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Teachers of Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders' Perceptions of the Importance of Selected Professional Standards of Practice

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Utilizing the Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) standards delineated for preparation programs in teaching students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), the present study sought to determine how graduates of one teacher preparation program perceived the importance of the standards in their work with students with EBD. Results indicated that graduates viewed the CEC standards as important to their work. Further, a multiple regression model examined specific demographic variables (i.e., total years of teaching experience, positions graduates currently held, graduates' feelings about working with students with EBD, and their feelings as to causal factors leading to EBD) as predictors for how graduates perceive the importance of using the CEC standards. Unfortunately, the regression model did not predict the graduates' perceived importance in using the CEC standards; however, graduates' years of teaching experience with students with EBD was a significant predictor for three of the standards.

Keywords: emotional and behavioral disorders, Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) standards, teacher preparation programs

In 1983, the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence and Education, 1983) began a national frenzy. The report broadcasted the notion that American schools were not appropriately educating children and youth. Over the years, national reports and legislative actions have called for improvements in teacher preparation (e.g., Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008; No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2001). These landmark actions have placed pressure on Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) and their teacher preparation programs to enhance the quality of teacher preparation.

Teacher preparation programs in IHEs in the United States have been criticized for (a) centering too much on pedagogy and not enough on teacher competencies or standards, (b) being detached from the realities of education settings, and (c) providing minimal field

experience for pre-service teachers (Prater & Sileo, 2004). According to the United States Secretary of Education's Annual Report on Teacher Quality (USDE, 2002), IHEs are to blame for the unqualified teachers in the country. The Teacher Quality Report holds IHEs and their colleges of education responsible for producing teachers that are not prepared for the realities of the classroom.

Organizations in special education that accredit and approve teacher preparation programs recognize the importance of specific standards and corresponding knowledge and skills for teacher candidates of children and youth with exceptionalities (e.g., Bullock, Dykes, & Kelly, 1973; Carlson, 1996; Prater & Sileo, 2004). For several years, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the largest special education organization in the U.S., has researched the standards needed by teachers who serve children and youth with exceptionalities. Outcomes of its works are reported in *What Every Special Educator Must Know* (1995, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2003, 2009) and serves as a guide for teacher preparation programs in special education. Typically, IHEs use the CEC standards to guide the development of their curricula and as a measure whereby to assess graduates' competence (CEC, 2009; Crutchfield, 2003). More specifically, teacher educators may utilize these CEC standards as a means to evaluate teachers' competence in teaching students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD; Crutchfield, 2003).

The issue of limited empirical research on the effectiveness of quality teacher preparation programs in special education is a current dilemma in education (Sindelar, Brownell, & Billingsley, 2010). Specifically in the preparation of teachers of students with EBD, data are limited on teacher preparation programs that conduct ongoing, comprehensive evaluation of the preparation provided (Brownell, Ross, Colon, & McCallum, 2005; Carlson, 1996). To adequately prepare teachers of children and youth with EBD, the authors of this paper thought it may be helpful for IHEs to examine graduates' perceptions of the importance of the CEC standards to their work. Data accrued from the present study may provide insights that could assist in the development of quality teacher preparation models for teachers of students with EBD.

In this study, we sought to answer two research questions: (a) How do graduates perceive the importance of CEC standards in their work with students with EBD? and (b) To what extent do specific demographic variables (i.e., total years of teaching experience, positions graduates currently held, graduates' feelings about working with students with EBD, and their feelings as to causal factors leading to EBD) predict graduates' perceptions of the importance of the CEC standards?

Procedures

Selection of Participants

Participants in the present study were graduates from a selected master's degree program in special education with a focus on teaching students with EBD. The program was part of a comprehensive special education department in a major suburban university in the Southwestern part of the United States. The IHE program had been a National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and CEC approved program since its early inception in the 1980s. The general requirements for the degree remained essentially the same over the years and the content focus maintained the same basic elements, but was routinely updated. The names and addresses for 230 graduates of the master's degree program from 1990 to 2011 were accessed through university databases. A letter from the program coordinator was sent to all 230

program graduates introducing the study and soliciting their online contact information. One hundred and seventy-one graduates provided online contact information.

E-mails were sent to each program graduate who provided online contact information. In the e-mail, further information was provided about the online survey along with an invitation to complete the survey. In all cases, the use of a coding system ensured anonymity. No names or other identifying information was used in data analysis and presentation.

Instrumentation

The survey instrument was developed utilizing the CEC (2009) standards and knowledge and skills statements for the preparation of teachers of students with EBD. The survey instrument was constructed in two parts.

Part one asked for demographic data, which was comprised of 13 items (i.e., year completed master's program, undergraduate major, highest degree attained, total years teaching experience, years teaching students with EBD, geographic setting of position, position currently held, other positions held, population of students worked with, age group of students with whom they currently work, problems faced in their current setting, number of the students on their caseload, graduates' feelings about working with students with EBD, and their feelings as to causal factors leading to EBD).

In part two of the survey, statements representative of the standards for professional practice were presented. Nine CEC standards for professional practice (i.e., foundations, development and characteristics of learners, individual learning differences, instructional strategies, learning environments/social interactions, instruction planning, assessment, professional and ethical practice, and collaboration) were delineated, each followed by four knowledge and skills statements representative of the specific standard. Participants were instructed to read each of the standards and accompanying knowledge and skills statements. Participants rated, using a four-point scale, their perceived importance of each standard in relation to his or her work with students with EBD.

Results

One hundred twenty-seven (n=127) respondents attempted the survey; however, 22 surveys were not included in the data analyses due to excessive missing data (15%). The analysis was based on 105 participants, a return rate of approximately 62%. (See Table 1 for demographic information of survey respondents.) Descriptive analyses were conducted; categorical demographic variables were analyzed with frequencies and percentages and continuous demographic variables were analyzed with means and standard deviations. A multiple linear regression (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003; Howell, 2007) was conducted to examine the graduates' perceptions of importance of the CEC standards as the outcome variable and specific variables (i.e., total years of teaching experience, position graduates currently held, graduates' feelings about working with students with EBD, and their feelings as to causal factor leading to EBD) as the predictors.

Table 1
Demographic Information on Survey Respondents (N=105)

Position	Number	Percent
Positions Currently Held		
Administration	9	8.6
Classroom Teacher	65	61.9
Educational Support Personnel	21	20.0
Higher Education	20	9.5
Years Teaching Students with EBD		
5 years or less	39	37.1
6 – 9 years	34	32.4
10 years or more	32	30.5
Total Years Teaching Experience		
1 – 10 years or less	59	56.2
11 years or more	46	43.8
Geographic Setting Where Teaching		
Suburban	54	51.4
Rural	11	10.5
Urban	40	38.1
Time of Master's Degree Completion		
1999 – 2000	75	71.4
2001 – 2012	30	28.6
Highest Degree Earned		
Med., MA/MS, EdS	87	82.9
PhD, EdD	18	17.1

The first research question sought to determine how graduates perceived the importance of CEC standards in their work with students with EBD. Respondents were asked to rate each of the standards using response options ranging from 1 (*very unimportant*) to 4 (*very important*). Each of the four items within a single standard was averaged to create a single standard score. The means and standard deviations of perceived importance of CEC Standards One through Nine are reported in Table 2.

Respondents felt that the CEC standards were important in teaching students with exceptionalities, specifically students with EBD. The mean score for all nine standards, based on a four-point Likert scale, ranged from 3.88 (Learning Environments/Social Interactions) to 3.58 (Foundations). All the means were well above average.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Perceived Importance in Using CEC Standards 1 through 9

CEC Standards of Importance	n	Mean	*SD*	Min	Max
Standard 1 Importance: Foundations	105	3.58	.34	2.75	4.00
Standard 2 Importance: Development and Characteristics of Learners	105	3.67	.37	2.75	4.00
Standard 3 Importance: Individual Learning Differences	105	3.80	.28	3.00	4.00
Standard 4 Importance: Instructional Strategies	105	3.79	.34	2.50	4.00
Standard 5 Importance: Learning Environments/Social Interactions	105	3.88	.22	3.00	4.00
Standard 6 Importance: Instructional Planning	105	3.77	.34	2.75	4.00
Standard 7 Importance: Assessment	105	3.67	.36	2.75	4.00
Standard 8 Importance: Professional and Ethical Practice	105	3.75	.36	2.75	4.00
Standard 9 Importance: Collaboration	105	3.83	.28	3.00	4.00

In research question two, we wanted to determine the extent that specific demographic variables (i.e., total years of teaching experience, positions graduates currently held, graduates' feelings about working with students with EBD, and their feelings as to causal factors leading to EBD) predicted graduates' perceptions of the importance of the CEC standards. A multiple linear regression was conducted to predict the individual importance scores (Standards of importance One through Nine) from the main predictors of total years of teaching experience, position currently held, feelings about working with students with EBD, and graduates' feelings as to causal factors leading to EBD. Preliminary analyses showed that total years of teaching experience with students with EBD, highest degree held, undergraduate degree, and geographical region were covariates with the main predictor and, therefore, were included in the primary analyses. Table 3 reports the results of the overall regression model predicting Standards One through Four of importance and Table 4 reports information pertaining to Standards Five through Nine.

Table 3
Summary of Multiple Linear Regressions Predicting Standards of Importance 1-4 from Total Years of Teaching Experience, Positions Currently Held, Graduates' Feelings about Working with Students with EBD, and Graduates' Feelings of Causal Factors for Students with EBD

	Standard 1 Importance *Beta*	Standard 2 Importance *Beta*	Standard 3 Importance *Beta*	Standard 4 Importance *Beta*
Total Years of Teaching Experience	.026	-.125	-.046	-.060
Administrator Compared to Classroom Teacher	.053	.116	.123	.119
Educational Support Personnel Compared to Classroom Teacher	.133	.137	.038	.028
Higher Education Compared to Classroom Teacher	.129	.177	.130	.146
Temperamentally Adapted Compared to Personal Satisfaction	-.036	-.103	-.118	-.004
Other Factors Deterred Compared to Personal Satisfaction	-.071	.041	-.038	-.163
Home School Personal Choice Compared to Mental Health Issues	-.106	-.155	-.125	-.184
Teaching Students with EBD 6 to 9 Years Compared to 5 or Less	.099	.049	.035	.078
Teaching Students with EBD 10 + Years Compared to 5 or Less	.273*	.326	.245	.344
Highest Degree Earned	-.002	-.033	.051	-.061
Colleges of Arts and Sciences Compared to Colleges of Education	-.088	.110	.163	.076
Colleges of Business Public Affairs Compared to Colleges of Education	-.104	.014	.002	.049
Rural and Suburban Compared to Urban	.051	-.006	-.126	-.050

Note. Summary of Overall Models: Standard One: F (13, 91) = 1.05, p = .416, $R2$ = .006; Standard Two: F (13, 91) = 1.09, p = .375, $R2$ = .011; Standard Three: F (13, 91) = 1.10, p = .373, $R2$ = .012; Standard Four: F (13, 91) = 1.50, p = .132, $R2$ = .059.

Table 4

Summary of Multiple Linear Regressions Predicting Standards of Importance 5-9 from Total Years of Teaching Experience, Positions Currently Held, Graduates' Feelings about Working with Students with EBD, and Graduates' Feelings of Causal Factors for Students with EBD

	Standard 5 Importance *Beta*	Standard 6 Importance *Beta*	Standard 7 Importance *Beta*	Standard 8 Importance *Beta*	Standard 9 Importance *Beta*
Highest Degree Attained	-.006	-.005	.077	.163	.125
Colleges of Arts and Sciences Compared to Colleges of Education	.036	.018	.069	.071	.104
Colleges of Business Public Affairs Compared to Colleges of Education	.029	-.123	-.023	.060	-.073
Rural and Suburban Compared to Urban	.049	.102	.058	-.077	-.023
Total Years of Teaching Experience	-.118	.003	.011	-.050	-.122
Administrator Compared to Teacher	.098	.082	.115	.097	.099
Educational Personnel Compared to Teacher	-.077	.114	-.067	.005	-.021
Higher Education Compared to Teacher	.078	-.003	.140	-.051	.060
Temperamentally Adapted Compared to Personal Satisfaction	-.004	.032	-.101	.041	-.057
Other Factors Deterred Compared to Personal Satisfaction	-.069	-.126	-.203	-.098	-.122

(continued)

Table 4 (continued)
Summary of Multiple Linear Regressions Predicting Standards of Importance 5-9 from Total Years of Teaching Experience, Positions Currently Held, Graduates' Feelings about Working with Students with EBD, and Graduates' Feelings of Causal Factors for Students with EBD

	Standard 5 Importance *Beta*	Standard 6 Importance *Beta*	Standard 7 Importance *Beta*	Standard 8 Importance *Beta*	Standard 9 Importance *Beta*
Home, School, and Personal Choice Compared to Mental Health Issues	-.159	-.101	-.086	-.065	-.007
Teaching Students with EBD 6 to 9 Years Compared to 5 or Less	.104*	-.022	.018	-.221	-.094
Teaching Students with EBD 10 + Years Compared to 5 or Less	.142*	.198	.096	.076	.134

Note. Summary of Overall Models: Standard Five: F (13, 91) = .76, p = .699, $R2$ = -.031; Standard Six: F (13, 91) = 1.06, p = .403, $R2$ = .008; Standard Seven: F (13, 91) = .89, p = .569, $R2$ = -.014; Standard Eight: F (13, 91) = 1.01, p = .445, $R2$ = .002; Standard Nine: F (13, 91) = 81, p = .132, $R2$ = -.025.

The researchers analyzed specific variables as predictors to examine graduates' perceptions of the importance of the CEC standards. Four main predictors for this analysis included (a) total years of teaching experience, (b) position graduates currently held, (c) graduates' feelings about working with students with EBD, and (d) their feelings as to causal factors leading to EBD. Although the overall multiple linear regression model for importance Standards One were not significant, further examination revealed that graduates' years of teaching experience with students with EBD was a significant predictor. The overall regression model for importance Standards Two, Three, Four, and Five was not significant; however, further examination revealed that graduates' years of teaching experience with students with EBD was a significant predictor for Standard Five: Learning Environments/ Social Interactions. Finally, the overall regression model for importance Standards Six, Seven, Eight, and Nine was not significant. The multiple regression model did not predict the graduates' perceived importance in using the CEC standards; however, graduates' years of teaching experience with students with EBD was a significant predictor for Standards One and Five.

Discussion

Dissemination of the survey yielded an approximate response rate of 62%. Initially, demographic information was elicited from the participants. Most respondents identified themselves as being

employed as some type of classroom teacher and had a master's degree in education with specialization in EBD. Furthermore, a majority of respondents worked in a suburban geographic setting. For the most part, respondents reported great satisfaction in working with students with EBD; however, they were divided in their feelings as to causal factors leading to EBD. Approximately half of the respondents felt that the students' home environments were the cause of their exceptionality and slightly less than half felt that mental health issues were the cause of the students' exceptionality.

In addition, majority of respondents had previously worked with students with cognitive impairments. In regard to age groups with whom respondents worked, there was approximately equal distribution among elementary, middle school, and secondary-aged students. In general, respondents reported the most prevalent problems working in an educational setting included an unreasonable amount of paperwork and lack of parental and/or guardian support. Several identified *other* prevalent problems (e.g., lack of educational resources, lack of funding, lack of time) in working in an educational setting.

According to the analyses, the average time respondents graduated from the program was approximately nine years. Additionally, the average years' they had taught or were teaching students with EBD was about eight and one-half years. Finally, the respondents' total years of teaching experience averaged a little over eleven years.

Part two of the survey asked participants to rate how important they perceived the CEC standards to be in their work with students with EBD. Based on a four-point scale, respondents' ratings of importance of the CEC standards ranged from 3.58 to 3.88, which indicates that respondents felt standards were important to very important in educating students with EBD. Finally, the multiple regression model did not predict the graduates' perceived importance in using the CEC standards; however, graduates' years of teaching experience with students with EBD was a significant predictor.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As result of this study, the researchers conclude that program graduates felt the CEC standards were important to teachers in effectively educating children and youth with EBD. In addition, we determined that the more teaching experience the graduates have with students with EBD, the more important they viewed the CEC standards. Essentially, teachers with more years teaching experience with students with challenging behaviors found greater value in using the CEC standards in their teaching practices than those with fewer years teaching experience educating students with EBD.

Replication of the current study should be considered by future researchers and educators. Future studies might focus on improving data collection procedures by employing qualitative methodologies such as (a) focus groups, (b) semi-structured interviews, or (c) observation field notes with past program graduates. Although it would likely be difficult to do, valuable data may be generated by interviewing graduates' current or past employers to obtain their perspectives of the graduates' competence in using the CEC standards.

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