

Teacher Threshold of Behavior Tolerance to Special Education Students in an Inclusive Setting

Rachael Hartley

Graduate School of Education, Touro University – California

Introduction

Many students with behaviors related to or resulting from a disability can struggle in the general education setting. A teacher's tolerance and ability to teach and manage the student's behaviors, in addition to the rest of his or her class, has an affect not only on the children around the child with behavior challenges, but on the child exhibiting the challenges as well.

For the purposes of this thesis, a survey was created and administered to gather data on certain teachers tolerance of maladaptive student behaviors, individually among staff from the surveyed schools, as well as informing the trends of educators preferring certain behavioral weaknesses over others. Although individuals will always vary in their preferences of student behavior, staff can increase personal understanding and awareness of certain behaviors that may help them manage these behaviors more effectively and thusly be less adverse to having students with certain difficulties in their classrooms. The reality of an elementary school site is that students can be limited to as many as five or as little as one or two teachers' classrooms and all educators need to continually increase their knowledge and skill set in working with special populations of students.

The objective was to determine trends in tolerance or acceptance of certain behaviors for the surveyed group. In addition, the results provided information for areas that the participants were more accepting and less tolerant, in order to provide areas of added support and strategies for teachers in areas where there is an overall trend of intolerance among staff.

Materials and Methods

The survey consists of questions regarding the participants gender, current job title, length of teaching, status of their credential, and experience teaching or working with students with special needs. The survey also included 45 statements involving a maladaptive behavior and require responses of "acceptable", "tolerate", or "unacceptable". The survey questions were informed by research studies with surveys to teachers regarding behavioral expectations, teacher tolerance, and teacher-student compatibility (Walker & Rankin, 1983; Walker & Lamon, 2001; Greene, Abdinin, & Kmetz, 1997); and by The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (American Psychological Association, 2013). Responses are meant to indicate teacher preferences and also help to determine their tolerance of students with the following challenges: ADHD/ADD, Autism, Low Adaptability, Low Ability (including Specific Learning Disability and Intellectually Disabled), Aggressive/Conduct Disorder, Physical Mobility, and Speech and Language Difficulties. The collective responses from each school were analyzed in order to aid in placement of students and indicate what areas of support are needed to effectively support students with disabilities in the form of teacher training to provide strategies in working with the identified category of students.

Participants: Teachers were selected from two school districts in the northern California Bay Area. From these two school districts, two elementary schools, one from each district, were selected. These schools were chosen because both have a thorough integration of special education into the general education population and classes. At School #1, all special education students are integrated into the general population. There are no separate classrooms serving only special education students. Students who require extra support services via an Individual Education Plan (IEP) are served in the resource specialists room. At School #2, although it has traditional self-contained classrooms for special education students who receive 50% or more of their day in an academically supported setting, students are mainstreamed for extracurricular and school- and grade-level activities, as well as other academic subjects based on ability. Students receiving less than 50% of their day are served by the school site's Resource Specialist and are pulled out of their general education class. This school also has a school-wide intervention program with different intervention blocks for students in the general population that require support.

Method of Administration: Surveys were placed in teacher mailboxes in a manila folder. Staff was directed to fill out the survey and personal information including gender, program type (general education or special education), credential status, years of teaching experience and education experience. The staff were directed to place completed surveys in a designated manila envelope in the office to be picked up on a specified date. The first school has 24 certificated teachers on campus and the second school has 21 certificated teachers on campus.

Results

Surveys were administered and the researcher received twelve completed surveys from School # 1 and nine completed surveys from School # 2. There were eleven female teachers and one male teacher who completed surveys at School # 1 and nine female teachers who completed surveys at School # 2.

Of the completed surveys from School # 1, seven of the teachers had taught between 6-10 years and 5 had been teaching over 15 years. Of the twelve teachers who completed the survey at School # 1, four had prior or current experiences teaching a designated special education class. Eight of the twelve teachers only had experiences teaching students who presented behavioral or academic challenges within their general education classroom. Student enrollment for School # 1 is based on the School Accountability Report Card from 2011-12 School Year and is as follows: 51.1% of students are non-white; 13.5% of students are identified as having a disability; 13% are English Language Learners; and 41.6% are socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Of the teachers surveyed at School # 2, only one had been teaching 0-2 years; one had taught between 10-15 years; and seven of the teachers had been in the teaching profession for more than 15 years. Of the completed surveys from School # 2, three of the nine teachers had prior experience teaching a designated special education class. Six of the nine teachers only had experiences teaching students who presented behavioral or academic challenges within their general education classroom. Student enrollment for School # 2 is also based on the School Accountability Report Card from 2011-12 School Year and is as follows: 80.1% of students are identified as non-white; 7.3% of students are identified as having a disability; 18.4% are English Language Learners; and 60.5% are socioeconomically disadvantaged.

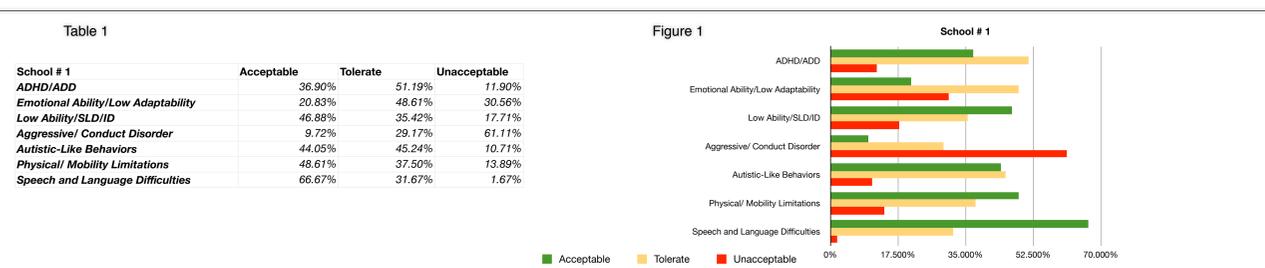


Table 1. Shows the overall percentage of teachers from School # 1 that rated the behavioral statements in each category as acceptable, tolerate, or unacceptable.

Figure 1. Graph comparing the percentages of teachers responses in each category as acceptable, tolerate, or unacceptable from School # 1.

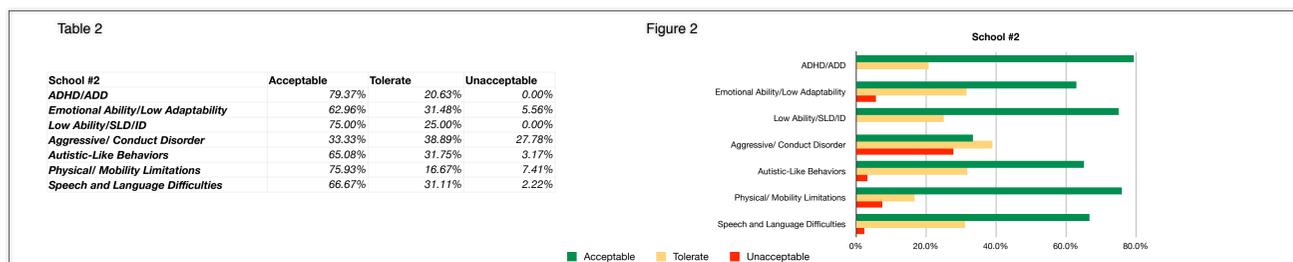


Table 2. Shows the overall percentage of teachers from School # 2 that rated the behavioral statements in each category as acceptable, tolerate, or unacceptable.

Figure 2. Graph comparing the percentages of teachers responses in each category as acceptable, tolerate, or unacceptable from School # 2.

Based on the participants surveys, at School # 1 there is a very high tolerance for students exhibiting difficulty due to Speech and Language Difficulties, as 66.67% of participants responded "acceptable" to behaviors and difficulty resulting from Speech difficulties. The next three behaviors resulting from a disability that staff found acceptable were Physical/Mobility Limitations (48.61%), Low Ability, including Specific Learning Disability and Intellectually Disabled, (46.88%), and, somewhat to the authors surprise, Autistic-Like Behaviors (44.05%). Participants at School # 1 rated behaviors in the categories of Emotional Ability/Low Adaptability, and Aggression/Conduct Disorders the two most "unacceptable", meaning teachers do not feel equipped or comfortable with students who exhibit these behaviors (see Table 1). As you can see from Figure 1, the participants of the survey at School # 1 seemed overall to accept or tolerate most behaviors, with the exception of Aggressive/Conduct Disorder related behaviors, in which you can see the group rated those behaviors primarily unacceptable, with 61.11% of the participants finding these behaviors "unacceptable".

At School # 2, there is a very high level of acceptance for students exhibiting maladaptive behaviors related to ADHD/ADD (see Table 2), Physical/Mobility Limitations, and Low Ability including Specific Learning Disability and Intellectually Disabled, from participants surveyed. The participants at School # 2 responded more frequently to the statements as "acceptable" than "tolerate" or "unacceptable"(see Figure 2), with the exception of Aggressive/Conduct Disorders (participants were evenly divided with the highest number of responses in "tolerate"). Overall, School # 2's participants stated that they felt comfortable teaching most students who exhibit maladaptive behaviors, with the least comfortable being students who exhibit aggressive and conduct disordered behaviors.

Conclusions

Teacher tolerance levels and management of behaviors drive a teachers ability to effectively teach his or her classroom. It is important for school staff to learn new strategies to cope with and manage difficult student behaviors. This thesis' objectives are to determine trends in tolerance or acceptance of certain behaviors for the surveyed group. And, the results, in turn, provide information for areas that the participants are more accepting and, also, less tolerant. The purpose was to provide added support and strategies for teachers in areas where there is an overall trend of intolerance.

This thesis presented some very interesting results. First, participants at both sites felt the least tolerate of students who have aggressive and/or conduct disordered behaviors. Due to the nature of aggression and conduct disordered behaviors, teachers may feel concerned about their other students' and their own personal safety. In addition, School # 1 would benefit from training on strategies that would work well to support students who exhibit maladaptive behaviors due to low emotional ability and adaptability, and low academic ability. The data also provided information about individual teacher preferences, which would aid in more effectively placing students who exhibit similar maladaptive behaviors in the teacher who is more tolerant and/or accepting of these behaviors. School # 2 appeared to be much more tolerant of difficult student behaviors overall. Whether this is due to the seniority of the teachers, and/or their experience with working with a higher percentage of students who come from socioeconomically disadvantaged is not measurable. The majority of participants from School #1 rated the statements of maladaptive behavior in most categories as "tolerate" more than "acceptable" or "unacceptable".

Further Study: These results and differences between School #1 and School # 2 poses the question for further research: Do teachers who work in areas where there are a higher percentage of socioeconomically disadvantaged students have a higher tolerance for maladaptive student behaviors? Or is the difference primarily based on personal preference and tolerance? In addition, it would be interesting to see if student placement, aided by individual grade-level teacher tolerance survey results and training, would result in a more compatible student-teacher match.

Literature cited

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.
 Greene, R. W., Abdinin, R.R., and Kmetz, C. 1997. The index of teaching stress: a measure of student-teacher compatibility. *Society for the Study of School Psychology* 35 3:239-259.
 Walker, H. J., and Lamon, W. 1987. Social behavior standards and expectations of Australian and U.S. teacher groups. *The Journal of Special Education* 21 3:56-82.
 Walker, H. J., and Rankin, R. R. 1983. Assessing the behavioral expectations and demands of less restrictive settings. *School Psychology Review* 3:274-284.

Acknowledgments

A big thank you to my amazing husband, Nick Hartley, whose support, encouragement, and critical thinking skills were invaluable. I want to thank my mother, Stephanie Wheeler, for encouraging me to finish; all the participants of the survey, for taking the time to thoughtfully fill it out and giving me such wonderful and interesting data; to Happy Johnson, for helping me to refine my ideas.