

Management of classroom behaviors: Perceived readiness of education interns

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Abstract: Education students at a large research university participated in internships during their final semesters as part of their respective programs of study as a capstone experience. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to collect data on the perceptions of interns' readiness and knowledge of evidence-based practices to manage classroom behaviors for students with exceptionalities in inclusive settings. Emergent themes include general feeling of readiness to manage classroom behaviors. However, a desire for earlier access to actual classroom experiences was also expressed, as was the desire for greater instruction in evidence-based practices to manage behaviors for students with exceptionalities.

Keywords: teacher preparation, behavior management, evidence-based practices, student internships

I. Purpose.

Teacher quality is the single most accurate indicator of students' academic success, and teachers who leave the profession often cite a lack of adequate preparation as one of the reasons for their departure (Darling-Hammond, 2010; McKinney, Haberman, Stafford- Johnson, & Robinson, 2008). Reschly and Holdheide (2008) found that teachers who are skilled in scientifically based instruction, classroom organization, and behavior management had the competencies to establish classroom environments conducive to learning and improved academic performance for all students.

In a literature review of evidence-based practices in classroom management, Simonsen, Fairbank, Briesch, Myers, and Sugai (2008) identified five critical features of effective classroom management: (a) maximize structure; (b) post, teach, review, monitor, and reinforce expectations; (c) actively engage student in observable ways; (d) use a continuum of strategies for responding to appropriate behaviors; and (e) use a continuum of strategies to respond to inappropriate behaviors. Proactive, evidence-based programs are currently being implemented in school districts nationally (Sugai & Horner, 2006) and disseminated through resources such as pbis.org to support teachers in managing behaviors. However, early career teachers have frequently stated that they are unprepared to address problematic behaviors (Cooper, Kurtts, Baber, & Vallecorsa, 2008), especially among students with exceptionalities in inclusive settings (Billingsley, Israel, & Smith, 2011; Regan & Michaud, 2011).

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Traditionally teacher preparation programs provide a culminating, capstone experience (Backhus & Thompson, 2006; Fernandez & Erbilgin, 2009; Kenny, 1998) in the form of a semester-long internship during a senior student's final semester of baccalaureate study. These internships provide an opportunity for students to implement and refine teaching strategies learned through their coursework in actual classrooms with K-12 students.

The purpose of this study was to investigate undergraduate pre-service teachers' levels of preparedness when managing student behaviors in inclusive settings. Specifically, we asked (a) what are the perceptions of readiness among college of education interns for managing classroom behaviors for students with exceptionalities when they begin teaching, and (b) to what extent do interns identify best practices for managing behaviors of students with and without exceptionalities?

II. Background.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has dramatically increased the demands that all teachers encounter in the classroom. New teachers need a broad continuum of abilities to teach more complex curriculum to the growing number of public school students who have limited educational resources at home, those whose primary language is not English, and those who have special needs (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Moreover, established research on teacher development has shown that early career teachers have long had feelings of "inadequacy and unpreparedness" (Katz, 1972, p. 51.) as well as concerns about classroom management (Burden, 1979; Fuller, 1969; Fuller & Brown, 1975; Katz, 1972). These factors emphasize the need for Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) to not only evaluate the outcomes of their teacher preparation programs, but assess processes that lead to those outcomes in the name of high quality education for all teachers and their students (Slavin, 2007). This is particularly important with respect to teachers' classroom management readiness (Cooper et al., 2008).

Objectives of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA; 1965) include (a) improving teacher and principal effectiveness, (b) providing information to families to help them improve their children's schools and to educators to help them improve their students' learning, (c) implementing college and career-ready standards and development of improved assessments aligned with those standards, and (d) providing support and interventions to improve student learning and achievement in the nation's lowest performing schools. Above all, the reauthorization emphasizes the goal to meet the needs of diverse learners (Department of Education [ED], 2010). An emphasis on preparation in content knowledge that applies to special education teachers has been explicated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 (Boe, Shin, & Cook, 2007).

For their part, general education teachers have indicated the need for ongoing professional development in the management of student behavior (Cooper et al., 2008). Many new special educators conveyed that when it comes to behavior management, they faced comparable challenges to their general educator colleagues (Keller, Brady, & Taylor, 2005; White & Mason, 2006). In a meta-analysis of studies concerning teacher induction programs, Billingsley et al. (2011) found that new teachers focus more on behavioral challenges than any other area of their jobs. The impetus for the current research came from the legislative context of increased teacher accountability and the increased momentum toward including students with exceptionalities in general education settings (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Forlin, Loreman, Sharma, & Earle, 2009), thus informing programming among colleges of education, and

establishing an engaging and safe environment for all students (Lane & Carter, 2006; Oblinger, 2008; Regan, 2009; Jukes & McCain, 2011).

III. Methodology.

A. Setting.

To address the findings of previous research, a survey was conducted at a large research university in the southeastern United States, having an enrollment of 58,587 students. At the time of the study, the college of education had an enrollment of 5,590 students. In an attempt to triangulate the data and increase reliability, subsequent semi-structured interviews were held on the main campus of the university in a medium-sized student lounge setting.

B. Sample.

A convenience sample was obtained in collaboration with the director of the office of clinical experiences at the college of education of all students enrolled in a teaching internship (N=891). An invitation to complete an anonymous online survey (Appendix A) was distributed by the director to the interns, and the response rate was 34% (see Table 1).

C. Materials.

Participant response to survey questions was conducted using a free online survey platform. Design and deployment of the survey followed protocols set forth by Dillman and Bowker (2000) on four types of errors- sampling, coverage, measurement, and nonresponse. The online survey was composed of a total of 18 questions with 15 questions on a Likert scale ranging from one to five (1= strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) and three open-response questions. Questions 1-15 were sectoried into three factors: (a) preparedness; (b) accommodations for students with exceptionalities; and (c) communication. Three open-response questions were included at the end of the survey that asked respondents (a) their age; (b) what strategies they were planning to use to manage behaviors in inclusive classrooms; and (c) their program of study.

Strategies for classroom management and program of study were included because they could be indicators of how particular programs of study prepared their students to teach in inclusive settings. Kaplowitz, Hadlock, and Levine (2004) determined mean response rates for web-based surveys to be 21% compared to surveys delivered by mail (31.5%). The survey used in this study included a small number of items with the intention of increasing the likelihood of participant response. Survey response rate was 34%, higher than the average, as reported by Kapliwitz et al. (2004).

Validation of survey items 1-15 was accomplished through factor analysis (Dillman & Bowker, 2000). Items that correlated the highest with a factor defined the meaning of the factor as judged by what conceptually tied the items together, thereby providing internal structure evidence (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 2009). The factors, ascertained by the magnitude of the coefficients are identified in Table 2 by the shading, where shaded coefficients are the largest coefficients for a factor. Names for the factors are as follows: Factor 1, Preparedness

Considerations; Factor 2, Accommodations Considerations; and Factor 3, Communication Considerations.

Table 1. Survey participants.

College of Education Major	N	Percent of N
Elementary Ed. BS	163	53.98%
English L.A. Ed. BS	21	6.96%
Exceptional Ed. BS	20	6.63%
Social Science Ed. BS	28	9.27%
Art Ed. BS	11	3.64%
Social Science Ed. MAT	5	1.66%
Mathematics Ed BS	14	4.64%
Secondary Ed. BS Biology	2	.66%
No Answer	7	2.32%
Elementary Education MA	1	.33%
Early Childhood Education BS	6	1.99%
Exceptional Education MA	8	2.65%
Middle School Mathematics MAT	1	.33%
Science Education BS- Chemistry	1	.33%
Foreign Language Education BS	4	1.31%
Science Education BS – Physics	2	.66%
English Language Arts Education with ESOL Endorsement MAT	2	.66%
Counselor Education MA	1	.33%
Counselor Education Med	2	.66%
Foreign Language Education BS Spanish	3	.99%
Total	302	100%

Descriptive statistics were performed to examine the frequency of responses to items 1-15 of the survey. Cross tabs were examined to determine if there existed an influence of the respondents' program of study or their age on their response to items 1-15. Open-response items from the questionnaire were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Cresswell, 2007; Glesne, 2011), which consisted of coding the survey responses and aggregating the codes to identify themes. The themes that emerged served as foundation for the development of semi-structured interview questions.

The director of the Office of Clinical Experiences at the College of Education facilitated the distribution of invitations via email to the respondents of the survey to participate in semi-structured interviews. The resulting sample size for the semi-structured interviews was five participants from four educational programs of study (See Table 3).

Table 2. Structure matrix.

	Factor		
	1	2	3
i5	.886		
i6	.848		
i9	.755	.510	
i1	.732	.444	
i10	.605		.319
i8		.846	.151
i4		.802	.111
i2	.307	.790	
i7		.642	
i13		.602	
i14		.501	
i11	.344		.764
i3	.264		.599
i12		.126	.392
i15		.119	.382

Extraction Method: Maximum Likelihood.
Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization.

Table 3. Interview participants.

College of Education Major	N
Exceptional Education B.A.	2
Elementary Education B.A.	1
Mathematics Education M.A.T.	1
Early Childhood Education B.A.	1

D. Data Collection.

All the interviews used a standard protocol of questions and were conducted according to Bogdan’s and Biklen’s (2007) recommended approach. The primary author conducted each of the sessions, served as facilitator, and audio taped the interviews. Interview questions were developed based upon analysis of survey results and the protocol of interview questions followed the structure of the overall research questions regarding perceptions of readiness for behavioral management when working with students with special needs in inclusive settings, knowledge of best practices for behavioral management when working with students with exceptionalities and

curriculum coursework that student participants had completed. Recommendations for future curriculum preparation and in-service programs were also solicited.

E. Data Analysis.

Grounded theory (Cresswell, 2007) procedures were utilized to examine responses to question 17 of the survey, “What strategies are you planning for managing classroom behaviors for students with exceptionalities in inclusive settings?” These procedures consist of “developing categories of information (open coding), interconnecting the categories (axial coding), building a ‘story’ that connects the categories (selective coding), and ending with a discursive set of theoretical propositions” (Creswell, 2007, p. 150). Due to the open-ended nature of these questions, a participant could have identified several concerns within one answer. As such, more than one theme could have been identified and coded for the question. To establish inter-rater reliability, the primary and secondary authors independently coded the first 50 responses into categories whereupon themes emerged, then compared each response and corresponding theme category. Response codings that were not agreed upon were discussed and agreement was sought. Final inter-rater reliability on the question was higher than 95%. Themes from the qualitative analysis of the survey were fundamental to the creation of interview questions.

Subsequent interview data were analyzed using Krueger and Casey’s (2000) recommended methods to identify themes and their prevalence within and across individuals and to contrast the views of interns from different education programs. Audiotapes of the sessions were transcribed and combined with affiliated notes for analysis. Member checks were conducted throughout the duration of the study (Merriam, 1998). Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe member checks as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314) in a study and consist of taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study to confirm credibility of information and narrative account.

Participants were emailed transcripts of their interview and the researchers’ interpretations of the interviews and were invited to comment on accuracy of interview transcripts and interpretations prior to subsequent interviews. None of the participants objected to the interview transcripts or the researchers’ interpretations. Related themes and patterns emerged in the course of the conversations. Results of the data analysis were then examined in the light of current research and literature about the preparation of general and special educators for behavioral management.

IV. Results.

A regression analysis (see Table 4) of survey items 1-15 on items 16 and 17 resulted showed the following areas of significance:

Table 4. Survey item regression.

Nominal item	Interval item	Significance
Age	The physical environment of my classroom is an important consideration toward the learning of all students.	.025
Program of Study	I am confident that I will be able to cope with the pressures of classroom behavior management.	.043
Program of Study	I am confident in my ability to manage classroom behaviors	.050
Age	Seating arrangements of students can promote positive behaviors or negative behaviors.	.023
Age	I should be aware if any of my students take medication or not.	.031

Among the responses of the survey, nine predominant themes emerged: (a) positive reinforcement; (b) seating arrangements; (c) collaborative development of class rules; (d) posting class rules and consequences; (e) rewards systems; (f) consistency; (g) smooth instructional transitions; (h) use of behavior charts; and (i) not sure. The survey results provided salient concerns of teaching interns. In order to establish deeper context to those concerns (Krueger & Casey, 2000), semi-structured interviews were conducted. Three main themes emerged from the analysis of the transcribed participant interviews. Emergent themes include: (a) a feeling of uncertainty to manage classroom behaviors; (b) a desire for earlier access to actual classroom experiences; and (c) a need for greater instruction in evidence-based practices to manage behavior for students with exceptionalities.

A. A Feeling of Uncertainty to Manage Classroom Behaviors.

The first major theme to emerge from the structured interviews was consistent with the literature as it relates to the feelings of teachers regarding their readiness to manage inappropriate classroom behaviors (Brownell, Ross, Colon, & McCallum, 2005; Burden, 1979; Fuller, 1969; Fuller & Brown, 1975; Katz, 1972; Melnick & Meister, 2008; Westling, 2010). Clarissa (pseudonym) stated:

As teachers, we are asked to go into classrooms and be highly qualified teachers to both students that want to learn and students that don't want to learn or only want to disrupt the flow of a lesson; but principals expect us to be both experts in our content area and experts at controlling behaviors, we are just not prepared or trained to do that.

A comment from another student from a different education program was:

I feel that I am progressively getting better and learning new techniques to manage behaviors in the classroom, but I'm not sure how well I could implement them if I were in my own classroom and in a real situation.

Although the respondents were uncertain of their readiness, there was a sense of optimism among some. "I am planning to use my personality and love for teaching as tools to enthruse my students about learning, and I hope that will make a big difference in terms of how they behave", wrote one intern.

B. A Desire for Earlier Access to Actual Classroom Experience.

The second theme that emerged among participants was the desire for earlier access to actual classroom experiences. As one student expressed:

We come into our programs thinking that we are made for this, and we spend a lot of money to become teachers. But we don't even get a chance to spend any real time in a classroom until our last two semesters. What if we got all that way and realized that we really weren't cut out for teaching?

Another intern had similar concerns:

I really wish that my program gave us exposure to a range of classroom experiences sooner than at the end, when we are slapped with the realities of juggling lesson plans, classroom management, state exam prep, and everything else that can overwhelm us. That way, we could have a better chance to reflect on what we've learned and prepare better.

One student framed her response from another point of view:

I had the opportunity to visit a friend of mine who teaches students with special needs early in my program to see what it would be like to really teach. That experience solidified my motivation to get into the classroom and teach. I know it will be tough, but every kid deserves an opportunity to have a great education and if they have the right teacher it will make all the difference.

C. A Need for Greater Instruction in Evidence-Based Practices to Manage Behavior.

The final theme that emerged clearly during interviews with the interns was the need for greater instruction in evidence-based practices to manage behaviors in the classroom. When asked, "what kind of strategies will you use to manage classroom behaviors?" a range of positive responses were given among the participants, including:

You need to allow for student differences. For example, say you may have a child who has ADHD and is fidgety. I would allow him to take a calm lap around the classroom and return to his studies. This way, he uses up his energy and can focus better on the task at hand.

Although the participants largely had well-meaning plans for the management of classroom behaviors, there were a number of responses that did not align with evidence-based practices for students with exceptionalities. One such example being:

I would just nip it in the bud straight off the bat. Students are just kids, and they need to know that the adult is in charge of the classroom. I mean, I am not going to be a tyrant, but my students will be well aware that the classroom is mine, and that misbehavior will not be tolerated. That way, they will be able to anticipate what I want from them.

Despite their lack of experience in implementing evidence-based practices, there were responses that indicated a degree of willingness to learn more about the how to put them into practice. As one participant said, “ I think I have learned a lot of great strategies for managing behavior and working with diverse students. I just need some coaching and practice in using them in real teaching situations”.

In summary, analysis of data from both the survey results and the semi-structured interviews during this study indicated that students at this university had feelings of uncertainty about managing classroom behaviors and possessed a desire for earlier access to actual classroom experiences. They also expressed a need for greater instruction in evidence-based practices for behavior management when working with students in inclusive settings. However, there was a sense of optimism about having the opportunity to teach that coincided with the feelings of reticence.

V. Discussion.

This study sought insight into pre-service education interns’ readiness to manage behaviors of students with exceptionalities in inclusive classrooms. Upon analysis of the results, there was evidence that some teaching interns felt uncertain of their ability to manage classroom behaviors. Many respondents expressed a desire access to real classrooms earlier in their educational program and felt that having a more initial exposure could solidify foundational pedagogies of best practices in behavior management.

Lastly, both survey and interview responses indicated that students recognized the importance of honing a skill set in behavioral management, and evidenced that they grasped some of the concepts integral to best practices when working with students who have special needs. However, many respondents also stated that they required more in-depth instruction before becoming the teacher of record themselves. These findings mirror previous study findings which report that the incorporation of increased instruction on the implementation of evidence-based practices for behavior management when working with students who have exceptional needs is a predominant factor to student success and teacher retention (Billingsley et al., 2011; McKinney et al., 2008; Reschly & Holdheide, 2008), and should occur within teaching curricula.

In looking toward future studies on perceived readiness of pre-service education interns and given the state of available technologies, institutes of higher education may seek to develop and evaluate teacher preparation curricula that harnesses cloud technology. By utilizing a web-based learning and supervision platform that allows student teachers to progress through clinical teaching coursework, intern supervision can take place online with opportunities for immediate feedback and coaching (Rock, Gregg, Gable, & Zigmond, 2009; Scheeler, McKinnon, & Stout, 2012). Possibilities may include synchronous online tutoring (Vasquez & Slocum, 2011) and experiences in simulated learning environments (Hughes, Stapleton, & O’Connor, 2006; Vince Garland, Vasquez, & Pearl, 2012).

Such learning opportunities could be infused into teaching curricula to enhance traditional face to face instruction (Billingsley et al., 2011) and increase opportunities for earlier access to classroom experiences among teaching interns prior to their final semesters of programming. It is clear that targeted instruction of evidence-based practices for behavior management when working with students with exceptionalities is recognized to be important by the pre-service teachers in this study, and necessary to ensure the retention of teachers who serve even our most vulnerable students.

It is recognized that the sample for this study was limited to one university, and generalization to other programs in the U.S. is slight. Future research should include a larger sample size from several IHEs in different geographical areas. It is important to note that findings echo results from previous studies across the years and emphasize a continued ongoing desire among teaching interns for additional preparation in behavior management (Burden, 1979; Fuller, 1969; Fuller & Brown, 1975; Katz, 1972).

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Appendix 1. Survey.

A Survey of Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions of Readiness for Behavior Management	Strongly Disagree					
Instructions: Please circle one answer for each statement below.	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable	
	S	D	NA	A	S	N/A
	D	/D	A			

START HERE

1. I know that students with disabilities have legal rights.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
2. Some students need accommodations for their behavior.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
3. It is a good idea to consult with parents at least once per grading period.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
4. The physical environment of my classroom is an important consideration toward the learning of all students.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
5. I am confident that I will be able to cope with the pressures of classroom behavior management.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
6. I am confident in my ability to manage classroom behaviors	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
7. There should be opportunities for individual and group work on assignments.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

8. Seating arrangements of students can promote positive behaviors or negative behaviors.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
9. I should know if any of my students has a behavioral disability.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
10. I should be aware if any of my students take medication or not.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
11. I should communicate with my students' other teachers about their behaviors in other settings.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
12. I will allow for students to communicate their emotional needs.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
13. I will allow for students to have a "break" when they appear to be stressed or anxious.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
14. It is okay to send a student out of the room when they are being disruptive.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
15. Using physical restraint is used as a last resort and only when a child is a threat to herself or others.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

16. What is your program of study (your major)?

17. What is your age?

18. What strategies are you planning for managing classroom behaviors for students with exceptionalities in inclusive settings?

****Thank you for your time to complete this survey!****

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