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General Educators' Perceptions of Social Inclusion of Elementary Students With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

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Abstract

Students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) exhibit challenging behaviors and social skills delays that can interfere with their ability to build relationships. Intervening early (e.g., in elementary school) can prevent short- and long-term consequences of these challenging behaviors. General educators serve as the primary teacher of these students, with some students with EBD spending more than 80% of their school day in the general education setting. In addition, given the amount of time elementary students spend with their general educators, these educators may be able to build a community that can help students establish and maintain positive relationships while engaging equally and actively in classroom activities. The purposes of this study were to (a) explore elementary general educators' perceptions of social inclusion of students with EBD, and (b) identify facilitators of and barriers to social inclusion. We identified four themes: social inclusion, relationships, facilitators, and barriers and needs. Findings indicated that general educators work to socially include students with EBD, but they faced barriers related to collaboration with special educators and needed professional development. Implications include the need for more collaboration between practitioners to promote socially inclusive environments for students with EBD.

Keywords

teacher perceptions, general education, special education, emotional and behavioral disorders, social inclusion

Students in schools exhibit challenging behaviors on a daily basis; however, students identified with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) display behaviors that extend beyond typical challenging behaviors. They may exhibit externalizing (e.g., aggression, impulsivity, vandalism) and/or internalizing (e.g., anxiousness, withdrawal) behaviors that impede navigating the school environment in a variety of ways, such as (a) attending to academic instruction, (b) complying with educator directions, or (c) feeling fearful of school (Landrum, 2017). Students with EBD can also struggle with social functioning that impedes managing interpersonal relationships (Farmer, Talbott, et al., 2018). Many students with EBD struggle to acquire or use socially acceptable behaviors, such as conversational turn taking, helping others, and following rules (Farmer, Talbott, et al., 2018). Behaviors such as social withdrawal can lead to social isolation, and students with EBD can sometimes misread social cues and norms, causing them to respond inappropriately to certain situations (Lane et al., 2005).

Students with EBD engage in challenging behavior, which makes them subject to exclusionary discipline such as suspension and expulsion in early childhood and elementary school (Meek et al., 2020; Skiba et al., 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Examination of suspension data among students with disabilities revealed that students with EBD were more likely to be suspended than students with other disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The impact of such exclusionary discipline is not a reduction in challenging behavior (Meek et al., 2020) but instead reduced academic and social learning in the classroom (Loson & Gillespie, 2012; Skiba et al., 2014). Because students with EBD already have delays attending to academic instruction and social–emotional functioning (Farmer, Talbott, et al., 2018; Landrum, 2017), missing academic and social learning opportunities can exacerbate these deficits.

Long-term data indicate that students with EBD have higher rates of high school dropout and higher rates of incarceration than students with other disabilities (Liu et al., 2012;

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U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Liu and colleagues (2012) reported that 21% of youth between the ages of 15 to 18 with EBD had been arrested in the previous 2 years. When data were compared with all individuals with disabilities, only 7% of youth ages 15 to 18 had been arrested during the same time period. These data indicate the need for schools to intervene with students early in an effort to prevent lifelong consequences for students with EBD. Based on current literature, general educators can alleviate some of these consequences by providing students with EBD a socially inclusive environment from a young age (i.e., in elementary school) and giving them instructional support tailored to their needs (e.g., difficulties with social functioning) (Benstead, 2019; Farmer, Dawes, et al., 2018; Landrum, 2017).

General and Social Inclusion

Some students with EBD spend the majority of their day in general education classrooms. For example, data from Illinois suggest that 36% of elementary students with EBD spend more than 80% of the school day in general education and 16% spend 40% to 79% of the day in general education (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Given the number of students with EBD who are educated in elementary general education settings, effective inclusive environments should be established. Two types of inclusion are general inclusion and social inclusion. *General inclusion* is when students with disabilities actively participate in classroom activities, and many educators believe that it is linked to academic learning and achievement as opposed to social–emotional learning and development (Bemiller, 2019; Benstead, 2019). *Social inclusion* involves children with disabilities being integrated into classroom and school communities, having equal and active participation in social activities with typically developing peers, and having opportunities for reciprocal and positive relationships with peers and adults (Dyson, 2014; Simplican et al., 2015; Walker & Wigfield, 2003; Woodgate et al., 2019). General and social inclusion are necessary in general education settings, but current educational models sometimes value academic achievement (i.e., general inclusion) over social inclusion (Benstead, 2019). Academic learning can be a social activity, and though academic achievement may often be valued over social inclusion, a necessary relationship exists between the two for students to be able to grow academically (Benstead, 2019). Therefore, both general and social inclusion should be incorporated into classrooms for students with EBD to be academically and socially successful.

Socially inclusive environments help to facilitate social networks among students with EBD and their peers without disabilities. Educators can impact social networks by serving as models for how to interact with students within the classroom and by creating an environment that is conducive to positive classroom communities. This is referred to as the *invisible hand* (Farmer, Dawes, et al., 2018). Because elementary general educators are with the same students most of the school day, they have more opportunities to create socially inclusive environments. However, elementary general educators sometimes struggle to identify and use evidence-based practices to support the academic, behavioral, and social–emotional needs of students with disabilities in their classrooms (Lanterman et al., 2021). In addition, students with EBD can display challenging behaviors and find it difficult to create relationships (Farmer, Talbott, et al., 2018; Landrum, 2017), making it hard for elementary general educators to effectively manage the behaviors in which these students engage (Lanterman et al., 2021). This can further complicate the students' education, and make social inclusion more challenging. More effective models of social inclusion for students with EBD are needed (Lanterman et al., 2021).

Literature related to social inclusion for students with EBD is limited, with most social inclusion studies focusing on other disability categories. Woodgate and colleagues (2019) recently conducted a systematic review of literature on social inclusion of students with and without disabilities. A total of 45 studies that had target populations with a variety of disabilities were included in the review, though none of the studies focused specifically on students with EBD. Instead, two studies included participants with emotional, social, and/or behavioral needs and nine studies included participants with disabilities that were not specified. Many other disabilities were included, such as autism, intellectual disabilities, visual and/or hearing impairments, and physical impairments.

Findings from the systematic review (Woodgate et al., 2019) indicated that peers without disabilities reported general education classrooms as appropriate places to form relationships with students with disabilities, specifically related to learning how to interact with peers during play- and academic-based activities. In addition, some researchers indicated that student participants with disabilities reported feeling included in socially inclusive settings though other researchers reported participants felt isolated. Despite mixed reports provided by included students, researchers reported students without disabilities continued to spend less time with students with disabilities than with students who do not have disabilities. Woodgate et al. (2019) indicated that this was due to barriers associated with social inclusion, including the need for more instructional strategies for its use in general education settings. Findings related to social isolation students felt may be more relevant to students with EBD as this is a characteristic often associated with EBD (Lane et al., 2005); however, it is difficult to make this conclusion due to a limited number of students with emotional, social, and/or behavioral needs included in the studies.

Other studies align with the findings Woodgate et al. (2019) reported. For example, Dyson (2014) examined social inclusion for students with disabilities in Canada and China and reported 31.9% and 41.3% of students in each country, respectively, were socially included based on general educator report. Furthermore, educators indicated classroom activities as being most difficult to socially include student with disabilities. However, Dyson did not indicate what disabilities students had, and instead stated classrooms were inclusive general education settings. Further research is needed specifically related to social inclusion of students with EBD to understand the impacts of socially inclusive settings.

Theoretical Framework

The Ecology of Inclusive Education (Anderson et al., 2014) is a theoretical framework that builds on the Ecological Systems Theory of Bronfenbrenner (1976) and aims to address specific needs of research in inclusive education. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory was built on two factors of student learning: (a) relationships between the learner and environment and (b) relationships between the environments themselves. Anderson et al. (2014) used Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework to outline the ecology of inclusive education. The authors identified three elements of effective inclusive education for a student: participation, achievement, and value. They highlighted that this means students need to have meaningful and collaborative relationships with their peers in an environment conducive to their educational achievement. Inclusive education will allow students with disabilities to be equally involved in academic and social activities, achieve academic and social success, and feel valued by their peers and educator.

For students with EBD, inclusive education is important to their academic and social development. When considering the role of social inclusion, the micro-system (i.e., the inclusive classroom) can play an important part in the educational success or failure of students with EBD. As noted by Anderson et al. (2014), classroom culture, peers, educator, and curriculum can all make up part of the micro-system, which can also impact social inclusion of the student with EBD. In a classroom where a culture of acceptance exists, students with EBD will feel valued by their peers and educator. However, in classrooms lacking a culture of acceptance, behaviors exhibited by students with EBD may not be easily tolerated and such students could become isolated. Classrooms with a culture of acceptance will lead to more opportunities for participation and achievement of the student with EBD (Anderson et al., 2014).

Students with EBD have unique needs when it comes to delays in social–emotional functioning and high rates of challenging behavior (Farmer, Talbott, et al., 2018; Landrum, 2017; Lane et al., 2005) that make it necessary to intervene early in an attempt to ameliorate the short- and long-term consequences that have been impacting them for decades (Meek et al., 2020; Skiba et al., 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). One way of doing this is to provide a socially inclusive environment that promotes participation in social activities and opportunities for relationships with peers and adults (Dyson, 2014; Simplican et al., 2015; Walker & Wigfield, 2003; Woodgate et al., 2019).

However, limited research has been conducted that focuses on social inclusion of students with EBD (Woodgate et al., 2019). General educators are often unsure of how to incorporate evidence-based practices into their classrooms to best support students with EBD (Benstead, 2019). Given the needs of this population of students, the limited research in this area, and to better understand the needs of educators who work with students with EBD, the purpose of this exploratory study was to identify the perceptions of elementary general educators regarding social inclusion of students with EBD that could lead to experimental studies in this area. To accomplish this purpose, we posed two research questions. First, what are elementary general educators' perceptions of how students with EBD are socially included in general education settings? Second, what are elementary general educators' perceptions of facilitators and barriers to social inclusion of students with EBD?

Method

We addressed the two aforementioned research questions through general qualitative inquiry as described by Patton (2015). Such inquiry does not require the researcher to follow specific epistemological perspectives, but instead allows the researcher to use general inquiry methods to ask qualitative questions of participants. For purposes of this study, we used general qualitative inquiry and conducted semi-structured interviews with one group of educators who worked with students with EBD to describe and understand the experiences and perceptions of those educators.

Our research team consisted of a doctoral student and faculty member. Both researchers had extensive training and experience in qualitative research methods. The first author and primary investigator was a doctoral student who had taken methods courses, conducted previous qualitative research studies, and was mentored by the faculty member (i.e., second author) throughout the study. Both researchers had prior experience working with students with EBD and challenging behaviors in early childhood and elementary settings.

Participants

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we used purposeful and snowball sampling to recruit

Table 1. General Educator Participant Demographic Information.

Educator (pseudonym)	Age	Level of education	Years of experience	Type of school	Grade level
Heather	45–54	Master's degree	16–20	Urban	1st
Erin	45–54	Certificate of advanced study	4–5	Urban	1st
Melissa	25–34	Bachelor's degree	4–5	Rural	5th
Sarah	35–44	Master's degree	1–3	Urban	Kindergarten
Jennifer	35–44	Master's degree	16–20	Urban	1st
Stephanie	25–34	Bachelor's degree	6–10	Rural	3rd
Tiffany	25–34	Bachelor's degree	4–5	Rural	4th
Megan	35–44	Master's degree	11–15	Suburban	3rd
Morgan	18–24	Bachelor's degree	1–3	Suburban	3rd
Rachel	25–34	Bachelor's degree	1–3	Urban	3rd
Angela	25–34	Bachelor's degree	4–5	Urban	3rd
April	18–24	Bachelor's degree	1–3	Urban	1st
Katie	25–34	Master's degree	6–10	Urban	5th

participants. Specifically, we posted recruitment flyers to a social media group for Illinois teachers, sent emails to special educators who distributed flyers to general educators, and participants were asked to give the flyer to their colleagues. We purposefully selected participants based on predetermined inclusion criteria (Brantlinger et al., 2005), which were: (a) be an elementary general educator; (b) be employed at a public school in Illinois; and (c) have, or had in the past one year in their general education classroom, at least one student with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for the eligibility identification of EBD.

A total of 18 educators completed the screening form and met eligibility criteria for the study, and 13 individuals responded to a request for an interview (see Table 1). All 13 participants were women (12 White and one Asian). In addition, all elementary grade levels were represented (i.e., kindergarten through fifth grade), except for second grade. The educators represented nine elementary schools in five different school districts from two regions in Illinois (i.e., Northeast and Central Illinois). Of the 13 participants, 11 primarily discussed their experiences with one student, and two participants shared their experiences with two students. Twelve educators provided demographic data about their students, resulting in information about 13 students. All students were between the ages of 5 and 10, and most students (n = 11) were boys. They represented a variety of races and ethnicities: Black (n = 7), multiracial (n = 1), Native American (n = 1), and White (n = 4).

Data Collection

We collected data through two main sources: a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire included 17 demographic items about the participant, such as age, gender, race and ethnicity, years of teaching experience, grade levels taught, and number of students with EBD in their class. The questionnaire also included 14 items that solicited information about the school, such as whether it was urban, suburban, or rural.

We developed an interview protocol to elicit relevant information from each participant (Brantlinger et al., 2005). We included questions on topics aligned with the research questions: (a) perceptions of the inclusion of students with EBD in the general education setting and (b) perceptions of the facilitators of and barriers to social inclusion of students with EBD (see online supplemental materials). The questions also focused on the equal and active participation of the student, the relationships with adults and peers, and supports and challenges at various levels (e.g., describe the type and level of interaction between the student and their peers). We developed these questions based on a review of the literature pertaining to the inclusion of students with challenging behavior, students with EBD, and social inclusion. Immediately following the interview, the interviewer collected field notes which were used for reflection and to analyze the data (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Collecting field notes included writing down interpretations of the interview process, information that may not have come out in the interview itself, and questions in response to the interview.

Procedures

The first author conducted all of the interviews individually with the participants. To provide a foundation for the interview, we began by reading the following definition of social inclusion and asking how it aligned with their own understanding of social inclusion: equal and active participation, and relationships with peers and the teachers. The semi-structured interviews lasted an average of 61 minutes (range 48–77 minutes), and took place in person (n = 7) or via video-conference (i.e., Zoom; n = 6) based on the convenience of the participant. We audio-recorded, transcribed, and summarized the interviews for the purpose of member

checking (Brantlinger et al., 2005). We removed identifiable information from the transcripts and participants were given an alphanumeric code to protect their identity (Brantlinger et al., 2005). We sent summaries and follow-up items (e.g., student demographics, and questions that arose after reviewing the transcript) via e-mail to the participant for review. Of the 13 participants, 12 participants responded to the summaries. Eleven participants confirmed the accuracy of the summaries and responded to the follow-up items. One participant made minor clarifications to the summary and responded to the questions.

Data Analysis

The first and second authors analyzed transcripts using constant comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) to identify the themes of the interviews. First, we read seven transcripts independently. Then, we assigned a descriptive code to units of data using line-by-line coding. Next, we met to discuss one to three transcripts at a time by reviewing each code and discussing similarities and differences in our respective coding. We also referred to field notes to identify pertinent information about the interviews, such as the emotional state of the participant or interruptions during the interview. Codes we developed during the initial round of coding formed our initial codebook. We identified common codes and themes based on newly emerging codes, our definition of social inclusion, and our theoretical framework. After we reviewed codes, categories, and themes, the first author used the final iteration of the codebook to code all interviews.

Findings

Four themes emerged from the interviews with elementary general educators that addressed the research questions of this study: social inclusion, relationships, facilitators to social inclusion, and barriers and needs.

Social Inclusion

At the beginning of each interview, the interviewer asked the participant if the definition of social inclusion made sense to them and how they felt that definition aligned with what they consider to be social inclusion. Each educator agreed that social inclusion involved aspects of participation and relationships, specifically emphasizing the importance of relationships. For example, Erin, a first-grade educator, stated,

> I think it [the definition] aligns pretty closely, and I think that's what we really tried to do last year with our student, helping him to have some solid peer relationships as well as really making connections with that student each day.

Each educator also reported believing that social inclusion was important and necessary for all students, especially at the elementary level. They also reported wanting students with EBD in their classroom and felt these students were an important part of their classrooms. As Melissa, a fifth-grade educator, stated, "So I want them, they are my students. I want them in my room. I want them to be . . . socially and relationally involved and connected with everyone."

Educators also reported the importance of students with EBD being included because of the social benefits to them and their peers. Jennifer, a first-grade educator, felt that all students could benefit from social inclusion. She stated,

> I think it's good for the kids, especially when they're this young and you can reach them. . . . It's helpful for these other ones [students] to see that this happens and that we need to all learn how to calm emotions.

Five educators seemed to be able to express their understanding of social inclusion; however, their responses seemed to reflect confusion between general inclusion and social inclusion. For example, April stated,

> I think it's important that they're included in the classroom setting, in that educators are finding ways to make all students feel welcome and taking the patience and the time to figure out the strategies to work for each of these students.

This type of statement could apply to aspects of social activities and peer relationships; however, it can also apply to inclusive practices in general.

Under the theme of social inclusion, categories emerged that addressed opportunities for participation. This included the educators' provision of opportunities for participation and educators' perceptions of student participation within those activities. Educators discussed different types of social activities in which students were offered opportunities to participate.

Educators' provision of opportunities for participation. Each educator discussed specific activities they considered social activities in which students were given opportunities to participate, typically traditional social events, such as recess or sports-related activities, as well as classroom- or academic-based activities, such as morning meetings, reading games, or math games. An interesting finding was that kindergarten through third-grade educators more easily shared social activities that took place both inside and outside the classroom, but fourth- and fifth-grade educators identified activities that occurred primarily outside (e.g., at recess). Even when we probed to provide examples of social activities inside the classroom, these fourth- and fifth-grade educators provided no examples or provided examples such as times between lessons or when students were given free time during the school day.

Each educator stated that they tried to ensure that they provided their students' opportunities to participate in activities, whether they are those considered to be more "traditionally" social, or social activities that took place in the classroom. One educator explained that her student would be brought back to his general education classroom for celebrations because he was educated for a portion of his day in an EBD setting. She stated, "Any kind of classroom rewards he's able to come in and participate . . . because usually, that'll be during the time that he's in his other classroom." Nine educators provided several examples of opportunities for participation, they were given with the caveat that it was up to the student to engage in that opportunity. For example, Melissa stated, "The opportunities were allowed, were permitted, were present, whether he took it upon himself to do it or not, which I think is half of it. I can't make him participate or be actively involved."

Educators' perceptions of student participation. Each educator indicated that if and how their students with EBD participated in academic and social activities varied based on the activity and time of school year. For example, if an activity included a preferred peer or subject area, the student with EBD was more likely to participate. In addition, three educators reported game-based activities could inhibit participation because the students with EBD were afraid of losing. An example of a student's varying level of participation was provided by Rachel, who stated:

> If it is a peer he felt connected to, he was more than willing to work with them. Whether it be read to someone . . . or sitting together at lunch . . . but if another student that he didn't have that bond with or didn't seem to care for asked him, he would just flat out (say), "No."

Educators discussed their students' levels of participation increasing or decreasing throughout the school year. Six educators explained that supports put in place seemed to help students with EBD make more connections with peers or adults, which seemed to allow for more social participation in the classroom. Two educators stated there seemed to be an increase in challenging behaviors or that the student seemed to withdraw throughout the school year. Morgan, a third-grade educator, provided one example of her student's progress in social interactions with his peers:

> Beginning of the year he definitely didn't want to talk to anybody, didn't care about anybody, didn't like anybody. . . . So he's definitely made a lot of progress on his own and reaching out and making friends and he always has kids to play with at recess.

Relationships

Two categories (peers and adults) of findings about relationships emerged from the data. Eleven educators spoke positively about the relationships they had with their students with EBD and that students with EBD had with their peers. They spoke frequently about how students' characteristics impacted these relationships, both positively and negatively. For example, each educator described their students with EBD as caring, always being concerned about others and wanting to ensure others were okay; however, they also stated past traumas and/or specific challenging behaviors interfered with their ability to form or maintain positive relationships. Educators also spoke frequently about the importance of building trust with students prior to establishing a positive relationship, especially for adults. Most educators explained students with EBD often were forgiving of their peers when their peers broke trust.

Peer relationships. The educators overwhelmingly discussed peers' acceptance and welcoming of their classmates with EBD. April, a first-grade educator, shared this, "The kids were so close with him, he was so close to the students, he felt so welcomed." Morgan also discussed how her third-grade students accepted some of the behaviors that the student with EBD displayed in the classroom, stating, "I feel like it's to the point where my kids are just like, 'This is [student name]. This is just how he is.'" She further explained that she felt the other students were willing to overlook his behaviors and accept him for who he was.

All of the educators reported their students with EBD had multiple friendships. For example, Erin stated, "I would say he had a couple of peers in the class that he would have considered good friends." Megan said that her third-grade student was good at creating friends, stating, "She's really good about creating [friendships], and even when she turns on them, if she decides to be their best friend again, they will come right back to her." Although all of the educators reported their students had friends, two educators reported that the friendships were superficial (i.e., "always like, barely. They were very thinly built" [Melissa]). For example, Stephanie stated, "Everyone would consider him a friend. Now I don't know if it's like a 'best friend' kind of situation.'"

While most educators reported students with EBD being accepted by their peers, four educators reported their students were sometimes left out by peers. Melissa explained that, "It always kind of seemed like there was these 16 [students] and then him," and later added that the relationship between the fifth-grade student with EBD and his peers was like "oil and vinegar." Rachel also noticed her third-grade student with EBD being left out, stating that "her behaviors definitely started to cause peers to intentionally isolate her, and it got to the point where . . . anytime that group activity was expected, she would start to automatically shut down." She later added that "peers didn't want to interact with her, didn't want to include her in games or things like that. A lot of them just had assumptions that no matter what . . . something's going to happen."

Adult relationships. Eleven educators were positive about the relationships they built with their students with EBD. Erin, a first-grade educator, shared, “I felt really close with him. I made it a point that I have done every day, multiple times a day. I would ask him, ‘Do you want a hug?’” Tiffany, a fourth-grade educator, also discussed how close she was with her student, stating she felt “very lucky to have my boy and mine’s relationship. Plain and simple.”

Two educators, both fifth-grade educators, reported less than positive relationships with their students with EBD. Melissa described her relationship with her student as “cautious, if that can describe a relationship. It was a rocky one. It was very rocky. I wanted one, but at the same time . . . I was constantly, I felt on edge.” Katie was a little more positive about her relationship, stating, “It was like a medium . . . I would try to connect with him and I tried to talk about sports or something like that. But then sometimes they got very confrontational.” She added they “had a decent relationship. I wouldn’t say it was terrible.”

Though relationships with general educators were, for the most part, positive, 11 of the 13 educators reported that relationships with other adults were either nonexistent or negative. Sarah used the word “tolerates” to describe the relationship her student with EBD had with familiar staff members, but went on to say that, “he pretty much ignores every other human.” Megan said that her third-grade student with EBD had a “bucket list” of individuals who she did not like, and mentioned the principal was, “at the top of her bucket list and she wants nothing to do with him.”

Eight educators reported that it was important to establish trust with students before trying to build a positive relationship with them. This seemed to be more important when building adult relationships. Jennifer stated her first-grade student “would hold grudges against people if they did something,” specifically referring to his poor relationships with school administrators and the bus driver. Rachel found that her student was “very slow to trust adults,” and “very hesitant to build that relationship and even if there’s one little thing that could break that trust, then it does for a while.” This level of trust seemed to be the reason for limited positive relationships with other adults in school. Educators who reported positive relationships with other adults also shared that trust was established first.

Facilitators to Social Inclusion

Each educator reported facilitators for promoting the social inclusion of students with EBD. These facilitators came from other adults in the building, such as social workers and special educators. They also discussed strategies they used to support their students with EBD.

Support from others. Educators discussed supports from professionals throughout the school, such as social workers and special educators. These included supports provided directly to the student related to basic academic, social–emotional, or behavioral needs, in addition to supports for the educator, such as ideas and strategies to promote social inclusion. Most of this support was reported to be provided by social workers, although educators also discussed other types of supports, such as consultative services, that were provided by special educators as well.

Eight educators discussed the importance of having support from social workers. For example, Rachel, a third-grade educator, shared that the social worker worked with her class to promote social inclusion of a student with EBD by “[pushing in] a lot . . . [doing] different community builders, or conversations and lessons . . . she did a really good job of not making it seem like [she focused on one student], she was not singling out these behaviors and how we manage them.” She explained that she felt this was beneficial because her students learned how to interact with her student with EBD more appropriately. She was also able to see the social worker model these types of lessons for her, so that, she could do them independently.

Seven participants discussed academic supports provided by special educators. When further asked about social–emotional supports provided by special educators two educators stated their students were receiving social supports. The remaining 11 educators reported that special educators provided consultative services for socially inclusive strategies. For example, Heather stated, “She [the special educator] came in a few different times to talk about like, ‘Okay, so this isn’t working. So we’re going to try this,’ or ‘We’re going to see how this goes.’”

Educator strategies. Educators shared many ideas for facilitating peer interactions and social inclusion. Community building activities were a common theme among educators, such as morning meeting, referring to their class as a “family,” taking opportunities to have “lunch bunches” with the student with EBD and a few peers, or having classroom discussions about how to welcome a student back to the classroom who had to be removed due to a behavioral crisis. For example, Melissa, a fifth-grade educator, said, “We take time to try to acknowledge the positives in everybody, again, for that family element and aspect of the classroom.” Some educators also stated they provide social skills instruction to their class as a whole to facilitate peer interaction and inclusion, whether that be through general social–emotional learning (e.g., April, first-grade educator), or using specific programs, such as Zones of Regulation (e.g., Sarah, kindergarten educator).

Some educators indicated that building trust and a positive relationship was a helpful strategy for social inclusion. Those educators reported that they engaged in specific activities to try to help elicit more social inclusion. Three of the educators discussed eating lunch with their students to

try to build a relationship with them, and sometimes inviting other students to try to build positive peer relationships as well. Others discussed being open themselves, in hopes that their student would be willing to be open with them too.

Barriers and Needs

Most barriers and needs related to social inclusion that participants reported comprised three categories: student needs, other professionals, and knowledge and professional development. Educators expressed concerns about the supports they did or did not received from other professionals in the school and the knowledge they did or did not have for educating students with EBD. These limitations, they felt, directly impacted the success of their students in the classroom. Educators did not feel adequately prepared or supported to socially include students with EBD in their classrooms.

Student behavior. Educators reported that challenging behavior was one of the biggest factors that lead to students not having access to social inclusion. Eight of the educators reported incidents in which their student with EBD behaved in a way that required the student to be removed from the class by another adult, such as a special educator or an administrator, or the class to be evacuated from the classroom due to the severity of the student's behavior. For two students who spent a portion of their day in an EBD classroom, their behavior in that classroom sometimes resulted in them not being allowed to go to their general education classroom. For example, Tiffany, a fourth-grade educator, stated, "I know when he was acting up in his [EBD] classroom, I know there's a chance of him losing time in my room." Such situations lead to students having limited access to the general education environment, and therefore limited opportunities for social inclusion.

Limited support from other professionals. Ten educators expressed concerns about limited support provided by special educators and social workers. Six of the educators reported a lack of support and services in general from special educators, with one educator, Melissa, stating, "I would like to think that the special ed teacher would have have had some more insight (about social inclusion)." Educators also felt additional special education support was needed for students to be successful. As Jennifer said, "I think it was more he needed that time with her [the special educator] for emotional, but he was on track academically."

Our respondents indicated that social workers provided the support general educators sought for socially including students with EBD. Respondents also reported that social workers were overwhelmed by the number of students they served. Jennifer stated it would be beneficial to have "more than one social worker in the school because there're so many kids coming in that need that. And I know that she can only stretch so far and I feel badly because she has a lot on her plate." Many educators expressed a desire for their students to receive more social work services, specifically Sarah, who said she "would love social work push-in." By receiving push-in services from social work, Sarah indicated that her student would be able to apply the same social skills he was learning in the therapy setting to the classroom, which could help promote more effective social–emotional skills.

Limited knowledge and professional development. Each respondent reported limitations relating to knowledge and professional development, which interfered with successful social inclusion of students with EBD. Each educator reported feeling they did not have enough knowledge about how to properly educate such students in their classrooms. Some reported a lack of knowledge about managing the characteristics of EBD (i.e., inappropriate interpersonal relationships and challenging behaviors). Others reported a lack of knowledge for students with a history of trauma or mental health issues (e.g., students with oppositional defiant disorder). Stephanie found the most challenging part of educating a student with EBD was "just finding something that works." Megan found the most challenging thing was "never knowing what will truly set her (student) off." Without having knowledge to manage the behaviors exhibited by students in their classrooms, educators reported they were unable to understand how to socially include their students.

An overall consensus among participants was that they had limited professional development for educators about how to socially include students with EBD. Rachel stated, "I definitely would have liked more training on emotional disturbances, or behavioral disorders and what that might look like, and how that manifests and strategies for that." Educators acknowledged that currently school- or district-provided professional development emphasizes academics (e.g., reading), but felt that professional development should include behavioral and social–emotional needs of students so educators can create more socially inclusive environments for their students.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore elementary general educators' perceptions of social inclusion of students with EBD with the hope that the findings will lead and inform experimental studies in this area. Our two research questions were: What are elementary general educators' perceptions of how students with EBD are socially included in general education settings? and, What are elementary general educators' perceptions of facilitators and barriers to social inclusion of students with EBD? Findings

indicated that participant general educators want students with EBD in their classroom and feel social inclusion is important. Our respondents indicated they work to promote socially inclusive practices using social–emotional learning, collaborating with social workers, consulting with special educators, and trying to build relationships with their students with EBD and between their students with EBD and students without disabilities. Respondents also reported barriers to social inclusion of students with EBD, including limited support, knowledge, and professional development.

Educator Perceptions of Social Inclusion

Educator participants expressed mostly positive feelings about including students with EBD in their general education classrooms. Our participants routinely voiced the phrase "my student" when they discussed students with EBD who were in their classrooms. Moreover, participants stated such students should experience all of the same academic and social benefits as any student in general education classrooms, indicating that they should be active members of the classroom environment (Anderson et al., 2014). Prior research on the topic of including students with EBD in elementary classrooms has been limited but has been favorable toward inclusion of students with social–emotional needs in elementary general education settings (Hamaidi et al., 2012). Educators also felt students with EBD should be equal and active participants in their classrooms, and that they provide opportunities for such students to engage in social and academic activities at the same level as their peers. However, some participants indicated this participation was based on the willingness of the students to participate in such activities. This finding also aligns with previous theory and literature, indicating that students with EBD and other disabilities can struggle to participate in both academic and social activities at the same level as their peers (Anderson et al., 2014; Farmer, Talbott, et al., 2018; Landrum, 2017).

Both the definitions of social inclusion (Dyson, 2014; Simplican et al., 2015; Walker & Wigfield, 2003; Woodgate et al., 2019) and theoretical framework (Anderson et al., 2014) used in this study highlight the importance of relationships in promoting inclusive settings. Most participants in our study indicated their students with EBD had positive relationships with peers and their general educator. However, many participants also reported their students with EBD had either nonexistent or negative relationships with other adults in the building. Educators also discussed the importance of establishing trust with students with EBD prior to building a relationship, and that the breakdown of trust could result in a negative relationship. Some prior literature indicates students with EBD struggle to form positive peer and adult relationships (e.g., Hecker et al., 2014; Srsic & Rice, 2012). Balagna and colleagues (2013) conducted a study with middle school students at risk for EBD who indicated they rely on peer relationships for support, but struggle to form positive adult relationships. These students indicated they had a few positive adult relationships with educators who were willing to establish trust prior to building a relationship (Balagna et al., 2013). Prior research related to peer and adult relationships included participants at the middle and high school levels. However, participants in our study may establish better positive relationships because they are in elementary school. As Jennifer said, "The kids are always trusting of each other at that age and they forgive really easily, which makes . . . first grade awesome, because they're still moldable if that makes sense." Jennifer seemed to feel this was due to their peer relationships or "moldability" at such a young age. However, this could also be because elementary students spend most of the school day with one educator instead of multiple educators as they do in middle and high school, therefore limiting their time to create positive relationships with adults.

Facilitators and Barriers to Social Inclusion

Educators indicated facilitators of effective social inclusion included reliance on the school social worker for both their own support needs and for social skills instruction for their students. Previous research has reported that school social workers serve in a myriad of roles, including collaborative and consultative roles to other professionals who work with students who exhibit challenging behaviors, are diagnosed with, or are at risk of developing mental health disorders, and/or have other disabilities (e.g., Forenza & Eckhardt, 2020; Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2017). This expertise means they are a realistic source of knowledge for general educators. However, as the participants in the current study acknowledged, school social workers are often overworked. Since the educators in this study were all educating students with disabilities, it is reasonable to expect special educators to be a source of information as well.

Our participants also found that working with all of their students to facilitate appropriate peer interactions, such as establishing a classroom community, was meaningful in building effective social inclusion. Educator participants reported that they worked to ensure that they were creating a culture that was conducive to inclusion of all students, and facilitated effective peer interactions through the use of planned social skills instruction and spontaneous social interactions during structured mealtimes. Anderson and colleagues (2014) emphasized student participation, value, and achievement for students with disabilities in an inclusive environment, which was exemplified by some of our educator participants. Similarly, Farmer, Dawes, and colleagues (2018) use the term invisible hand to discuss the role of the educator in creating this positive physical and social

environment that helps to facilitate positive social inclusion for all students. These findings help to further illustrate how the general educator fills the role of the invisible hand in the classroom (Farmer, Dawes, et al., 2018; Farmer, Talbott, et al., 2018; van den Berg & Stoltz, 2018). Educators in our study lent invisible hands to assist social inclusion by arranging "lunch bunches" that included the student with EBD and having specific discussions with their students about how to welcome the student with EBD into the classroom, or how to use specific language with the student with EBD if they were bothered by a behavior. We propose that social inclusion is likely to be more effective when general educators consistently provide an invisible hand throughout the day versus during isolated times, for example, when it is "social skills" time. In addition, in our study kindergarten through third-grade educators seemed to understand how social activities can be intertwined into the classroom, whereas fourth- and fifth-grade educators seemed to find social activities as those that occurred outside of the classroom. By introducing invisible hand, educators of all grades, including fourth and fifth grades, may be able to incorporate social inclusion into social activities throughout the school day.

Barriers to social inclusion commonly reported by our participants included limited support from special educators in the school. This may be, in part, due to a breakdown between systems (Anderson et al., 2014) in school settings. Special educators provided consultative services and responded to behavioral crises in classrooms as needed. Per respondents, special educators rarely provided direct social, emotional, or behavioral services to students. Only those students who were also educated in EBD classrooms part-time received services from special educators related to their social, emotional, and/or behavioral needs. General educators reported those students not educated in specialized EBD settings received social skills instruction at most twice a week from the school social worker, with most educators reporting once a week social skills instruction for 30 minutes. Two educators reported their students with EBD received no additional services related to their social–emotional needs. We were surprised that respondents reported what we considered a dearth of social skills instruction. A study conducted by Vannest and Hagan-Burke (2010) reported similar findings. They looked at the amount of time that special educators spent on various activities. Three variables included were academic instruction, nonacademic instruction, and discipline, and findings indicated that special educators spent less time on nonacademic instruction ($M = .045$) than they did on academic instruction ($M = .156$) and discipline ($M = .071$). Findings from our study reflect perceptions of general educators. The perceptions of other stakeholders, such as special educators, were not included as they were beyond the scope of this study.

Our respondents also expressed a strong desire for needing additional professional development to educate students with EBD, work with students who have a history of trauma, and work with students who have various health needs that impact them socially and behaviorally so they could have a better understanding of how to socially include their students. These findings align with extant literature as many general educators are underprepared to work with students with disabilities in general (Allday et al., 2013; State et al., 2019). In addition, students continue to enter the school system with histories of trauma, and educators must understand the best ways to manage the social, emotional, behavioral, and academic ramifications of these past experiences (Morton & Berardi, 2017). Many of the participants in our study shared that their students with EBD had a history of trauma, including time spent in foster care, physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, exposure to violence, and/or food insecurities. Such experiences could have a direct impact on educational development of students in these educators' classrooms, and educators in our study said they were unsure of how to best support them. For educators to provide a socially inclusive environment where students are able to fully participate; achieve behavioral, emotional, social, and academic success; and feel valued by their classmates (Anderson et al., 2014), they need to receive professional development to address the gaps in their own understanding of inclusion of students with EBD and impact of trauma.

Limitations

We address here some limitations of our study. First, participants were few ($N = 13$ educators), located in only one state (Illinois), all women, and all White with one exception. Though the participants were representative of the demographics of elementary educators in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] & U. S. Department of Education, 2020), the students with EBD are more racially diverse than the educators who teach them. Another limitation is that demographic data for one included student are missing from the findings. In addition, though findings were generally positive regarding social inclusion of students with EBD, participation in research is voluntary, and as such, participants who chose to be included may have done so because of their successful inclusion of students with EBD or may have shared positive information to try to please the interviewer. Others who have not experienced success may have chosen not to participate. Another limitation of the study is that the only form of data collection was interviews of general educators instead of other stakeholders (e.g., special educators, administrators, students, etc.) or other forms of data collection (e.g., observations, record reviews, verification of student eligibility).

Finally, we provided participants with a definition of social inclusion at the beginning of the interview, and asked them to describe their understanding of the definition; however, our definition may have been limited or brief. Thus, participants' interpretation of social inclusion might have differed from our interpretation.

Implications

Although this was an exploratory study, implications for both research and practice can be discussed as they were recommended by the participants. First, the implications for practice relate to ways services are delivered to students with EBD. Educators reported their students with EBD relied on social skills instruction from social workers as their only opportunity for direct, specialized instruction based on their disability. Although this instruction is valuable, social workers are often overworked, as they serve both general and special education students in addition to other responsibilities. It is difficult to expect social workers to increase instructional time with students with EBD. Most of our participants also stated that they received limited support from special educators, and in some cases the only direct-to-student support was during a behavioral crisis. We recommend increased collaboration between general educators, special educators, and social workers to establish strategies to promote more effective support for students with EBD. As they are doing this, the educational team can write IEP goals tailored toward social–emotional learning. This will help meet the needs of students with EBD in both the special and general education settings and ensure attention is given to this important area of inclusion.

When considering the implications for research, researchers should first consider how using the invisible hand (Farmer, Dawes, et al., 2018) from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders (i.e., the general educator, special educator, and social worker) can help to further support the social inclusion of students with EBD. By doing this, such stakeholders can collaboratively provide social–emotional supports and a socially inclusive environment to students with EBD through the lens of the invisible hand. Researchers should also explore perceptions of other stakeholders (e.g., special educators, administrators, social workers, parents, students) related to social inclusion of elementary-age students with EBD and related professional development needs of elementary general educators. Though our study focused solely on perceptions of general educators, findings from the perspective of our participants indicated that special educators seemed to have a minimal role in social inclusion of students with EBD. This was surprising and future research may help to illuminate why some general educators perceive this minimal role. It may also help to better understand supports needed for students and general educators. It is important to look at all aspects of this topic so researchers have a better idea of how to support such students. Collecting data in other forms, such as record reviews or observations, could elucidate how students with EBD are and are not socially included in general education settings. In addition, using such data could lead to future theory development in the areas of the invisible hand, Ecology of Inclusive Education, and social inclusion.

General educators felt they needed additional professional development to educate students with EBD, a history of trauma, and with medical conditions that impact such students socially and behaviorally. Future research should focus on suitable types and efficacy of professional development. School districts typically provide educators with professional development opportunities in academics, but many students will struggle with mastering academics if their social, emotional, and behavioral needs are not addressed. Providing pertinent professional development might help educators better serve developmental needs of the student, not just academic needs. This could help establish socially inclusive environments for students with EBD that promote both academic and social–emotional achievement (Benstead, 2019).

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Supplemental Material

Supplementary material for this article is available on the *Behavioral Disorders* website with the online version of this article.

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