on the findings from the analyses of the archival data, survey data, and interview data of two targeted areas of participants five themes emerged. Upon the analysis of these themes, there were four results that addressed the gap in the research concerning the accountability of iPad integration in self-contained special education classrooms. Four results emerged from the archival data, survey data, and interviews with the administrator. (1.) Global Technology Funding Required, (2.) Global Benefits of iPads in Self-Contained Classrooms, (3.) Essential Need for Professional Development for all Staff, and (4.) Positive Effects of Technology Integration Embedded in Teacher Evaluations.

Based on the survey responses of the six self-contained special education teachers through the use of multiple-choice and open-ended questions, the study revealed that iPads are being integrated into these self-contained classrooms to support several educational domains. Self-contained special education classroom teachers shared that in the area of academics, the iPad was used to support math, English language art, and written expression lessons as well as the IEP goals of students assigned to these classrooms. Additionally, self-contained special education teachers utilized the iPad for other global educational domains and areas to support the overall needs of their students. This included their communication, social-emotional and self-help or adaptive needs. Given the combined experiences of all six self-contained teacher subjects, a unanimous result was revealed: no iPad training is provided to special education self-contained classroom teachers from the local elementary school nor the greater school district. Through the survey feedback it became evident that the self-contained special education teachers had to seek alternative means to support their technology integration skills on the iPad for teaching, learning and assessment.

► CONCLUSIONS

Through utilizing the framework of the research questions, conclusions became evident that special education teachers of self-contained classrooms deployed alternative methods of gaining strategies outside of this urban mid-Atlantic public elementary school and school district. The study revealed that iPads are being integrated into self-contained classrooms to support several educational domains. One conclusion is that self-contained special education classroom teachers shared that in the area of academics, the iPad was used to support math, English language arts, and written expression lessons as well as the IEP goals of students assigned to the CES and BES classrooms. Additionally, self-contained special education teachers utilized the iPad for other global educational domains and areas to support the overall needs of their students. This included their communication, social-emotional, and self-help or adaptive needs. A second conclusion that became evident is that the self-contained special education teachers had to seek alternative means to support their technology integration skills on the iPad for teaching, learning, and assessment.

Another conclusion that emerged included that through the process of a two-phased interview, technology integration practices were not imbedded in the evaluation process of these teachers and their classrooms. Based on this qualitative feedback, the researcher designed a Technology Assessment Checklist (TAC) tool that was administered to capture the technology integration skills being deployed in the self-contained special education classrooms. The final conclusion yielded that administrator not only found the TAC tool to be helpful, but also shared that a tool should be streamlined to assess all self-contained classrooms.

► SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTIONS

This mixed-methods study examined the experiences of a school administrator and six self-contained special education teachers in relation to technology integration in one elementary school in an urban, mid-Atlantic school system. The research targeted the technology integration practices in self-contained programs specifically. This research should be referenced for urban school districts to develop or enhance comprehensive systems for analyzing the technology integration practices of teachers, specifically targeting the self-contained special education teachers given the unique needs of individualized technologies in these classrooms. Furthermore, the scope of this study focused on special education programming utilizing an iPad in an urban, public school district. Additionally, schools and school districts should develop a means of evaluating technology in their classrooms, including iPads. In this study, the TAC tool was utilized. The TAC or another measure for evaluating technology integration for classrooms should be considered for administrative assessment. Specifically, the TAC tool could be modified to analyze the unique needs of every classroom (both general and special education classes) in a school district.

This final contribution revolved around assessing the technologies currently in place or recently purchased in self-contained special education classrooms. Given the amount of funding spent nationwide to prepare for a technologically driven world and future, school districts must take notice. School districts nationwide continue to invest billions of dollars in hardware, software, and media to support the technology integration vision (Martín-Gutiérrez, 2016). Specifically, in this urban, mid-Atlantic, public elementary school, additional findings and feedback could lead to even more improved outcomes for students, as well as data generated on the effectiveness of unique technologies. The findings could minimize the impact of overspending on technologies that are not appropriate for incorporation into these self-contained classrooms.

► RESEARCHER BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Justin Lien is a Board-Certified Special Educator (B.C.S.E.), holds a Bachelor's degree in Special Education (B.S.), a Master's degree in Educational Administration (M.S.A.) and a Doctoral degree (Ed.D.) in Educational Leadership and Management with a concentration in Special Education Leadership. Dr. Lien has extensive experience in the field of special education in the private, residential, charter, public school and district office levels. He has worked with District of Columbia Public Schools in Washington, D.C. since 2011 as a central office employee developing programming supports, monitoring educational interventions and curriculum as well as modeling best practices. Currently, he is a school-based administrator funded by the District of Columbia Public Schools district office to assist with special education and leadership reform in elementary schools. He has a deep commitment to the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) where he has been delivering local, state and national presentations on special education topics since 2015. Most recently, Dr. Lien is partnering with American University on an up to two-million-dollar inclusion focused equity grant for area schools through the Office of the State Superintendent of Education in Washington, D.C.

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Intentions to Implement: Predicting the Use of Pivotal Response Training (PRT) in Public School Autistic Support Classrooms

By Dr. Michelle Nutini

► ABSTRACT

Over the last 20 years, there has been an increased focus on identifying evidence-based practices for use with students with autism. Along with a desire to improve outcomes for students with moderate to severe autism, federal legislation, regulatory guidance and case law have set forth and necessitated the use of such practices. Despite a growing field of research identifying barriers and challenges involved in implementing evidence-based practices into public school settings, a well-established research-to-practice gap exists alongside a lack of understanding as to whether teachers intend to implement such interventions in the first place. The purpose of this mixed method phenomenological research study was to explore autism support teachers' intentions to use and their use of pivotal response training (PRT), a naturalistic evidence-based practice rooted in the principles of applied behavioral analysis. Using Fishbein and Ajzen's (2010) reasoned action approach (RAA) as a guide and theoretical framework, this study examined how the determinants of intentions (attitudes, social norms, and behavioral control) predicted kindergarten through fifth grade (K-5) autism support teachers' intentions and use of PRT with students within their public school autistic support classrooms. Applying a sequential explanatory approach, this QUANTITATIVE-phenomenology (QUAN→phen) study consisted of three phases, with an initial and follow-up survey providing quantitative data used to measure and test the associations between constructs, offering findings then explored through phenomenologically based interviews with smaller subsets of participants. Autism support teachers' intentions to use PRT were successfully predicted by the RAA, with behavioral control found to have the strongest predictive statistical significance. The RAA was unsuccessful in predicting autism support teachers' use of PRT, indicating that factors impacted teachers following through on their intentions. Qualitative themes emerged consistent and characteristic of the strength of autism support teachers' intentions and the status of their use of the practice. Overall findings indicated that increasing teachers' behavioral control over the practice would increase the strength of their intentions and resultant use of PRT.

► INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, evidence-based practices for students with autism have identified and integrated within clinical settings. Federal laws, regulatory guidance, and court decisions have followed, requiring and establishing precedence for their use in K-12 educational settings, however, there are notable and documented challenges involved in implementation (Dingfelder & Mandell, 2011; Locke et al., 2015). While practices rooted in applied behavioral analysis (ABA) often offer greater evidentiary backing, they can also command considerable resources and training in equipping educators to deliver them with fidelity (Rispoli, Neely, Lang, & Ganz, 2011; Stahmer et al., 2015; Suhrheinrich et al., 2013). With limited resources

and many evidence-based practices identified, researchers have begun to explore what particular elements of practices may be particularly effective or essential. The recent finding that the evidence-based practice of pivotal response training (PRT) may be thought to be a key active ingredient (Pellecchia et al., 2015) offers both promise and future potential due to its naturalistic nature, roots in and ability to translate into home and community settings.

► PROBLEM STATEMENT

Prior to addressing the challenges and barriers to the implementation of evidence-based practices within public school settings, there is a need to examine whether teachers intend to implement the practices in the first place.

► PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to explore autism support teachers' intentions to use and their use of the evidence-based practice of PRT and examine how the determinants of these intentions (attitudes, perceived norms, and behavioral control) predicted their intentions and use of the practice with students in their K-5 autistic support classrooms. Federal laws, regulatory guidance and court decisions oblige the use of evidence-based practices; however, educators encounter barriers and challenges in implementing them into school settings. With the gap between research and practice approximated to span 17 years (Morris, Wooding, & Grant, 2011), there is an urgency to investigate teachers' intentions to implement and use of PRT to inform implementation efforts.

► CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study was informed by four streams of research: (a) autism in K-12 education in the United States, (b) the use of evidence-based practices for students with autism, (c) pivotal response training (PRT), and (d) the reasoned action approach (RAA). The preliminary stream provided an overview of the educational classification of autism within the K-12 public school educational system specific to specialized autistic support programming for students with moderate to severe autism. The secondary stream focused on evidence-based practices (EBPs) in respect to federal regulations and included a discussion of the research-to-practice gap. The tertiary stream looked specifically at the evidence-based practice of PRT, detailing its components, practice, and implementation challenges in school settings. The fourth and final stream explored the reasoned action approach (RAA) detailing its research base as a framework from which to examine teachers' intentions to perform and use PRT.

► METHODOLOGY

This mixed methods study utilized a sequential explanatory QUANTITATIVE-phenomenology (QUAN→phen) approach with the research conducted over three distinct phases. Quantitative data were collected through an initial *Intentions Survey* (Phase 1) and follow-up Behavior/Use Survey (Phase 2), which were designed in alignment to Fishbein and Ajzen's (2010) Reasoned Action Approach (RAA). Question items on these surveys informed the development of specific constructs: intentions, determinants of intention (attitude, social norms, and behavioral control), and use. These results obtained from these constructs were

then expanded upon through phenomenological interviews (Phase 3) with six participants representing the three subsets of participants.

The target population for this study consisted of 140 kindergarten through fifth grade (K-5) autism support teachers of specialized autistic support classroom programs. These kindergarten through second grade (K-2) or third through fifth grade (3-5) classroom programs were embedded within 72 elementary schools within a large urban school district in the northeastern United States. At the time of the study, there were an estimated 127,000 students enrolled in the district, with approximately 3,000 students receiving services within autistic support classroom programs.

► RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This mixed methods study investigated autism support teachers' intentions to use PRT, examining how these intentions later predicted their use of the evidence-based practice with students within kindergarten through fifth grade autistic support classroom programs. The research was guided by these questions:

1. Do K-5 autism support teachers' intentions to use pivotal response training (PRT) predict their use of the practice?
2. What determinants of intentions (attitudes, social norms, and behavioral control) are most important in predicting intentions?
3. Among autism support teachers with strong intentions to use PRT, what factors affect their ability to act on those intentions?

► FINDINGS

A total of 26 out of the 139 autism support teachers were invited, participated in the study and completed the initial and follow-up surveys and six participants participated in the interview phase of the research. Constructs for the measures of intention and the determinants of intention (attitude, social norms, and behavioral control) in respect to the *behavior of running one-on-one PRT at least once a day* were developed from participants' responses on a 7-point Likert-type scale on the *initial RAA* and follow-up *use* surveys and informed by internal reliability tests (Cronbach's alpha). Means were calculated for each construct and compared with bivariate correlations performed and frequency distribution tables developed and designated as positive, neutral, and negative. Specific subsets of participants were derived from these findings, with six participants agreeing to participate. Coding and analysis of the interview data generated eight general themes, with subthemes specific to participant category and were organized into three main categories: individual teaching characteristics, classroom variables, and PRT.

The mean for the measure of attitude ($M=5.00$, $SD = 1.29$) towards running one-on-one PRT at least once a day had a Cronbach's alpha equal to .956 with participants being split between positive ($n=11$, 42.3%) and neutral attitudes ($n=11$, 42.3%) with 4 participants expressing negative attitudes ($n=4$, 15.38%). The construct of social norms ($M=3.86$, $SD=1.08$) had a Cronbach's alpha of .914 with most participants reporting either neutral ($n=12$, 46.15%) or weak perceived social norms ($n=12$, 46.15%) and almost half of participants ($n=12$, 46.16%) indicated strong behavioral control over running one-on-one PRT at least once a day ($M=4.67$, $SD=1.32$, $a=.892$). The construct of intention to run one-on-one PRT at least once a week for the next three weeks was derived from participants' responses on a 7-point Likert-type scale to

the statement: (“I intend to run one-on-one PRT at least once a day for the next three weeks”) ($M=4.58$, $SD=1.79$). The majority of autism support teachers expressed strong intentions to run PRT ($n=17$, 65.38%), with the remainder reporting neutral intentions ($n=4$, 15.38%) or weak ($n=5$, 19.23%) intentions to run PRT. Behavioral use ($M=4.31$, $SD=1.81$) was measured by participants’ self-reported use of “running one-on-one PRT at least once a day for three weeks” on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1- strongly disagree to 7 - strongly agree). A little over half of participants ($n=15$, 57.69%) reported running PRT at least once a day with a little less than half reporting that they did not ($n=11$, 42.31%).

► CONCLUSIONS

Autism support teachers’ intentions to run one-on-one PRT were positively correlated with their attitudes ($r = .545$, $p = .004$) and social norms ($r = .629$, $p = .001$) toward and behavioral control ($r = .687$, $p = .000$) over PRT. Statistically significant correlations were also found between attitude, social norms, and behavioral control and between these determinants of intention and intentions, with the strongest relationship found between intentions and behavioral control ($r = .687$, $p = .000$). The reasoned action approach (RAA) successfully predicted autism support teachers’ intentions to run one-on-one PRT, however, the results of the Bivariate Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients revealed that autism support teachers’ intentions were not predictive of their use of PRT with non-significant correlations found between intentions and the behavioral use of PRT ($r = .338$, $p = .091$). These results suggest that there were additional factors that impacted autism support teachers’ ability to follow through on their intentions to use pivotal response training.

The phenomenological phase of the research surfaced qualitative themes and subthemes that specific to the strength of autism support intentions, the status of their use of the practice of PRT, and their categorical designation of participants’ intentions and use. Despite similar quantitative variables including class size, existence of student aggression, number of support staff, and range of students, participants with strong intentions and high use of PRT were more likely to discuss and cite similarities between students as an impetus towards structuring their instructional scheduling and grouping practices, while participants with low use of PRT were more likely to articulate how these variables proved to be barriers. Scheduling time for PRT and incorporating PRT into the instructional routine ultimately served as either a catalyst or deterrent as to whether teachers were able to make good on their intentions, as were feelings of behavioral control over the practice.

► SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTIONS

Evidence-based practices require implementation in order to have any impact and understanding the relationships between the determinants of intention, intentions, and use highlight which factors impact educators’ decision to implement a practice. This study revealed that autism support teachers with strong intentions to use PRT were able to follow through on their intentions to use the practice because they saw the practice as being a valuable and integral part of their classroom schedule and routine and designated time for it accordingly. The study identified the role and significance of behavioral control in impacting teachers’ intentions and use of the practice and illustrated the need to address and respond to teachers’ feelings of behavioral control in order to improve their ability to act on their intentions. While the RAA

was not successful in predicting autism support teachers’ intentions, this study identified the role of external and internal factors of behavioral control as impacting the use of the evidence-based practice of PRT and outlines recommendations for future research and practice.

► RESEARCHER BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Michelle Nutini is the Autism Support Coordinator for the School District of Philadelphia, where she spent over a decade as a K-5 Autistic Support teacher. Focused on building capacity, she is working to strengthen the implementation of evidence-based practices in over 300 specialized classroom programs spread across nearly 200 of the city’s public schools. She received her Ed.D. in Special Education Leadership and Management at Drexel University as a USELT (Urban Special Education Leaders for Tomorrow) Scholar. Michelle seeks to infuse creativity and create meaningful connections in her work, working collaboratively with a variety of stakeholders to improve outcomes for students with autism. Her current assignment offers her the flexibility to provide support to students, educators, and families from the ground up as well as help to help create and carve out resources and procedures to support this work from the top down.

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Evaluating the Impact of Economic Disadvantage on Specific Learning Disability Identification in Elementary School Students: A Grounded Theory Study

By Dr. Angel Shelley Royal

► ABSTRACT

When a student in a public school is suspected of having a Specific Learning Disability (SLD), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) mandates teams to not consider a student to have a SLD if the student's learning is primarily the result of economic disadvantage. This mandate is of growing importance as more and more children living in poverty are disproportionately identified as eligible for special education services as students with SLDs. Literature reveals the impact of poverty on early brain development, which can have a profound effect on academic performance throughout a child's entire educational career. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to examine how school psychologists evaluate the impact of economic disadvantage when determining a student's eligibility for a SLD. This study consisted of conducting semi-structured interviews with school psychologists and collecting responses to the SLD economic disadvantage exclusionary clause on their written evaluation reports. Results found that school psychologists work in conditions that lack explicit policies or procedures for ascertaining the negative impact economic disadvantage may have on student learning. Accordingly, school psychologists typically rely upon their professional judgment as to the influence the student's poverty may or may not have on their learning, and ultimately, on their disability categorization as a student with SLD. This study highlights the need for improved SLD determination evaluation policies and procedures and intervening supports for students from economically disadvantaged households.

► INTRODUCTION

Appropriate education for students that reside in low income households is of growing importance as research reveals that exposure to poverty during the early developmental period can adversely impact a child into adulthood. Although measures have been taken to combat the prevalence of poverty, it continues to affect a substantial number of American students. Research shows that poverty has a direct impact on the psychological, emotional, and physical well-being of all individuals; yet, children are especially susceptible to the effects of poverty (Lipina, 2016). During the early developmental years, poverty compromises the brain functioning needed to acquire skills for further learning as a child matures into adulthood (Hair et al., 2015). Continued exposure to poverty increases its negative consequences throughout a child's school career (Hair et al., 2015).

With 51% of public school students coming from low-income households, schools need to be equipped to meet the needs of students who come to school with learning deficits (Hair et al., 2015). Data shows that an income achievement gap exists and puts students from low-income households at a disadvantage when they enter school and as they progress throughout elementary, middle, and high school. The achievement gap raises valid concerns for parents, educators, and other stakeholders. In addition to the moral and ethical reasons for helping these students achieve, schools also have a federally mandated obligation to identify students who are not making adequate progress and determine if they are students with a disability (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004 [IDEA]). As students from low income households achieve below their more affluent peers as a result of environment disadvantage, federal legislation provides guidance to school systems across the country to consider the impact of economic disadvantage on student academic success when determining if a student has a Specific Learning Disability.

► PROBLEM STATEMENT

Children living in poverty are disproportionately identified as having learning disabilities. The disproportionate numbers may result from lack of resources needed for a fair chance to reach their potential. Students who live in poverty may present with complex learning needs as a result of poverty's impact on their brain development. The repeated identification of a disproportionate group of students of poverty as having SLD calls into question the validity of the disability classification (Shifrer et al., 2011).

► PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this study was to examine current practice in the evaluation of economically disadvantaged students and the identification of the impact of poverty on children's learning abilities. This study aimed to provide further data that could lead to improved outcomes for this population. These are students who may have structural changes to the brain and will need procedures to identify appropriate educational programming through comprehensive evaluations as well as protective factors to lessen the chance for exposure to the negative effects of poverty.

► CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To investigate the topic of this study, three literature streams were explored that focus on an interdisciplinary approach to the needs of students living in poverty and current methods used to support them. The literature streams included:

1. Brain Development and Poverty: Current literature on the effects of poverty on children's brain development is reviewed. The growing body of research on the effects of poverty on the brain has major implications on service delivery in schools. Research suggests the areas of the brain affected have a direct link on student's learning.
2. Socioeconomic Disadvantage and Elementary Education looks at student socioeconomic status and its impact in educational settings.
3. Special Education Evaluations for Students in Poverty: Current literature on academic achievement, test scores, instructional methods, and education policy. Current and best practices in conducting evaluations for students from low socioeconomic status are examined.

► METHODOLOGY

This study examined how school psychologists identify the impact of economic disadvantage when determining if a student meets the criteria as a student with a SLD. Presently, there is no definable process for making this determination; hence, a qualitative method was selected for this study. Creswell (2018) asserted that a qualitative approach is appropriate to use when inadequate theories exist. Furthermore, grounded theory is a qualitative method that specifically uses experiences from those experiencing a phenomenon to identify a theory that can explain a process (Creswell, 2018). The method is appropriate for this study, as the study sought to explain the evaluation process for economically disadvantaged students. By examining participant experiences, the researcher can move beyond describing the phenomenon to generating or discovering a theory (Creswell, 2018). This method allowed the researcher to interact with the data and further analyze emerging themes.

The evaluation practices of school psychologists were explored within a network of high-needs schools in the district. The network comprises 22 schools and has a student population of 9,000, and approximately 15 school psychologists are assigned to the schools. All schools have a high percentage of students deemed as being economically disadvantaged. Although the network also has high schools, the study only consisted of researching schools that have kindergarten through eighth grades. The school psychologists who participated in the study were all state certified to practice school psychology. They all participate on evaluation teams when determining if students meet the criteria as a student with a SLD. The years of experience and education varied from six to 23 years.

► RESEARCH QUESTIONS

When determining if a student has a SLD, a school evaluation team is required to determine if a student's deficits are primarily the result of economic disadvantage. The IDEA (2004) mandate is important, as some students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds present with academic deficits, and it is necessary for teams to appropriately identify whether or not their poor academic performance is the primary result of an economically disadvantaged background. The study examined how school psychologists working in high-needs schools identify the impact of economic disadvantage when determining if a student meets the eligibility criteria for a SLD. The study explored the purpose of the study through the following research questions:

1. How do school psychologists distinguish student deficits in academic achievement that are due to economic disadvantage from those that are caused by a disabling condition?
2. In what ways can school psychologists help students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds overcome barriers that may impede their academic performance?
3. In what ways are school psychologists taking precautions to limit misrepresentation of economically disadvantaged students as having a Specific Learning Disability when conducting Special Education evaluations?

► FINDINGS

The study revealed four themes and six sub-themes. A key assertion of the study was that school psychologists do not have an established and defined process to determine the effect of economic disadvantage on student achievements, resulting in school psychologists relying on professional judgment to make decisions about whether a student has a Specific Learning Disability. Given the requirement of IDEA to consider the impact of economic disadvantage, a process is needed to help guide school teams in determining the impact of economic disadvantage on student learning. Additionally, four themes and six sub-themes emerged from the study's findings:

- **Theme One: School Psychologists Lack Established Process to Identify Economic Impact on Learning**
Sub-Theme One: Pressure to Identify Students Despite Economic Disadvantage
- **Theme Two: School Psychologists Need to Know a Child's Story**
Sub-Theme One: School Psychologists Experience Barriers to Knowing a Child's Story
- **Theme Three: Support Diverse Student Needs**
Sub-Theme One: School Psychologists Experience Barriers in Supporting Diverse Student Needs
- **Theme Four: School Psychologists Need a Team**
Sub-Theme One: Working with Parents and Building Trust
Sub-Theme Two: Coaching and Working with School Staff
Sub-Theme Three: Needing Additional Support in the Evaluation Process

► CONCLUSIONS

The study did not identify an established method or process used by school psychologists to distinguish whether student deficits in academic achievement were primarily a result of economic disadvantage rather than from a disabling condition. Participants reported various ways they approach the mandate to determine whether the student's suspected learning disability is primarily the result of economic disadvantage. In order to help students from low income homes overcome barriers attributed to economic disadvantage, the participants conduct comprehensive evaluations that determine the student's eligibility for special education services. Through evaluations, the participants help students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds overcome barriers by providing recommendations that are unique to the student's strengths and needs. The schools in which they work have research-based instructional programs that they use as recommendations. However, participants were unaware of any research-based interventions specifically targeted to help students from economically disadvantaged homes. Because of the lack of direction and guidance on the topic, the majority of participants do not make a conscious effort to limit the misrepresentation of students from economically disadvantaged households with a SLD. The school psychologists do not have a framework to defensibly present that a student's learning challenges are primarily the result of economic disadvantage and do not feel supported by parents, administrators and other school staff to address the topic of economic disadvantage in evaluation reports. One participant acknowledged that she will state if a student's economic disadvantage is the primary cause of a student's learning abilities if her findings suggest it, but she fears her decision will lead to lawsuits by parents who challenge her decision. All participants expressed their concern with appropriately supporting students that present with learning deficits caused by economic disadvantage but noted that schools often lack resources and personnel to fully support their diverse academic needs.

► SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTIONS

Although it is a requirement to consider the effects of economic disadvantage on learning when determining if a student has a Specific Learning Disability, findings revealed that some school psychologists face dilemmas when including this topic in the evaluation process. The study accentuated the concern that school psychologists have when addressing poverty which can be a sensitive issue. The study put the spotlight on taking the onus off the school psychologists and truly utilizing a team approach to conducting evaluations and having a legally and defensible approach to examine the impact of economic disadvantage on student learning. Furthermore, there is a gap in the literature that provides school psychologists and other members of the evaluation team guidance on how to address the impact of economic disadvantage on student learning especially with emerging literature on how it affects brain development. Even in schools with a high number of students from low income households, specific intervention and process were not identified by participants to support their needs. Overall, the results suggested the need for clearly definable procedures to use in the evaluation process, additional school resources for comprehensive evaluations, stakeholder partnerships, and training.

► RESEARCH BIOGRAPHY

Angel Shelley Royal has a strong commitment to providing superior programming for children with special needs. She passionately advocates for the services that students with special needs require to make lifelong gains. Angel has worked as a certified school psychologist for over 10 years with the School District of Philadelphia. In this position she works closely with all members of the school community to provide consultation, intervention, and assessment to promote student success, both academically and emotionally. Angel's professional experiences also include teaching special education and research on topics in urban studies and education. Through experiences in special education and research, Angel developed a strong interest in inclusion. She believes that each student's unique strengths should be a major force in his or her educational programming. Angel's goal is to continue her career in the field of education to create and implement programs and services that better serve students, parents, and schools in urban communities.

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Secondary Principal Internship Preparation Program: A Qualitative Study Focused on Twenty-First Century Principal Readiness

By Dr. Joe Ruben

► ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of secondary principals who participated in a large urban mid-Atlantic school district's, District Y, secondary principal internship preparation program (SPIP). This study examined perspectives on 21st-century principalship preparation, analyzed the impact of the training and development program, and identified the key components of the program. The principal shortage continues to be a well-documented national concern, as higher turnover rates for principals serving urban public school districts have emerged. Five key themes emerged from coding and analysis of the interview data and are offered as findings in this study: (a) school administrator cohorts of learning, (b) principal preparation seminars, (c) teamwork in principal development, (d) mentorship, and (e) the practicum experience. Three recommendations for enhancing the secondary principal training and development program were identified from findings and conclusions: (a) include more research-based learning into SPIP seminars, (b) the SPIP should be a mandatory requirement for aspiring secondary principals, and (c) the practicum experience should be extended. This research can support essential understanding regarding the professional development needed for aspiring principals in the 21st century and assist with data and valuable information addressing the nationwide principal shortage.

► INTRODUCTION

Today in the United States, the secondary principalship is no longer just a school figurehead and or management position in a school. In the 21st century, school principals are not only managers of adults, they communicate the mission and vision of the school, oversee school safety and security, observe and analyze classroom instruction, lead teacher professional development, manage school finances, develop and monitor school improvement action planning, collaborate with unions and union representatives, and are the individuals responsible for the total school program and transforming the school. Among the various roles and different hats, the "21st-century principal" may collaborate with government agencies to provide services including healthcare, emergency cash, medical assistance, social worker support, food, and mental health services to students and families. In addition, 21st-century principals are expected to present data on school system initiatives, including reform efforts, to state/school district officials and stakeholders, in addition to partnering with faith-based organizations, non-profit organizations, and the business sector to eliminate the negative effects poverty may have on student achievement (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Van Roekel, 2008). Being that student achievement is the goal of education, effective principal training is critical.

Higher turnover rates for principals serving urban public schools are a reality across the United States (Stein, 2018). A 2014 study from the Department of Education found that only “72% of principals in schools serving low-income students remained at their schools” (Stein, 2018, p. C1). Jean Desravines, the chief executive of New Leaders, an organization that identifies and trains educators to be principals, was quoted in a 2018 *Washington Post* article, titled “Search for Principals is Difficult in District,” as saying, “It’s far easier to identify an elementary principal, than a high school one” (Stein, 2018, p. C1). The principal’s job continues to evolve and has become more difficult over time. According to Scharmer (2009), “When the future cannot be predicted by the trends and trajectories of the past, we must deal with situations as they evolve” (p. 61). Additionally, principals today also face significant challenges in the current environment of testing, accountability, and data-driven decision making.

In response to the above mentioned challenges, the Large Urban Mid-Atlantic School District (District Y), developed a secondary principal internship, training, and development program in 2003 to address school leadership needs. The Secondary Principal Internship Program (SPIP) is an intensive internship program with ongoing professional development. The purpose of the SPIP is to provide secondary assistant principals who are also aspiring principals a chance to function in a secondary school as an acting principal to increase their skills/knowledge and experiences, as school leaders and decision-makers, through mentorship and cohort learning. Secondary principals who supervise the principal intern are temporarily removed from their school and given a special assignment by central office leadership for a period of four weeks during the internship period, while being kept informed by the principal intern, associate superintendent for secondary schools, and or high school director about what is occurring at the school during their absence.

► PROBLEM STATEMENT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the SPIP and examine the perspectives of the participants on how the program prepared them to be a successful 21st-century principal in an urban school district.

► PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

This study examined District Y’s secondary principal internship, training, and development program. Although this program has been in place since 2003, the program effectiveness has not been evaluated. There is also, in general, limited research about school district-level secondary principal internship, training, and development programs. This study analyzed program implementation and the desired outcomes of the program. Gallos (2008) stated, “Effective structural leaders experiment, evaluate and adapt” (p. 40). Because SPIP has not been evaluated in its 15 years of implementation, and successful instructional leaders must be continuously fluent in current and relevant practice, a close study of this program is long overdue. Implementation of this type of program requires periodic examination and evaluation to ensure that its mission and vision are in alignment with the outcomes.

► CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Using a qualitative approach, this study sought to evaluate the District Y secondary principal internship, training, and development program and contribute to the decision-making surrounding aspects of program administration by the District Y central office leadership officials.

Three streams were used in this study:

1. Retention of Secondary Principals
2. Twenty-First-Century Principal Leadership Standards
3. School District-Developed Principal Preparation Programs

► METHODOLOGY

For this study, the researcher utilized a phenomenological qualitative design. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that qualitative research should be applied when “an understanding of the context in which participants in a study address a problem is warranted” and when “a desire to empower individuals exists” (p. 46). The researcher collected the information regarding the year of SPIP participation, number of years as an administrator/principal, and school demographics. Every effort was made to ensure gender equity among research participants. This research analyzed emerging patterns from the participant interviews. At the close of the SPIP participant interviews, the researcher organized the interview transcript text into large groupings before bringing meaning to the groupings. The researcher categorized the groupings based on the language from the SPIP participants and searched for common themes of SPIP participants who participated in this study, later analyzing and evaluating the interview transcript data for connections or common themes among the participants in this study (Saldaña, 2016). The researcher reviewed the broad categories to find themes that addressed the research questions and or identified new or unexpected answers to the research questions. The researcher examined the interview transcripts for various perspectives, which supported the participants’ diverse quotations (Saldaña, 2016). To assist with data analysis, the researcher utilized the NVivo coding software.

According to school district officials and the profile information on the website, District Y is the nation’s 17th largest school system and the largest within the state, serving more than 162,000 students in 203 schools, including 37 National Blue Ribbon schools. The district oversees 133 elementary schools, 39 middle schools, 25 high schools, one career and technology center, and five special service schools. District Y is one of the most diverse school systems in the country with students from 157 different countries and native speakers of 138 languages. Six of the District Y high schools ranked in the top 200 of the *Washington Post*’s 2015 High School Challenge; and all 25 high schools have appeared on the list, which includes only the top 11% of all high schools in the nation. In 2010, District Y was the recipient of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. The racial demographics of the district consist of approximately 30% Hispanic, 29% White, 21% Black or African American, 14% Asian, and less than 5% American Indian. Over a third (34%) of the students in the school district receive free or reduced-price meals, 11% of the students receive special education services, and 14% of students participate in English for speakers of other languages during the time of this study. District Y is located in a county with a population of more than 1 million residents and growing both in terms of population and diversity. District-level enrollment indicates the system has experienced significant increases in the number and diversity of students over the past 20 years. Populations of Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and low-income students have increased dramatically, by as much as 20 percentage points over the past decade, within schools that have been historically high-poverty schools. Secondary principals in District Y are selected for the principalship through the application and interview process. Qualifications for the secondary principalship, listed on District Y website include state eligibility for Administrator I and II Certification and at least two years of successful experience as an assistant principal.

► RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study focused on current principal's lived experiences in SPIP. The study analyzed the impact of District Y's secondary principal internship, training, and development program and identified the key components of the program. This phenomenological study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do participants who are currently principals perceive that the Secondary Principal Internship Program (SPIP) has prepared them to meet the complex demands of the 21st-century principalship?
2. How do SPIP participants perceive the program prepared them to be instructional leaders?
3. How do the SPIP participants perceive the theoretical frameworks used in the program assisted them in being a 21st-century principal?
4. How do SPIP participants perceive the program prepared them to be transformational leaders?
5. Do the SPIP participants perceive the program will result in greater principal retention or longevity?

► FINDINGS

The themes that emerged from the study encompassed the salient points of the SPIP: (a) school administrator cohorts of learning, (b) principal preparation seminars, (c) teamwork in principal development, (d) mentorship, and (e) the practicum experience. Through the interviews, participants revealed the magnitude of the relationships formed with their cohort mates and how those relationships have supported them in the secondary principalship with instructional leadership, transformational decision making, and longevity. Providing a platform for study participants to examine best practices and adaptive challenges, the seminars became a vehicle towards better understanding of the secondary principalship requirements. All participants related mentorship as the key structure of SPIP. While the guidance and support varied between established principals and central office leadership, the relationships formed between SPIP participants and their mentors were instrumental in study participant growth in the position. In building stamina and experience towards the secondary principalship, the ability to take over a secondary school for the practicum experience gave participants the most "hands-on" learning prior to the secondary principalship.

► CONCLUSIONS

Based on coding and analysis of the data, which included the face-to-face interviews, five key themes emerged: (a) school administrator cohorts of learning, (b) principal preparation seminars, (c) teamwork in professional development, (d) mentorship, and (e) the practicum experience. Results were elucidated from the findings and supporting literature. Conclusions were inferred from careful synthesis of the participant interviews, research questions, and findings.

In the 21st century, school principals are not only managers of adults, they communicate the mission and vision of the school, oversee school safety and security, observe and analyze classroom instruction, lead teacher professional development, manage school finances, develop and monitor school improvement action planning, collaborate with unions and union representatives, and are the individuals responsible for the total school program and transforming the school. At a time when the principal shortage continues to be a national concern, the job itself requires much more. Principal training and development, which

supports this new perspective on the principalship, is imperative. District Y developed a Secondary Principal Internship Program (SPIP) with ongoing professional development in 2003 to address school leadership needs. This research examined the perceptions of District Y's secondary principal training and development program. Throughout the interviews, the study participants stressed the importance of the administrator cohort learning experience, principal preparation seminars, teamwork in professional development, mentorship, and the practicum experience. Three recommendations for enhancing SPIP were identified from the findings and conclusions: (a) include more research-based learning into SPIP seminars, (b) the SPIP should be a mandatory requirement for aspiring secondary principals, and (c) the practicum experience should be extended. SPIP creates an opportunity to experience first-hand the role of the secondary principal. While all participants in this study shared a passion for the principalship, the efficacy and longevity in the position was impacted most significantly by the secondary principal internship practicum experience and the guidance and support of experienced secondary principals and central office leaders.

► RESEARCHER BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Joe L. Rubens has degrees in Business Administration (Howard University), Special Education (Trinity Washington University), Administrator I & II Certification (Bowie State University), and a Doctorate in Education Leadership and Management (Drexel University). Additionally, he has enjoyed over 20 years as a para educator, special education teacher and administrator at the secondary school level. Dr. Rubens is a former recipient of the District Y Board of Education Award for Distinguished Service to Public Education, and he is currently a high school principal in the District Y school district.

As a school leader who has always served in highly impacted communities, instability in the principalship is concerning to Dr. Rubens. Dr. Rubens was interested in this research topic because of his professional experience and the preparation principals require to meet the complex demands of the job and the needs of all children. Dr. Rubens believes that to move student outcomes in a positive direction, especially for our low-income, English language learner, and special education students, professional training and development for principals must be connected to what school districts see as needs due to their data. He believes the focus of professional training and development for aspiring principals should be consistent and sustained based on a school district's vision and school system's priorities. Dr. Rubens believes learning institutions and school districts have a responsibility to create both time and a learning space for the transference of principalship knowledge to occur for an aspiring school principal. The principal shortage and principal burnout, particularly in impacted schools, with high special education and English language learner students in urban school districts, is an issue for him because he is passionate about equity and student learning. Exploration of the causes of principal turnover has led him to this research.

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A Phenomenological Investigation into the Utility of Online Professional Development to Promote Inclusive Opportunities for Young children with disabilities in Community-Based Early Childhood Programs

By Dr. Mauria Uhlik

► ABSTRACT

Preschool children deemed eligible for special education and related services pursuant to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) must receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Access to publicly funded early childhood general education settings is limited for young children with disabilities. Educators in such programs often lack formal training in special education and meaningful professional development required to meet the needs of young children with disabilities in their classrooms. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine how access to online professional development, targeting community-based early childhood educators, promotes inclusive environments for young children with disabilities. The following research questions were developed as part of this research inquiry: 1) what are perceptions of early childhood educators on the use of online PD to promote inclusion of young children with disabilities? and 2) how do early childhood educators perceive that their practice will change as a result of participating in online PD and how outcomes for young children with disabilities will improve through their participation in PD? Research was conducted to determine how online professional development could optimize inclusive opportunities for young children and expand the IDEA-mandated continuum of services offered by school districts. Study participants completed an online survey and asynchronous, one-on-one interviews designed to answer the research questions. Findings from the study revealed that participants support the use of online professional development to promote inclusive classrooms, increased retention of, and better outcomes for young children with disabilities.

► INTRODUCTION

The integration of authentic assessment into the practices of early childhood educators is essential for the successful inclusion of and improved outcomes for young students with disabilities. Authentic assessment is defined as “the systematic recording of developmental observations over time about the naturally occurring behaviors and functional competencies of young children in daily routines by familiar and knowledgeable caregivers in the child’s life” (Bagnato & Yeh Ho, 2006, p. 29). The utility of authentic assessment for young children with disabilities in early childhood general education settings, particularly community-based programs, is more favorable than standardized assessment practices (Bagnato, 2007). Authentic assessment is designed to capture “the naturally occurring behaviors and functional competencies of young children in daily routines by familiar and knowledgeable caregivers in the child’s life” (Bagnato & Yeh Ho, 2006, p. 7). Partnership between parents and early childhood educators in routinely documenting a young child’s progress lends itself to mutual investment in attainment of milestones and a collaborative relationship to foster educational growth. Authentic assessment is regarded as “the developmentally appropriate alternative to conventional, psychometric testing in early childhood intervention” (Bagnato, Goins, Pretti-Frontczak, & Neisworth, 2014). Formal testing kits and expensive, web-based scoring applications are often not required to effectively implement authentic assessment practices, thereby reducing the financial burden of establishing a comprehensive assessment system in inclusive early childhood settings. According to Dennis, Rueter, and Simpson (2013), authentic assessment is fluid and dynamic in nature, and better aligns with the inconsistent developmental trajectories of young children with disabilities. Furthermore, the literature supports the implementation of authentic assessment in inclusive, early childhood settings to promote improved outcomes for these children.

High-quality inclusive settings and positive outcomes for young children with disabilities are not possible without meaningful professional development (PD). The use of online PD, particularly learning communities, has grown exponentially as new technology modalities are woven into the fabric of modern education. Fishman, Konstantopoulos, Kubitskey, Vath, Park, Johnson, and Edelson (2013) conducted a large-scale study comparing the efficacy of online and traditional, face-to-face PD for teachers. Specifically, they addressed “a conceptual framework for studying PD that links the features of PD to changes in teachers’ knowledge and beliefs, changes in classroom practices, and changes in student learning outcomes” (Desimone, 2009). Fishman et al. (2013) found that each modality produced marked improvements in teacher self-efficacy, classroom practices, and student outcomes. Additional studies have also confirmed that online PD is cost-effective for a sustainable PD model for providers who are geographically distributed, and yields positive outcomes for participants if aligned to their specific needs (Dede et al., 2009; Kleiman, 2004; Means et al., 2009). Snyder, Hemmeter, Artman Meeker, Kinder, Pasia, and McLaughlin (2012) utilized an existing framework to “characterize key components of early childhood PD by conducting a descriptive systematic review of the literature” (p.188). Their research revealed that most paid early childhood educators were working out of center-based programs (i.e., community-based) (51%); however, this group had less access to “systemic and sustained PD” when compared to providers in the public education domain (Ochshorn, 2011).

Growing research on the use of online PD for early childhood educators indicates the effectiveness of web-based learning and connections to peers via online forms. The flourishing body of empirical evidence suggests that “professional development is more likely to be effective if...learning opportunities are intensive, are sustained over time, and include guidance and feedback on how to apply specific practices through

methods such as coaching, consultation, or facilitated collaboration (i.e., communities of practice)” (Buysse, Winton, & Rous, 2009). Content-rich, asynchronous online PD achieves each of these goals as a low-cost, accessible, and far-reaching alternative to traditional adult learning methodologies. Opportunities to connect with other center-based early childhood educators to discuss supporting young children with disabilities can easily be integrated into online PD activities. According to Snyder et al. (2012), online PD must include adult learning theory strategies that best connect learners with the content (i.e., role play, demonstration, video examples, modeling). However, limited data is available on the use of online PD for early childhood educators in center-based programs to promote inclusive opportunities for young children with disabilities. The present study aimed to examine how the implementation of such PD can improve authentic assessment techniques in classrooms and outcomes for young children with disabilities.

► PROBLEM STATEMENT

The integration of high-quality PD to promote practices of early childhood educators is essential for the successful inclusion of and improved outcomes for young students with disabilities. High-quality inclusive settings and positive outcomes for these students are not possible without meaningful PD. Pursuant to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2004), young children with disabilities must be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE), which often begins in a fully inclusive early childhood classroom. The percentage of young children with disabilities enrolling in and attending community-based early childhood programs continues to rise (OSEP, 2016), yet very few studies have focused on the utility of online PD teaching a singular practice (i.e., authentic assessment) for early childhood educators in community-based settings to promote inclusive opportunities for young children with disabilities. This is the problem addressed in the present study.

► PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this study was to capture the lived experiences of early childhood educators participating in online, asynchronous PD focused on authentic assessment to promote inclusive classroom environments. Specifically, the study examined how access to such development enhances practices of early childhood community-based programs to support young children with disabilities and foster meaningful inclusion.

There is limited research exploring the qualitative aspects of online PD for early childhood educators not employed by the public-school system. Several authors have highlighted the significant need for training and support for community-based early childhood educators serving young children with disabilities in their programs. This study aimed to fill the gaps in the existing research by identifying how access to online, asynchronous PD in an evidence-based practice (authentic assessment) supports community-based early childhood educators serving young children with disabilities in their classrooms.

Federal law mandates that young children with disabilities be educated in the LRE. Often, this means remaining in their existing private placement (i.e., childcare, preschool, in-home daycare, etc.) after being found eligible for special education and related services. This can be challenging if center-based early childhood educators feel ill-equipped to support the young child’s needs, particularly in implementing the Individualized Education Program (IEP) with fidelity. Asynchronous, online PD teaching a low-cost, evidence-based practice (i.e., authentic assessment) is an under-explored niche that can address the needs identified by early childhood educators. The use of authentic assessment can have a positive effect on the

outcomes of young children with disabilities being educated in their LRE. As the push for inclusive early childhood settings serving as a primary LRE continues to increase, it is critical that the educator base in these settings be fully equipped to meet students' needs (Ochshorn, 2011).

► CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The social constructivist perspective was best aligned with the researcher's stance and with the aims of this study. The constructivist paradigm is grounded in the notion that "there is no single reality or truth. Reality is created by individuals in groups" (Crotty, 1998). The practical application of this paradigm is that the learner is more than a recipient of knowledge: rather, he or she is actively involved in the learning process (i.e., creating his or her own reality). The social overlay of constructivism in my stance is that this study focused on the humanist element of early childhood inclusion from the perspective of the educator (Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017). Social constructivism acknowledges and celebrates the influence of experiences on the application of knowledge (Dewey, 1938). Dewey (1938) suggests that "all principles by themselves are abstract. They become concrete only in the consequences which result from their application" (p. 20). It is through accessing online PD focused on a singular concept and the application of this knowledge that the social constructivist learning occurs – namely, participants interpreting the content and implementing it in their classrooms (Schon, 1983).

► METHODOLOGY

A phenomenological research approach was implemented in this study. The aim was to understand how online PD focusing on authentic assessment supports early childhood educators in fostering inclusive environments. Chi-Shiou (2013) described phenomenology as "a recommended methodology when the study goals are to understand the meanings of human experiences or to explore concepts from new and fresh perspectives" (p. 1). Phenomenological inquiry focuses on "what it means to be human" and aids researchers in "exploring a concept loaded with social and cultural meanings, especially when the topic does not render itself easily to quantification" (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000; Heinrich, 1995). The researcher believed that there was a set of shared experiences of the phenomenon being studied (*structure*), and an empirical phenomenological methodology was used to explore the nature of the structure and its *essential constituents* (Von Eckartsberg, 1986; Moustakas, 1994). These shared experiences were discovered in greater detail through an online survey and semi-structured interviews to portray the lived experiences of participants. It is the essence of the human, life-world experience that sets this study apart from previous research.

The reflective analysis of participants' lived experience (i.e., participating in online PD) was the best approach to capture the social phenomenon that is early childhood inclusion (Moustakas, 1994). Patton (1990) proposed the following question to determine what a researcher wants to gain from a phenomenological study: "What is the essence of the experience of this phenomenon for those who experience it?" In the present study, it was through survey responses and semi-structured interviews that themes emerged concerning the potential to utilize online PD teaching a singular instructional practice (i.e., authentic assessment) to promote retention and positive outcomes for young children with disabilities in community-based early childhood programs.

This phenomenological study was designed to capture the lived experiences of community-based early childhood educators accessing online PD focused on authentic assessment to promote inclusion

throughout the state of Maryland. Participants represented five different counties across the state: Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Calvert, Harford, and Howard counties. The participants, who were exclusively female, had diverse educational and experiential training in the fields of general and special early childhood education. Participant selection was based upon the principle of criterion, purposeful sampling, meaning that "all participants met some criterion" that was beneficial for quality assurance (Creswell, 2015, p. 127). For this study, participants had to meet the following criteria: a) they currently or previously had access to online PD targeting authentic assessment, and b) they currently or previously had young children with disabilities in their classrooms.

The following research methods were utilized in alignment with the qualitative, phenomenological research approach: (a) survey protocol, and (b) interview protocol. The 23 participants who responded to the study flyer and IRB recruitment materials were asked to complete an online survey. The purpose of the survey was to gather information from potential interview participants and to ensure that the interviewees formed a representative sample. The final sample of early childhood educators who participated in the interview portion of the study met the purposeful sampling criteria threshold. All participants chose a pseudonym to protect their identity. The synchronous interviews, ranging from 15 to 60 minutes, were conducted via an online platform to capture their audio portion. When they initially logged on, participants could see the researcher; however, prior to recording, they were instructed to turn off the video feature of the online platform so that only the audio portion of the interview would be formally captured.

► RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of early childhood educators participating in online PD to promote inclusive opportunities for young children with disabilities. The aim was to understand the effects of online PD in striving to create inclusive settings through the use of authentic assessment. This study also sought to capture the perspectives of early childhood educators on using online PD to retain young children with disabilities in their classrooms. The central research question was: How does online PD teaching a singular instructional practice (authentic assessment) to early childhood educators support inclusion of young children with disabilities? The following questions were designed to gather specific evidence to support this research:

1. What are perceptions of early childhood educators on the use of online PD to promote inclusion of young children with disabilities in their classrooms?
2. How do early childhood educators perceive that their practice will change as a result of participating in online PD focused on authentic assessment?
3. What are the perceptions of early childhood educators who participate in online PD on improving the outcomes (i.e., retention) of young children with disabilities in their programs?

► FINDINGS

Data collected from participant surveys and interviews revealed 4 themes and 11 sub-themes. The themes include: the need for high quality PD for early childhood educators, promoting inclusive early childhood environments, increasing the retention of young children with disabilities in community-based early childhood programs, and improving outcomes for young children with disabilities. Challenges identified in the research are directly correlated to lack of access and perspective of PD, the application of PD, failure to

use appropriate assessments in community-based early childhood programs subsequently not prioritizing the needs of young children with disabilities, promoting retention of young children with disabilities through identification of factors that influence retention, promoting retention through PD, and defining positive outcomes for young children with disabilities including the factors that influence outcomes.

The findings established that access to high-quality content focused on early childhood special education topics is extremely limited. Time, cost, and awareness of available PD resources each impacted access for the participants in different ways. The ability to access low-cost or free online modules, similar to the one utilized in this study, at one's own pace was consistently identified as a decisive factor that would increase an early childhood educator's ability to create an inclusive environment. Online PD is of interest due to its cost-efficiency, accessibility, and flexibility for teachers with busier or non-traditional schedules (Meeker et al., 2012). Participants also identified the utility of online PD teaching specific early childhood special education content as a means to promote their own workforce development. The ability to review the content shared in an online PD module at any time and on any device was another positive contributing factor to promote the application of PD content in an inclusive classroom.

► CONCLUSIONS

Previous and current research promotes the importance of PD for early childhood educators to support these children in inclusive settings. However, access to meaningful PD remains an ongoing challenge for these educators in community-based settings. The lack of local or federal policy requiring an expansive LRE outside of the public-school system combined with the limited number of general education seats in local schools has led to an inevitable number of young children with disabilities enrolling in private preschool programs. This in turn increases the necessity for a highly effective early learning workforce to meet the needs of all children and families (Buysse, Skinner, & Grant, 2001). Research has shown that young children with disabilities who remain in high-quality, inclusive early childhood settings have better outcomes (Bagnato, Neisworth, & Pretti-Frontczak, 2010).

The results of this study are in line with those reported in the literature. Snyder, Hemmeter, Artman Meeker, Kinder, Pasia, and McLaughlin (2012) utilized an existing framework to “characterize key components of early childhood PD by conducting a descriptive systematic review of the literature” (p. 188). Their research revealed that most paid early childhood educators are working out of center-based programs (i.e., community-based) (51%); however, this group has less access to “systemic and sustained PD” when compared to providers in the public education domain (Ochshorn, 2011). Furthermore, approximately 44% of providers in the literature review reported interactions with young children with disabilities (Meeker et al., 2012). In addition to targeting barriers such as cost and access, asynchronous online PD can be personalized to address issues specific to supporting young children with disabilities in inclusive settings. In Meeker et al.'s (2012) study, 10% of providers self-reported as working in early childhood special education, and 77% of providers (i.e., center-based early childhood educator, daycare providers, early childhood special educators, etc.) were reported to “work with either young children with disabilities and delays or those at risk for disabilities and delays” (Meeker et al., 2012). These findings highlight the importance of access to meaningful, engaging PD and the need for programs to ensure that young children with disabilities thrive in inclusive early childhood settings to achieve positive outcomes from their experiences with typically developing peers (Bruder et al., 2009). It can be concluded that access to ongoing, high-quality PD that is low cost or free would promote the

creation of inclusive classrooms for young children with disabilities. This study supports the current research and the concept that high-quality online PD could play a significant role in promoting inclusive classrooms for young children with disabilities.

Early childhood educators' desire to cultivate inclusive classrooms is another finding that emerged from this study. Each participant acknowledged the importance of exposing young children with and without disabilities to a variety of peers from differing backgrounds. Purposeful inclusion is key to retaining young children with disabilities in center-based early childhood settings and leads to improved outcomes (Buysse & Bailey, 1993). A program's vision for intentional inclusion goes beyond access and supports meaningful integration with shared beliefs in a child's potential. A gap highlighted in this study is that an inclusive environment for young children with disabilities is not possible without meaningful PD, regardless of an individual early childhood educators desire to promote inclusion.

► SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTIONS

There is a significant gap in the existing literature base examining how Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for young children with disabilities are implemented by Child Find staff in community-based early childhood programs. These preschool programs function as the least restrictive environment (LRE) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as detailed by yearly Office of Special Education Programming (OSEP) reporting data. However, no current database clarifies the processes that Child Find staff utilize to partner with early childhood educators to partner with community-based early childhood programs to implement IEPs. The absence of this data on local, state, and national scales creates a massive gap between policy (IDEA) and practice (implementation). A future small-scale qualitative study could aim to gather data on current collaborative IEP implementation practices and develop subsequent guidance to integrate into current early childhood Child Find staff processes. This research would identify any current needs for PD focusing on IEP implementation and other relevant early childhood special education content required to promote inclusion in community-based early childhood programs.

► RESEARCHER BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Mauria Uhlik currently serves as a Special Educator at Dundalk Elementary School in Baltimore County Public Schools. She is a former Director of Evaluation for DC Public Schools where she spearheaded massive changes across the District, including the development and implementation of a city-wide early childhood assessment model to determine eligibility for special education and related services for children ages 3-5 years old. Her research interests are focused on the policy expansion of LRE into the private sector of early childhood education and inclusive early child systems development. As a USELT scholar and a leader in the field she is currently leading the charge with a district initiative on the projection of preschool based assessments on the performance of subsequent county-wide assessment performance. Dr. Uhlik is a former Associate Professor at Towson University and the esteemed Johns Hopkins University.

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Exploring the Perspectives and Needs of Teachers of Elementary Emotional Support Programs: A Phenomenological Study

By Dr. LaTwyne Wise

► ABSTRACT

Public educational institutions have not produced positive outcomes for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBD) as evidenced by dropout rates, school-to prison pipeline results, student achievement scores, and percentage of students able to successfully transition to the general education environment or adult independence. Key factors that impact students' growth are teacher preparation, responsive programming, and multiple sources of support. Favorable student outcomes are typically the measure by which we gauge the success of educational programs, that metric has demonstrated failure for students with EBD nationally. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the perspectives and needs of elementary public school emotional support teachers with a focus on improving programming and, ultimately, the outcomes for students with EBD in large urban public schools. For this study semi-structured generative interviews, records and archival data reviews, and digital reflective journaling served as the data sources. Results revealed that teachers from this study were in need of technical training support to help them navigate special education processes and paperwork, professional developments relative to behavior science, opportunities to collaborate with teachers of similar programs, smaller classroom and caseload sizes, and support from professionals trained and with experience working with students with EBD. Teachers believed their students would most benefit from increased opportunities to be included in the general education environment, smaller class sizes, and a therapeutic component embedded in their educational program.

► INTRODUCTION

Students with emotional disturbance represent about 5% of the pupils served pursuant to the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and they display a wide range of behavioral, academic, and social-emotional needs that adversely impact their school performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Outcomes for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBD) are poor, as reflected in the dropout rate for the population that has consistently surpassed 35%, greater than any other disability classification (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, 2016, 2017). Research shows most students are placed in emotional support programming for externalized inappropriate behaviors that impede their achievement and interactions in the school community. Few effective interventions address the behavior, academic, and social skills of the population (Bullock & Gable, 2006; Walker & Gresham, 2014). Also, limited research exists on the perceptions of teachers who serve as primary instructors of emotional support programs in the public sector. Given the complex needs of students with EBD.

Teaching students with EBD demands specialized interventions beyond what is typically available or necessary in a general education program (Landrum, Tankersley, & Kauffman, 2003; Oliver & Reschly, 2010; Flower et al., 2017). Nationally, school districts must create effective programs for students with EBD (IDEA Regulations, 2006, 34 CFR §300.1), a challenge that has prompted many districts to subcontract educational services to private companies that provide behavioral instructional services for the district (Bullock & Gable, 2006). Emotional support programs must target the needs of students with EBD by structuring programming to increase academic gains, graduation rates, and the number of students reintegrated to the general education environment; it is one of the most difficult instructional assignments (Carran, Kerins, & Murray, 2005; Gage, Adamson, MacSuga-Gage, & Lewis, 2017; Simpson et al., 2011). Irrespective of limited support, teachers of students with EBD are expected to create structured learning environments and to generate effective functional behavior assessments and intervention plans for each student while producing academic and behavior gains for their students (Gage et al., 2017; Simpson et al., 2011).

► PROBLEM STATEMENT

Research reveals high attrition rates for teachers of students identified as EBD and outlines multiple difficulties surrounding programming (Billingsley, 2007; Freeman, Yell, Shriner, & Katsiyannis, 2019; Nance & Calabrese, 2009). However, much of the research focuses on private behavioral, mental health placements or non-public school settings. While the data are useful, they exclude the experiences and perspectives of public school teachers who must educate their students beside their same-aged, nondisabled peers, as mandated by IDEA. This presents a unique phenomenon for teachers charged to create such an educational experience for students with EBD. The perspectives and needs of public school teachers of students with EBD must be taken into account.

► PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

Teacher preparation programs are an area of concern in creating positive outcomes for students identified as EBD. Pre-service development trainings provide minimal supports for preparing teachers to serve students classified as EBD (Blake & Monahan, 2007; Gage et al., 2017). High rates of staff turnover also negatively impact districts in establishing continuity of services for students. For students with complex needs, intervention provided with intensity and fidelity is critical. Programming for students who need emotional support typically lack institutional knowledge of staff due to attrition rates and inexperienced teachers (Albrecht, Johns, Mounstevan, & Olurunda, 2009; Gage et al., 2017). Understanding the perspectives and needs of public school teachers of students with EBD regarding programming, support, and professional development is needed to address the gap between student needs and outcomes (Council for Exceptional Children, 2015).

► CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research was focused on the lived experience of teachers of emotional support programs. The researcher filtered the topic through the lens of a social constructivist believing that there is no single reality or truth, and therefore reality needs to be interpreted. This research stance often lends itself to a qualitative research approach (Creswell, 2018). Phenomenology, a qualitative research method, prioritizes and investigates how the human being experiences the world. It allows the researcher to delve into the

perceptions, perspectives, understandings, and feelings of those who have actually experienced the phenomenon, and thus was thought appropriate for this study. To provide further context relative to the phenomenon the researcher reviewed three streams of literature closely related to the subject matter: the complexity of the EBD classification, programming for students with EBD and teacher preparation and professional development.

► METHODOLOGY

Through the process of triangulation multiple data sources were used to capture the essence of the phenomenon of being an emotional support teacher. The three that served as the sources for this study were semi-structured generative interviews, records and archival data reviews, and digital reflective journaling. Seidman (2013) advises that phenomenological interviews must explore how the person came to the phenomenon, details of the phenomenon and lastly how the participant makes meaning of the phenomenon. To assure that those three areas were explored the researcher asked questions associated with the three phenomenological pillars through two interview phases.

The target population for this study was emotional support teachers who taught within the K-8 grade band who had between 2-6 years of experience. All participants were directly employed by one target school district. An urban K-12 school district served as the setting for this study. The educational site provides programming for over 130,000 students and staffs approximately 100 emotional support programs, supporting over 2,000 students. A quarter of the programs are outsourced and managed by community-based organizations. This study focused only on programs managed by the target district within the K-8 grade range.

► RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Centrally, the research sought to explore the perceptions and needs of teachers of emotional support programs. The sub-questions examined the following:

1. How do emotional support teachers perceive pre-service activities prepared them to teach students with EBD?
2. How do emotional support teachers perceive the professional development supports they have received?
3. How do emotional support teachers perceive the supports (district, admin, peers, etc.) they receive and are there additional supports they perceive they need to support their students?
4. In what ways do teachers of students with EBD perceive the needs of their students and how their needs can be met through specialized support?

► FINDINGS

Four themes and nine sub-themes emerged from the data examined in this study. Training needs and program challenges were most prominent in the accounts of teacher interviews and digital journal entries. The four research questions were explored and answered by first-account data sources. The most frequently expressed challenges marked in the data were the overall inadequacies of training provided to teachers, the complex needs of students, the wide range of work responsibilities, and the desire expressed by teachers to be supported by personnel familiar with the EBD population. The common program challenges shared were the inappropriateness of the self-contained special education model, the lack of inclusion for students with EBD, and the need for therapeutic measures in the classroom. The different perspectives reflected by the data indicate targeted training and supports be provided for teachers of emotional support programs. A further implication of the study was the need to review current programming structures for students with EBD to measure the intended and unintended consequences of current practices and constructs.

► CONCLUSIONS

It is important for teacher preparation programs and school districts to make efforts to better prepare teachers for the realities of a career in education as well as provide strategies specific to progressing students with EBD (Prather-Jones, 2011). While the demand for teachers is growing, the supply of new teachers is shrinking. Research notes the four major factors impacting teacher retention are compensation, preparation, mentoring and Teacher Induction, and teaching conditions (Sutcher et al., 2019). The purpose of this study was to provide teachers of emotional support programs a voice and opportunity to offer their perspectives about the specialized programs they lead and the ways in which they are prepared to educate and positively impact students with EBD. The results revealed that teachers perceived their preparation activities as disconnected from the work they do, but the student teaching opportunity provided the greatest support, as it provided a model for classroom structures and routines and exposed many of them to what emotional support programming could be. Teachers had varied perceptions of support but identified welcoming environments and informed advisement as valuable support from peers. Positive administrative support was thought of as accessibility, visibility, and willingness to provide support. Overall, the premise of this study was to improve conditions for students with EBD to have improved outcomes by learning the viewpoints of the teachers who serve them and positively influence the degree of support and preparation measures thought necessary to develop them.

► SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTIONS

This research exploring the perspectives and needs of emotional support teachers is Dr. Wise's first formal contribution to the field of education. The implications of the study results inferred a need to further explore the phenomenon of inclusion among students with EBD. The results indicated a strong theme of students being segregated and teachers on the teams responsible for the placement sharing various explanations why a segregated setting was deemed appropriate. Some cite the administrator's desire to keep general education students and teachers safe or able to participate in uninterrupted instruction. The findings suggest students with an EBD classification have a lowered expectation to succeed in comparison to their peers. The researcher intends to explore the aforementioned phenomenon through scholarly research.

► RESEARCHER BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Wise is a USELT scholar interested in the impact of mental health and wellness in the school setting, and leadership and management in special education. Her research on the perspectives and needs of emotional support teachers is being used to create training modules for teachers and redesign programming for students. Strategizing and using core pedagogic principles to instruct individuals to reach their full potential are skills she has been honing throughout her adult life, and her research pursuits allow for those skills to further develop. She currently works as a director of Emotional Support programs for the Philadelphia School District's office of specialized services managing and supporting more than one hundred thirty programs.

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