

A survey on the adaptation conditions of new students with special needs in Taipei

In 2003, the Department of Education of Taipei City Government established a “Taipei Emotional and Behavioral Problems Support Team”. The team is under the Taipei City East Special Education Resources Center (TERC) and assists with the severe emotional and behavioral control cases that had been referred from various schools (ranging from kindergarten to high/vocational school).

In view of these high-risk students (autism, EBD and EBD w/learning disabilities) who often have trouble adapting to new environments, the team, from a preventive point of view, hope to be involved with such students as early as possible in order to avoid the severe emotional behaviors that may arise. Therefore, the Department of Education of Taipei City Government called for the team to investigate the adaptation conditions of new students with autism, EBD, and EBD w/learning disabilities every year. Following the investigations, phone interviews were administered and school visits were given to the challenged students. The goal was to uncover the challenges students faced while trying to adapt, and the difficulties schools encountered when providing student counseling. The team also aspired for severe cases to be referred to us in order for our professional team to provide timely relevant resources and suggestions. The following article is comprised of our study procedures, study results and discussions, study suggestions, and its limitations.

Research Procedure

The research subjects were the new students entering elementary, middle, and high/vocational schools, and were either identified or suspected to have Autism, EBD, or EBD w/learning disabilities in Taipei. (The flowchart for the procedure is given in the appendix.)

1. Questionnaires mailed out and sent back: In order to make sure students and school teachers had already spent time together, the questionnaires were mailed out about a month after schools began. The questionnaires were filled out by the school teachers who were familiar with their students and understood their adaptation conditions (they were generally tutors in general education classes or case managers of special education). The questionnaires were asked to be sent back to us the following month.
2. Adaptation conditions checking:
 - (1) If the adaptation conditions on the questionnaires were answered as “very good”, “good”, or “fair”, the questionnaires were filed away.
 - (2) If the adaptation conditions on the questionnaires were answered as “poor” or “very poor”, the students were assigned to the team by administrative districts. The team made follow-ups on these students.
3. Follow-ups:
 - (1) Phone interviews:

The team interviewed the school teachers who had filled out the questionnaires to collect data (ex: the major problems, the special education services, the strategies used and its’ consequences, the difficulties for school), provide specific and feasible related strategies, and introduce some referral resources (ex TERC). Then, the team made decisions of whether or not we needed to set up an appointment to conduct school visits.

After the phone interviews, (a) if the adaptation conditions were satisfactory and the school teachers could handle the student situations very well, the questionnaires were then filed away, (b) if school teachers still needed future assistance, and were willing to be visited, the team would then set up appointments.

- (2) School visits:

The team visited the school teachers to assess the ecological environment and real adaptability of the students, provide intervention plans, and recommend schools to refer related resources if necessary. The records that the team wrote down after the visit would be sent to the school and a copy was also made and filed away.

4. Statistical analysis of relevant information:

It included the response rate of the questionnaires and the current adaptation conditions of new students, the percentage of the challenged students among three educational levels, the percentage distribution among three disabilities (Autism, EBD and EBD w/learning disabilities), the percentage of the challenged students among three disabilities, the analysis of follow-up results, and the result comparison with those in 2005.

The results of this study

The results of the study, based upon the questionnaires, phone interviews and school visits, can be divided into five parts: 1.The response rate of the questionnaires and the current adaptation conditions of new students; 2.The percentage of the challenged students among three educational levels; 3.The percentage distribution among three disabilities (Autism, EBD and EBD w/learning disabilities), and the percentage of the challenged students among three disabilities; 4.Analysis of follow-up results; 5.The result comparison with those in 2005.

1. The response rate of the questionnaires and the current adaptation conditions: 565 copies were issued in the study, and 498 copies were retrieved. The response rate was about 88% (498 / 565%). We used a five-point Likert scale questionnaire ranging from very good to very poor (very good, good, fair, poor, and very poor). "The challenged students" were defined as "students who were rated as either poor or very poor". Of all the students, 5% were unchecked, 1% were rated as "very good", 35% were rated as "good", 44% were rated as "fair", 12% were rated as "poor", and 3% were rated as "very poor". Figure 1 shows that 15% of the students were rated as challenged students (those who were rated either as "poor" or "very poor"). Most of the students were rated as either "good" or "very good". The possible reasons include the following: (1) The teachers put the transition into effect. (2) The teachers became more effective. (3) Most of the teachers have had the opportunity to become better acquainted with their students during the first month of school.

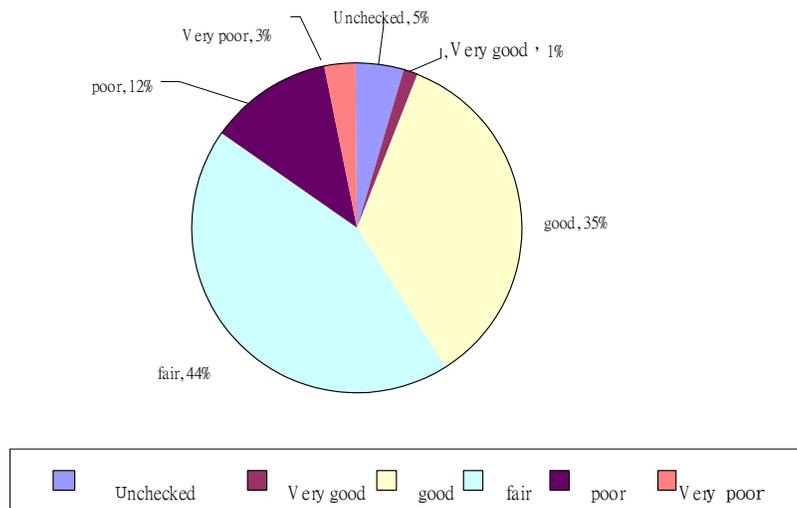


Figure1: Distribution about data of the adaptation conditions

2. The percentage of the challenged students among three educational levels: Table 1 shows that, of the challenged students, 15% were at elementary schools, 18% were at middle schools, and 11% were at high/vocational schools. The results of the study indicate that middle schools were rated as having the most challenged students while high/vocational schools were rated as having the least challenged students. There is a need to relate this to the response rate of the three individual educational levels before we can further compare the results among these different educational levels.

Table 1: The adaptation conditions among educational levels

| | Elementary schools | | Middle schools | | High/vocational schools | |
|-----------|--------------------|------|----------------|------|-------------------------|------|
| | Persons | % | Persons | % | Persons | % |
| Unchecked | 6 | 3% | 11 | 6% | 7 | 6% |
| Very good | 1 | 1% | 2 | 1% | 4 | 4% |
| Good | 82 | 42% | 52 | 27% | 39 | 35% |
| Fair | 77 | 39% | 91 | 48% | 50 | 45% |
| Poor | 26 | 13% | 27 | 14% | 8 | 7% |
| Very poor | 3 | 2% | 8 | 4% | 4 | 4% |
| Total | 195 | 100% | 191 | 100% | 112 | 100% |

3. The percentage distribution among three disabilities (Autism, EBD and EBD w/learning disabilities), and the percentage of the challenged students among three disabilities:

Figure 2 shows that, of all the students, 69% were Autism, 24% were EBD, and 7% were EBD w/learning disabilities.

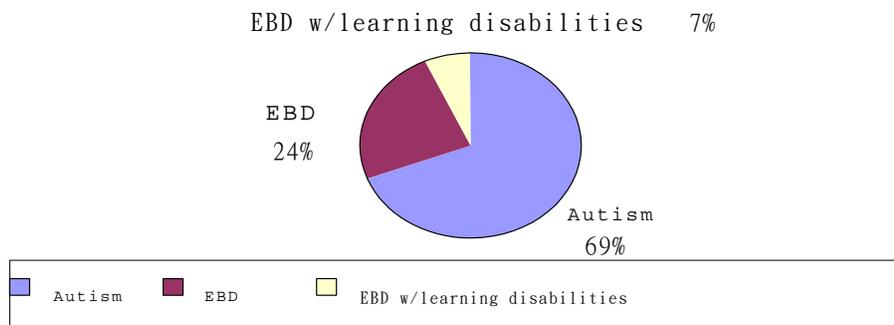


Figure 2: Percentage distribution among three disabilities

Table 2 shows that 15% of the Autism were rated as the challenged students, 16% of the EBD were rated as the challenged students, and 12% of the EBD w/ learning disabilities were rated as the challenged student. There was little discrepancy among the percentage of students that were rated as being challenged in school among these three disabilities. Each percentage was lower than 20%. We assume that the teachers have the abilities to deal with new students with Autism, EBD, and EBD w/learning disabilities.

Table 2: The adaptation conditions among these disabilities

| | Autism | | EBD | | EBD w/learning disabilities | |
|-----------|---------|------|---------|------|-----------------------------|------|
| | Persons | % | Persons | % | Persons | % |
| Unchecked | 12 | 3% | 9 | 7% | 3 | 9% |
| Very good | 4 | 1% | 3 | 2% | 0 | 0% |
| Good | 126 | 37% | 35 | 29% | 12 | 36% |
| Fair | 149 | 43% | 55 | 45% | 14 | 42% |
| Poor | 45 | 13% | 13 | 11% | 3 | 9% |
| Very poor | 8 | 2% | 6 | 5% | 1 | 3% |
| Total | 344 | 100% | 121 | 100% | 33 | 100% |

4. Analysis of the follow-up results:

Table 3 shows that of the elementary school teachers who had the challenged students, 93% were interviewed through the telephone and 7% were visited in the school; of the middle school teachers who had the challenged students, 83% were interviewed through the telephone and 3% were visited in the school. Of the high/vocational schools teachers who had the challenged students, 100% were interviewed through the telephone and none were visited in the school.

Table 3: Analysis of follow-up

| | Elementary schools 29 persons | | Middle schools 35 persons | | High/vocational schools 12 persons | |
|------------------|----------------------------------|-----|------------------------------|-----|--|------|
| | Persons | % | Persons | % | Persons | % |
| Phone interviews | 27 | 93% | 29 | 83% | 12 | 100% |
| School visits | 2 | 7% | 1 | 3% | 0 | 0% |

(Of the challenged middle school students, 14% were already referred to the team before the survey and were being assisted by the team. Those teachers were not interviewed.)

Of the teachers who responded, 14% (27+29+12/498%) were interviewed through the telephone and 0.6% (2+1/498%) was visited in the school. This indicates that most of the problems can be solved by interviews through phone calls.

5. The result comparison with those in 2005.

Table 4: Cross-year comparison of the challenged students

| Year 2005 | Elementary schools 159 persons | | Middle school 200 persons | | High/vocaitonal schools 101persons | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----|------------------------------|-----|--|-----|
| | Persons | % | Persons | % | Persons | % |
| Numbers of the challenged students | 23 | 14% | 30 | 15% | 10 | 10% |
| Year 2006 | Elementary school 195 persons | | Middle school 191 persons | | High/vocational schools 112 persons | |
| | Persons | % | Persons | % | Persons | % |
| Numbers of the challenged students | 29 | 15% | 35 | 18% | 12 | 11% |

The comparison indicates that the percentage of challenged students is growing. However, a longer period of observation and investigation are still needed in order to have a better knowledge of whether this is becoming a stable trend.

Suggestions and limitations

The survey on the adaptations of new students with special needs is routinely conducted each year by the team that worked with students with emotional and behavioral problems for the Taipei City East Special Education Resources Center. The purpose of this survey is to have a better command of the adaptation conditions of the students as well as to prevent severe emotional behaviors. Based on the results of this study, some suggestions are provided below. (1) The best time to send out questionnaires is one month after schools begin. The first month of the semester is a tough time for new students with special needs. It is also the time for teachers to know the students, including who they are and what they need. (2) An electronic questionnaire would be better than a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. The computer will save us a lot of time and labor. (3) We put the survey in position to find out students who are at high risk. Instead of waiting for the referrals from schools, we can provide efficient interventions actively.

Two limitations for this study: (1) The subjective judgment is vulnerable to bias. (2) The subjects are students with Autism, EBD and EBD w/learning disabilities entering elementary, middle, and high/vocational schools. Therefore, the results can not be analogized to other special education classifications or education levels.

Appendix: The flowchart on the procedure

