

# Characteristics of Students with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders: Perspectives of General Education Teachers in Saudi Arabia

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## Abstract

Students with emotional/behavioral disorders (EBDs) have a number of characteristics that distinguish them from other students with special needs. Some teachers may be aware of these problems through their teaching level, level of education, and/or experience in education but others are not. This study was conducted through a survey to determine teachers' perspectives of students with EBDs because an important relationship exists between what is believed by teachers about such students and what is practiced concerning them. Participants in this study included 296 general education teachers from Saudi Arabia. The results showed that the participants who responded to the survey have neutral perspectives on the characteristics of students with EBDs. The study has found additional significant differences between male and female teachers regarding their perceptions of characteristics of students with EBDs. No significant differences were discovered in the level of education, the number of years of teaching experience, or the school level taught. Implications and conclusions are discussed.

## Keywords

Emotional/Behavioral Disorders, General Education Teachers, Characteristics, Saudi Arabia

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## 1. Introduction

In any school, teachers anticipate students' violating the rules of appropriate behavior. These violations range from mild disturbances such as interrupting teachers to rude, disturbing behavior. Love (1997) notes that in

some instances “There is a large group of children having school problems screaming at educators with their behavior” (p. 93). For most “acting out” behaviors, students will probably be referred to special education (Henley, Ramsey, & Algozzine, 2006). Assessing students’ behavior for special education services requires examination of the frequency and intensity of the disturbing actions.

It is recognized that both boys and girls can suffer from EBDs. However, Heward (2006) finds that “The vast majority of children identified for special education because of emotional/behavioral disorders are boys” (p. 229). Boys specified as emotionally-behaviorally disturbed are probably externalizing disorders and antisocial behavior and aggression. Studies show that girls with such disorders have problems with antisocial behavior and aggression but are more likely to exhibit anxiety disorders through social withdrawal and self-absorption.

The estimated number of students with EBDs varies widely (Heward, 2006). Accounts of the spread of these disorders depend on many factors (Henley et al., 2006). It is generally accepted that the “nature of the definition and criteria used to determine which students have a significant impact on the rate of identification and the number of students that have been identified” as students with EBDs (p. 135). The National Institute of Mental Health in the US Department of Health and Human Services estimates that up to 10% of school-age community members have mental disorders. The US Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS), further estimates that between 1.2 and 2% of young children exhibit EBDs (Culatta, Tompkins, & Werts, 2003).

Children and youth act inappropriately at different times in different situations; so it is difficult to measure their feelings and behavior. Differences exist among cultures in terms of what behavior is acceptable and what is unacceptable. Similarly, the terms used to describe this category of the population are many and varied. They include emotionally disturbed, behaviorally disordered, adversely educated, socially disabled, personally weakened, and many other descriptions (Gargiulo, 2006). The majority of students with EBDs are typical in body and mind, but adverse behavior or withdrawal is a grave obstacle to all work and learning (Heward, 2006). Students with EBDs may experience less success in the classroom than do members of other sub-groups with special education (Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein, & Sumi, 2005).

It is possible to determine a common aspect among the many current definitions of EBDs, although certain points may differ greatly from one definition to another in the terminology used. According to Hallahan and Kauffman (2000), there is general agreement that emotional/behavioral disorders refer to:

- Behavior that goes to an extreme that is not just slightly different from the usual;
- A problem that is chronic one that does not quickly disappear;
- Behavior that is unacceptable because of social or cultural expectations. (p. 250)

In fact, some research and recent studies have examined issues related to teachers’ perspective of problems of EBDs (State, Kern, Starosta, & Mukherjee, 2011). According to Solesa, Bloom, Heath and Karagiannakis (2008), there are difficulties in identifying and giving service to students with behavioral difficulties and emotional problems. The current study has investigated teachers’ perspectives of emotional/behavioral disorder. Teachers rate girls as having more external difficulties than boys when describing characteristics exhibited by children with EBDs. On the other hand, there are no important differences between teachers’ estimates of accommodating girls and boys, although the girls offer more intense symptoms and depression. The researchers also point out “...teachers rated gender-contrary behaviors more severely than gender-consistent behaviors. Consistent with achievement results, teachers rated the majority of children as having moderate to severe academic difficulties. Little agreement was found between characteristics reported by teachers and children” (p. 275).

State, et al. (2011) investigated teachers’ perspective of students with mental health needs in primary schools in urban areas. The study asked teachers to respond to survey items which covered categories such as behavioral problems most commonly encountered in schools and the main barriers met when trying to resolve behavioral problems. The results indicated that teachers believed the most common behavioral problem in schools was disruptive behavior. The topic most in demand for service training was how to address disruptive behavior and implement plans to correct it. Although most of the instructors reported having pupils with behavioral problems in their schools, they did not trust their own ability to deal with EBDs problems. They reported inadequate knowledge, understanding, and skills. Walter, Gouze, and Lim (2006) found that teachers believe most of them had worked with students with behavioral problems, but had little training in dealing with EBDs nor had they had adequate consultation with EBDs professionals. Teachers’ perspectives on issues of EBDs were limited, and they felt students with such problems could not manage their own behavior in classrooms.

Stormont, Reinke, and Herman (2011) pointed out teachers’ need to understand and be willing to support stu-

dents with EBDs. They should be aware of the problems as well as have knowledge of resources provided in the school. Teachers should support students with emotional/behavioral problems by practices based on the evidence available. The researchers also “explored general education teachers’ knowledge of 10 evidence-based interventions as well as resources and data collected at their schools to support children with mental health problems” (p. 138). The results indicated that most participants lacked knowledge regarding programs and facilities provided in their schools for students with EBDs.

Finally, *State, et al. (2011)* stated though teachers have reported disruptive behavior as the most common behavioral problem in schools, many of them lack confidence in their ability to deal with the problems and lack sufficient knowledge to understand them. Thus, there is a need for further studies and training for the dissemination of the knowledge, understanding, and skills needed by teachers to enable them to work with pupils with EBD problems. So, this study has been undertaken because this phenomenon deserves the attention of teachers who have to deal with troubled children in the classroom every day. The purpose of the current study was to investigate what differences exist in general education teachers’ perspectives regarding characteristics of students with EBDs in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, it examined the impact of certain variables on general education teachers’ perspectives related to their gender, level of education, number of years of teaching experience, and the school level taught.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The participants in the current study were male and female general education teachers in Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia. Three hundred surveys were distributed through 30 randomly selected general schools (elementary, intermediate, and secondary education) equally divided between schools for boys and schools for girls in Riyadh. The survey was distributed in all regions of the city to be sure of equitable representation the entire study population. With permission from the Ministry of Education, the survey was distributed by intercessors to be returned within 15 days. No one was obliged to participate in the survey; completion was voluntary. Two hundred ninety-six general education teachers completed and returned the survey.

### 2.2. Instrument

A survey was designed to determine what the general education teachers’ perspectives were toward characteristics of students with EBDs in Saudi Arabia. The researchers developed the survey through content extrapolation of characteristics of EBDs found in the literature review. The three-part survey was completed by participants in this study. The first part included a description of the purpose of the study, instructions for answering the survey questions, and the rights of the respondents. The second part included three questions regarding the participants’ demographic characteristics: 1) teachers’ gender (male or female); 2) the level of education; 3) the number of years of teaching experience; and 4) the school level taught. The third part had 21 statements by which the teachers were asked to rate their degree of agreement on a Likert scale of one to five (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree). The statements related to general education teachers’ perspectives toward the characteristics exhibited by students with EBDs (items # 1 to 21). The study’s survey content was based on findings in the literature for emotional/behavioral disorders.

To establish the validity of the survey’s content four experts in the Special Education Department at King Saud University in Riyadh City reviewed the questionnaires. They were asked to evaluate and critique the survey and their feedback was considered in constructing the survey. To screen for reliability in the study, each survey item was judged against Cronbach’s Alpha reliability test. The results showed a high degree of reliability overall, which was = 0.9607.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Once the surveys were completed, they were collected and overall percentages were calculated to describe demographic information and responses to the 21 survey items. The data were analyzed using the SPSS statistical analysis program to find the frequency and percentages of the survey responses. To access the significant differences among the results of the study sample variables related to the level of education, the number of years of teaching experience, and the school level taught, a one-way ANOVA was accomplished. Finally, the indepen-

dent sample *t*-test was used with teachers' gender to analyze the differences between male and female groups.

### 3. Results

The information provided in **Table 1** below is a frequency analysis from all 296 surveys collected from general schools in Riyadh City, Saudi Arabia. The percentage in each area is provided. The demographic information for general education teachers showed that of 149 of the teachers involved were male and 147 were female. The demographics indicated that 217 (73.3%—the highest percentage) of the respondents in level of education of teachers had a bachelor degree. Most of the teachers who responded in the years of experience in education category had between 11 and 15 years of experience (26%) and the highest percentage of those who responded in the educational level were 110 elementary school teachers (37.2%).

**Table 2** shows the rank, mean, and standard deviation (SD) of participants' responses (1, strongly disagree; 5, strongly agree) to each of 21 items about general education teachers' perspectives toward characteristics of students with EBDs in Saudi Arabia. Through the results described below it was clear that the study sample members were neutral in their agreement about 20 items delineating the characteristics of students with EBDs on average (2.80 of 5.00). The average fall of means was between (2.54 and 2.97). So, the most neutral figures in the phrases were (12, 18, 20, 8, 21), which were arranged in descending order according to the neutrality of the study sample as follows: Students with EBDs suffer from mood disorder cases (2.97), several students with EBDS seem to have disturbances in oppositional defiant (2.95), many students with EBDS seem to have disturbances in hyperactivity (2.95), students with EBDs have difficulty complying with the task their teachers assigned (2.95), and many students with EBDS have severe impulsive tendencies (2.94). However, among the 21 survey statements there was only one with which all responses disagreed: (phrase 13) some students with EBDs suffer from schizophrenia in personal cases (2.54).

**Table 3** summarizes the differences in results on a *t*-test between groups, which showed there were significant differences ( $p = 0.017$ ) between male and female teachers concerning their perceptions toward characteristics of students with EBDs. Male teachers have more understanding about characteristics of students with EBDs than do female teachers.

**Table 1.** Overall demographic information.

Overall	Frequency	Percent
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	149	50.3
Female	147	49.7
<b>Level of Education</b>		
Bachelor	217	73.3
Master	62	20.9
Doctoral	5	1.7
Other	12	4.1
<b>Years of experience</b>		
5 years or fewer	61	20.6
6 to 10 years	53	17.9
11 to 15 years	77	26.0
16 to 20 years	57	19.3
21 years or more	48	16.2
<b>Educational level</b>		
Elementary education	110	37.2
Intermediate education	92	31.1
Secondary education	94	31.8

**Table 2.** Rank, means, and SD for participants' responses.

Rank	Statement	Mean	SD
12	Students with EBDs suffer from mood disorder cases	2.97	1.124
18	Several students with EBDs seem to have disturbances in oppositional defiant	2.95	1.181
20	Many students with EBDs seem to have disturbances in hyperactivity	2.95	1.196
8	Students with EBDs have difficulty complying with the tasks of their teachers	2.95	1.147
21	Many students with EBDs have severe impulsive tendencies	2.94	1.223
19	Most students with EBDs seem to have disturbances in attention	2.92	1.214
6	Students with EBDs suffer from low self-concept	2.88	1.130
10	Students with EBDs tend to break the rules of the school system	2.87	1.207
1	Students with EBDs suffer with educational problems which negatively affect their academic achievement	2.85	1.244
4	Students with EBDs suffer from difficulty adapting to the social environment around them	2.84	1.179
2	One attribute of students with EBDs is destruction and vandalism	2.80	1.146
3	One attribute of students with EBDs is they are aggressive toward their peers	2.79	1.182
7	Students with EBDs suffer low self-esteem	2.76	1.188
11	Students with EBDs suffer from dependence in their interaction with peers	2.75	1.109
14	Many students with EBDs suffer from anxiety in general	2.71	1.103
15	Most students with EBDs suffer from a phobia	2.71	1.098
5	Do not want students with EBDs to work in groups with their peers	2.69	1.163
16	Many students with EBDs suffer from depression	2.65	1.043
17	Students with EBDs suffer eating disorders and loss of appetite	2.65	1.073
9	Students with EBDs suffer social withdrawal and isolation from their surrounding environment	2.63	1.158
13	Some students with EBDs suffer from schizophrenia in personal cases	2.54	1.113

Note: SCALE: Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree.

**Table 3.** The results of a t-test for teachers' gender.

Gender	N	M	SD	T	p
Male	149	2.92	0.86	2.407	*0.017
Female	147	2.68	0.85		

**Table 4** summarizes the differences in results of an ANOVA between groups, which shows no significant differences were found ( $p = 0.094$ ) in the *level of education* variable of teachers concerning their perceptions of characteristics of students with EBDs.

In **Table 5** are summarized the differences in results of an ANOVA between groups, which shows there were no significant differences found ( $p = 0.608$ ) in the variable *the number of years of teaching experience* concerning teachers' perceptions of characteristics of students with EBDs.

**Table 6** summarizes the differences in results on an ANOVA between groups, which shows there were no significant differences found ( $p = 0.060$ ) in the variable *the school level taught* concerning teachers' perceptions of characteristics of students with EBDs.

#### 4. Discussion

The overall results of the study for all teachers responding to the survey indicated a natural understanding by respondents of the characteristics of students with EBDs in Saudi Arabia. This study has not given support to the

**Table 4.** The result of an ANOVA for the level of education.

Source	Sum of squares	Df	MS	F	<i>p</i>
Between	4.764	3	1.588	2.152	0.094
Within	215.503	292	0.738		
Total	220.267	295			

**Table 5.** The results of an ANOVA for the number of years of teaching experience.

Source	Sum of squares	Df	MS	F	<i>p</i>
Between	2.031	4	0.508	0.677	0.608
Within	218.235	291	0.750		
Total	220.267	295			

**Table 6.** The result of an ANOVA for the school level taught.

Source	Sum of squares	Df	MS	F	<i>p</i>
Between	4.182	2	2.091	2.835	0.060
Within	216.085	293	0.737		
Total	220.267	295			

argument in other studies about teachers having negative or positive perspectives regarding characteristics of students with EBDs. For example, in the study conducted by Manning, Bullock, and Gable (2009), they indicated little knowledge in teacher perceptions about emotional and behavioral disorders. Also, Saun (2008) argued about teachers' perceptions of behavior problems in elementary schools. He found that teachers had negative perspectives and shortage of knowledge toward behavior difficulties in elementary schools. In another study, Broomhead (2013) explored whether parents and teachers have negative perceptions of children with special educational needs and challenging behavior. In a further study, Conley, Marchant and Caldarella (2014) compared teachers' perceptions and research-based categories of student behavior difficulties. They found similarities between what teachers believe and what is in the research literature.

The present study found a difference regarding teachers' perspectives and their gender. Male teachers have more understanding than female teachers of the characteristics of students with EBDs. This finding disagreed with what appeared in previous studies where Kumpulainen et al. (1999) found there was no effect on parents' and teachers' reports for students with EBDs in the elementary school. On the other hand, Saun (2008) found female teachers more positive toward students with EBDs than were male teachers. The present study found no significant differences in the level of education of teachers. There was no relation between teachers' level of education and their perspectives regarding characteristics of students with EBDs. Buford and Casey (2012) agreed with what was found in the study, that there were no significant differences in the level of teachers' education and their perspectives to their preparedness to teach students with special needs.

The ongoing study found no significant differences based on the number of years of teaching experience. That translated as teachers' experience in education having no effect based on their perspectives toward characteristics of students with EBDs. This finding might disagree with previous studies, such as that of Poulou and Norwich (2000) who discovered that teachers' experience had no effect on their causal attributions, cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses to students with EBDs. On the other hand, Connelly et al. (2008) indicated teachers' experience has an effect in support of students with EBDs. Mak and Zhang (2013) argued in their study that teachers' experience affected their perception in teaching students with autism. The interesting finding in this study was there were no significant differences in teachers' perspectives of characteristics of students with EBDs based on which school level the teachers taught. Buford and Casey (2012) argued similarly that their study disclosed no significant difference in the school level taught and teachers' perception of their preparedness to teach students with special needs.

Certain limitations of this study determined that male teachers in Saudi Arabia are more understanding than the females of the characteristics of students with EBDs. However, the current study has limitations. There were

only 296 respondents out of 300, a very small sample to be representative of the teachers in Saudi Arabia. This limitation can be avoided in further studies by wider distribution of the surveys to more schools. Questionnaires were distributed in just one environment in Saudi Arabia and that might have elicited responses unlike those of teachers in other Saudi cities.

The practical implication of the findings in the current study is that general education teachers should improve their understanding about students with EBDs through educating themselves about the characteristics of such students. Doing so could make them more aware and understanding of these characteristics, based on the results indicating that participants had natural perceptions about the characteristics of students with EBDs. Another implication is that teachers should have training about students with EBDs, thus providing them with comprehensive information about this disorder. This knowledge would assist teachers in knowing how to deal with these students in their classrooms. Training could help special education teachers with the diagnosis process and provide the students with appropriate interventions.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study extends an overview of understanding about how general education teachers comprehend the characteristics of students with EBDs. This study has discovered to what extent teachers in Saudi Arabia have understood the characteristics of students with EBDs. It has shown in its results that there is natural agreement in perspectives of the teachers who have responded to the survey about the characteristics of students with EBDs.

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