

An Exploration of Perspectives of Service Providers about Students with Emotional Behavioral Challenges

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Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to explore the lived experiences of school officials working with children with emotional and behavioral disorders within the school setting. Past research further explains the burnout, stress, and emotional exhaustion that comes with working with students who have EBD. This study is unique because the personal narratives of school officials are often overlooked, ignoring their experiences, and leaving their voices unheard. This study answered the following research question: "What are the lived experiences of school officials who work with students with emotional and behavioral disorders in the school setting?" Diversity purposive sampling was used to gather research; five participants were recruited from numerous rural and urban school districts across the East Coast, representing varied demographics and job titles. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews exploring behavioral, emotional, and social factors, analyzed through phenomenological coding. Validation strategies for this study included peer review and member checking, which were used to uphold the integrity of this research. The contents and information gathered from the analysis yielded 36 codes, which were then characterized into three major themes: *Challenges in the classroom*, *Systematic needs*, and *Systematic Challenges*. The findings revealed that school officials who work with students who have EBD experience numerous unified challenges, including emotional outbursts within the classroom, behavioral disruptions, lack of support, and more. The study's implications for future studies include having more knowledge of specific classroom dynamics, which would provide much-needed emotional and professional support systems for school officials. This research helps initiate positive change for school officials by providing them a platform to share their experiences, ultimately leading them to better assist their students who struggle with EBD.

Keywords: emotional behavioral challenges, school officials, experience

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Emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) are a prominent concern in education due to the difficulties they lead to within the classroom. Students with EBD often have a tough time succeeding in academic settings due to their dealing with depression, inability to regulate their emotions, and managing their anxiety and hyperactivity levels (Pugach & Wisco, 2023; Ramey et al., 2023). Without proper investigation to better understand the issues affecting officials in and outside an academic setting, challenges may arise, leading to long-term mental health struggles. Furthermore, the Department of Education reported that in the 2018-19 school year, 5.45% of students were identified with emotional disturbances resulting in the lack of attention given to educators, impacting their ability to respond effectively (U.S Department of Education, 2020). Many consequences would arise if this study were to be dismissed, including a spike in anxiety among students, high depression rates, prolonged behavioral issues, and much more. An abundant amount of research has previously been conducted on the anticipating aspects of students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. However, we need to understand specific information that provides educational workers with the proper knowledge to assist these students. This lack of knowledge is a liability, leading to misjudgment in providing for students in need. General research shows that considering a student's cultural circumstances will allow them to excel academically. The findings from this study have a high probability of aiding educational workers, students, and parents in dealing with emotional and behavioral difficulties among students, resulting in better experiences within a classroom setting.

Literature Review

Academic Performance and Mental Health Well-being among Students

How one views oneself is crucial to self-development, especially in an academic environment. How academically gifted students interact with their identity and environmental support systems significantly impacts their viewpoint of self-esteem, self-concept, and self-efficacy regarding emotional and behavioral challenges (Collings et al., 2022)—focusing on the intersectionality of a student's race, and giftedness, highlights learning exceptionalities within a student's academic performance and ability to coexist with their emotional-behavioral challenges (Collings et al., 2022). Unfortunately, elementary school students with or at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), who exhibit challenging behaviors such as noncompliance, aggression, and disruption, are likely to experience social difficulties and challenges with peer relationships (Granger et al., 2025).

Impact of Support Systems on Student Outcomes

Parental warmth is vital to a student's support system (Whittington et al., 2024). A college student's ability to regulate their emotions is directly linked to impulse control concerning unwanted pursuit behaviors, demonstrating the positive influence a supportive family environment has on college students' actions of regulating their emotions (Whittington et al., 2024). Students dealing with learning disabilities must receive interventions to progress their success in a classroom setting. Studies show that teachers were more inclined to countersign academic interventions for students with learning disabilities (SLD) rather than ADHD, ignoring the fact that, at some points, their educational needs were the same (Chunta & DuPaul, 2022). Studies done by the Department of Education indicate that students identified with emotional

disturbances were more likely to be served in a separate school than all students with disabilities. 3% of students with all disabilities between the ages of 6 and 21 were placed in separate schools, whereas 12% of those students with emotional disturbances were placed in a separate school setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). A teacher's neglect to prioritize one student's disability over another can cause direct harm to a student's outcome in terms of achievement because, in other words, their support system is failing them. Students with emotional disturbances from ages 14-21 were more likely to drop out and be less likely to graduate compared to other students with all disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Studies concluded that participants who read with their siblings rather than parents experienced more significant improvement in language skills. Students who participate in dialogic reading with their parents and siblings greatly enhance their ability to comprehend language skills better and reading interest for those with ADHD (Dong et al., 2023). A support system of siblings and parents creates more room for students to succeed academically than others. Support systems positively impact a student's emotional and behavioral attitude because they have trusted individuals on whom they can rely.

Emotional Regulation

The distinctive influence of various emotional regulation repertoires is investigated on trauma-exposed college students about its link to PTSD. Emotional regulation and clarity focus on one's ability to control, recognize, and understand their emotions (Pugach & Wisco, 2023). Research shows that to regulate emotions correctly, one must have emotional clarity, which is managing different emotions. This is important for trauma survivors, as they are constantly hit with several emotions, sometimes even at the exact moment in time. Individuals who experience

PTSD frequently have trouble grasping positive coping mechanisms, usually worsening a student's ability to maintain their mental health. Emotional regulation is directly linked to the connection between working memory and mathematics achievement, leading to success and prosperity. (Pugach & Wisco, 2023; Kahl et al., 2021).

With academics comes stress. A lack of emotional regulations often fuels academic stress. Students' ability to manage and control their emotions directly impacts how they address academic stress, even in students from different disciplines. Studies show that placing basic psychological needs as a priority leads to students better managing their academic stress by taking control of their emotional regulation from a positive outlook (Chacón-Cuberos et al., 2021)

Research Question/s

Since school officials such as teachers, guidance counselors, and social workers take on the role of authority, many individuals tend to think that they do not need extra assistance. This notion of assumptions is very misleading and incredibly discouraging to these professionals who dedicate their lives to assisting students with EBD within an academic environment. These educational professions still need the assistance and cooperation of outside factors such as parents and school funding/support. A better understanding of the challenges these officials face is crucial to the progression of maintaining a balance when working with students who have EBD. This prompts the research question for this phenomenological study, "What are the lived experiences of school officials who work with students with emotional and behavioral disorders in the school setting?"

Methodology

Role of Researcher

As a researcher, exploring the lived experiences of school officials working with EBD students has dramatically influenced the philosophical assumptions that formulate my approach to this study. The idea that reality is not singular but multiple enforces that each participant has unique experiences regarding their struggles with the students within their classrooms. I acknowledge that my personal values align with my research. I have a strong passion for school psychology, which ultimately influenced my decision to conduct this research. I conducted hourlong interview sessions with participants, asking them a series of questions to grasp the whole perspective of their true lived experiences. To mitigate my biases, I have used multiple validation strategies such as peer review, member checking, and rich thick descriptions.

Participants

Five participants were in my study, ranging from the ages of 30 to 55. All participants have been school officials for a decade or more. Four participants were females, while the remaining one was a male. All participants have completed high school, undergraduate, and graduate programs at many universities. Participants were deliberately picked based on their knowledge of whether they taught within a school district or not and based on their specific job titles, ensuring their experiences were relevant to the research question I provided.

Validation Strategies

Data was collected to saturation, that is, the codes were saturated with the fourth participant, but I conducted one additional interview to ensure saturation. The data collection included a semi-structured interview. Participants were asked seven interview questions (see

Appendix A). While on the Zoom calls with each participant, I read the questions aloud and gave them as much as required to answer the open-ended questions. I used peer review as a validation strategy to enhance my research's credibility. An expert researcher critically examined the data, codes, and themes of my research, thus peer review helped establish dependability to my research. Additionally, I used member checking as a validation strategy to make my findings more credible. I met with two study participants, showing them my preliminary findings based on their experiences and giving them the platform to state if I accurately represented their experiences. This process was ideal as it allowed participants to agree, clarify, or correct my findings, ultimately aligning everything. Additionally, rich thick descriptions were used to report the data interpretation.

Results

My findings concluded that although school officials have a deep commitment to their students, within their capacity to support those with emotional and behavioral disorders, they face many struggles due to both in-classroom difficulties and broader systemic imperfections. Their responses signify a pressing need for better emotional and professional support systems and training to ensure that students and school staff are adequately supported. The transcripts from the interview sessions were uploaded to Atlas Ti 7.6.3, and codes were created from there. Thirty-six relevant codes were created and categorized into three themes. Some quotes had multiple codes and fell into one or more themes. Examples of codes include argumentative behavior, emotional abuse, and parental support.

Themes

The three themes of this study are as follows: Challenges in the classroom in terms of behavior and emotions, Systematic needs in terms of home and school life, and systematic challenges in terms of accessibility, home, and school life.

Challenges in the Classroom: Behaviors and Emotions

The codes within this theme consist of argumentative behavior, attendance issues, avoidance of schoolwork, behavioral problems, building relationships with teachers, disciplinary actions, lack of educational supervision, lack of motivation, monitoring student risk, multicultural training, negative academic impact from missing school, positive reinforcement, professional learning, referral systems, and student challenges. When Participant A was asked about early warning signs that often appear in students with EBD, they stated, "Attendance in school can be an issue, along with lack of interest in doing schoolwork or things that they normally enjoy doing. I think it sometimes looks like argumentative behavior or lack of motivation." Participant A recognized a pattern with their students who struggle with EBD, recognizing that these are just a few signs that the student may be having difficulty excelling in an academic environment.

Participant C touched on a key point when asked how the students perceive the support or lack of support they receive in school. They stated, "I feel like the most successful students are building relationships with teachers. They have at least one or two adults in the building who they can let their guard down around, feel comfortable around, and get support from." This shows that there are some positive aspects to school officials' lived experiences, such as when a

child feels supported, that is made clear, and they are then able to excel, making the teacher successful as well.

Systematic Needs: Home and School Life

The codes within this theme consist of caretaking for siblings, drug and alcohol abuse, EBD triggers, emotional abuse, lack of resources, limited ability to name disorders, medication-aiding behavioral regulation, self-harm, student coping strategies, supporting the family, and trauma. When Participant B was asked about what strategies students use to navigate their school environment and manage challenges, they stated, "... Some type of treatment plan, behavior, emotional, mental health support for the child." Participant B shared that within her lived experiences, they feel as though medication-aiding behavioral regulation for students has been successful. Participant B sees drastic improvements in their students' mood, academic work, and social life when taking a medication that helps regulate their behavior and emotions. When Participant D was asked about the most prominent environmental factors they see within African American students who struggle with EBD, they stated, "They are coming from broken homes. They have much trauma, whether it be sexual or physical abuse, alcoholism, or drugs. So again, when you understand where these kids are coming from, you can understand where the behavior may come from." As far as drug and alcohol abuse, most of these students are growing up in an urban environment, where life moves fast; there are liquor stores and drug dealers on every corner, along with a high poverty rate. These living environments leave children feeling as though they have no other option to engage in these activities, leading to a more severe case of emotional and behavioral disorders.

Systematic Challenges: Accessibility, Resources, and Home/School Life

The codes within this theme consist of broken homes, busy single parents, check-ins and collaborative meetings, data collection, diagnosis denial, disciplinary problems, early warning signs, parental support, and support systems. When participants were asked to describe an ideal collaborative relationship between educators, counselors, and parents that would assist students in overcoming their EBD, all five participants stressed the importance of collaborative systems and their benefits. Participant E stated, "... We were responsible for working collaboratively with the school principal, the counselors, the nurse, and whoever else at the school in a position to make decisions regarding children's support and services." Participant A stated, "It is an ongoing effort; everybody has to have something they are going to do or be assigned to do, and they agree with it. Then we have to come back and say, well, maybe let us try this or see if this works or that works." Participant B disclosed that "... Communication between the school counselors and the teachers helps a lot."

When describing an ideal collaborative relationship between educators, counselors, and parents that would assist students in overcoming their EBD, results indicated that although all five participants hold different job titles, they all have the same lived experiences regarding collaborative relationships. Participants feel that it takes a village to assist these students and that no one person can independently. A student who struggles with EBD requires an immense amount of effort from all of those around them.

Another shared lived experience that participants spoke about is parental support or its lack thereof. Parents have the most important role in their children's lives; they are the ones who

are supposed to teach them right from wrong. A parent's cooperation is essential when working in a school district; given that the students are underage, many things cannot happen without the parent's approval. When participants were asked about their experiences working with the parents of students who have emotional behavioral disorders, mixed responses were given; each participant shared that they experienced both absent parental figures and present parental figures. Participant A shared, "Parents who are involved and who want to take part in school meetings but are also willing to reinforce our suggestions, as professionals, at home." This is very important; school officials can only enforce so much in a school setting; it is up to the parent to continue those enforcements when a child returns home; if not, then a drastic decline in progress will appear, oftentimes giving the school official harder time making improvements with the child. Participant B stated, "I find it pretty easy to talk to parents because I think one of the key things for me is relationship building." Participant D stated, "Sometimes the parents are not in agreement with getting the kids the support that they need. A lot of times, it is denial; they do not want to believe something is wrong with their child, or they simply do not understand." This is an example of a participant who shared a lived experience that was discrepant from those of others.

Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of school officials working with students who have emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), displaying a shared sense of emotional investment, ongoing struggle, and deep commitment. The findings depict that these professionals routinely face behavioral disruptions, lack of parental support, limited resources, and emotional burnout. Despite these challenges, participants showed a continued commitment to their students'

well-being, emphasizing the significance of positive teacher-student relationships and coordinated support systems. This strain between burnout and commitment grasps the essence of their experience: navigating emotional tribulation while clasp onto the sentiment that they can make a difference.

While interpreting my findings, the importance of past research became prominent. A college student's ability to regulate their emotions is directly linked to impulse control concerning unwanted pursuit behaviors, demonstrating the positive influence a supportive family environment has on college students' actions of regulating their emotions (Whittington et al., 2024). As I compare my research to previous research, I see the notion of further stressing the regulation strategies students are not receiving. This lack of regulation thus forces school officials to burn themselves out in attempts to fill that void for the student's well-being. Limitations of the study include the sample size being on the smaller side. However, the participants were sampled to saturation. Another limitation would be that only one participant worked in an urban area, whereas the remaining four worked in rural areas. The location and environment of a school may play an important role in a school official's ability to properly help their students. Thus, future research should explore the lived experiences by context categories-rural and urban.

This research highlights the importance of exploring interventions that not only support students but also prioritize school officials' well-being. This study is essential to further understanding the voices and experiences of school officials. With these limitations in mind, it provides a better platform for future research and this information can be used to initiate positive change to the lives of the vulnerable children with EBD and those who teach them.

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Appendix A

Ice-Breaker Questions:

1. At what moment did you first realize you had a passion for working with children?
2. Describe how you are genuinely feeling today.
3. What has to happen during your day for it to be considered a good one?

Screening Questions:

1. What is your profession?
2. Do you have a bachelor's degree?
3. How long have you worked with children?

Interview Questions:

1. What are your general experiences related to students with emotional and behavioral disorders in a school setting?
2. If you have come across children/students with EBD, can you describe the early warning signs that often appear in students with EBD?
3. Have you worked with students of different ethnicities? If you have, what EBD's tend to appear most among African American students?
4. What are the most common environmental factors you see within African American students who struggle with EBD?
5. Describe an ideal collaborative relationship between educators, counselors, and parents that would assist students in overcoming their EBD.
6. What are consequences for actions used/recommended for students with EBD? How do you think they impact students with EBD?

7. How equipped are educators in recognizing and addressing EBD in African American students?

Sub Questions:

- How do these children perceive the support or lack of support they receive in school?
- What strategies do students use to navigate their school environment and Manage challenges