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**Demographic Trends in Educational Programs for
Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders**

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Abstract

This study analyzes demographic data in the field of emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). The data are from the most recent reports of the United States Department of Education on IDEA (USDOE, 2015, 2016). Findings focus on school prevalence, ethnicity, placement in educational environments, and school exit patterns. Implications focus in particular on attention to these respective demographic areas identified above as they relate to educational programs.

Demographic Trends in Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

Students identified as having emotional and behavioral disorders or identified under an alternative term such as emotional disturbance (ED) have behavioral characteristics and educational needs that have challenged educators to provide appropriate programs for them. The common trait of students served in this category are significant difficulties in adjusting their behavior to their school environment (Polloway, Kauffman, Auguste, Smith, Patton, & Yang, 2017). This paper seeks to identify the key demographic considerations of students with emotional and behavioral disorders, which frame the educational programs provided to them.

The purpose of this research was to analyze relevant data from the most recent annual reports to Congress on IDEA (USDOE, 2015, 2016), as these data specifically addressed considerations relevant to students with EBD (or, more accurately, the federal category of emotional disturbance). We base our analyses of data on the assumption that they will provide a profile of current educational programs for students with emotional and behavioral disorders in the United States.

Method

The most recent USDOE (2015, 2016) reports provided specific demographic data relevant to students with EBD. Although data from the 38th Annual Report (USDOE, 2016) constitute the most current information, the 37th Annual Report (USDOE, 2015) also provided some data sets that were not initially in the 2016 report. These data on prevalence, ethnicity, educational environments, and school exit patterns highlight specific observations concerning students categorized as having ED or EBD.

Results

The annual reports to Congress on the implementation of IDEA provide a significant database of demographic information related to students with emotional disturbance. The 37th and 38th Reports to Congress on the implementation of IDEA were released in December of their publication year (2015, 2016, respectively). Demographic considerations addressed include prevalence, ethnicity, placement issues, and school exit data including both graduation and dropout rates.

Prevalence data for 2004-2014 indicate that students ages 6-21 were identified as EBD at a rate of 0.7% in 2004 and continuing at that rate of 0.7% until 2007. Subsequently, the rate of 0.5% reported in 2011 continued through the most recent data for the year of 2014 (USDOE, 2015, 2016). Across the 50 states and the District of Columbia, there is however significant variance in prevalence. State prevalence data range from 0.13% to 1.5% (see Table 1). When considering all individuals with disabilities receiving special education, 5.9% of students with disabilities were identified specifically as having ED (USDOE, 2016).

<Insert Table 1 about here>

Ethnic variance data provide another demographic view of the population of students identified as having an ED (or EBD). Federal risk ratios provide a comparison between the percentages of a specific ethnic group served under IDEA to the proportion served among all other ethnic groups combined. Consequently, if a specific group has a risk ratio of *two* in receiving special education, then that group is identified at a rate two times as great as that for the other ethnic groups combined. A risk value of 1.00 indicates an exact match of proportions, and a ratio of less than 1.00 indicates under-representation compared to all other groups. The risk ratios by ethnicity for students with EBD are as follows: American Indian (1.68), Asian

(0.18), African-American (2.08), Hispanic (0.61), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (1.30), White (0.96), and two or more ethnic groups (1.19) (USDOE, 2016). Clearly, not all minority groups appear over-represented by this metric.

These ethnicity data can be further analyzed by considering the relative percentages of students with the identification of ED as a percentage of the overall number of students identified as having any disability (under IDEA), which can be compared to the overall rate (as noted above, 5.9% of all students with disabilities are identified as ED). The comparative data are as follows: American Indian (5.9%), Asian (2.3%), African-American (8.0%), Hispanic (3.7%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (4.4%), White (6.1%), and two or more ethnic groups (8.0%) (USDOE, 2016).

Educational placement is in the educational environment data. Typically, such data reflect significant state variation regarding the educational environments in which students with disabilities are served. These data are in **Table 2** according to the standard categories used in federal reporting (USDOE, 2015, 2016). The percentage figures refer to the amount of time students spent in the general education classroom.

<Insert Table 2 about here>

In addition, data also provided trends for *students exiting secondary school*. These annual data reported nationally focus on those who completed a high school diploma as well as those who dropped out (USDOE, 2016). Shown in **Table 3** are ten years of these exit data, cited as percentages.

<Insert Table 3 about here>.

Discussion

This review of demographic data provides a comprehensive picture of practice as related to participation in educational programs for students with EBD. The sections below highlight each of the foci in this analysis, placing them in the context of trends in the field.

Prevalence

Since 2001, federal data have indicated that the prevalence rate for students with emotional and behavioral disorders consistently has been 0.5%. This rate is much lower than has been assumed to be actual incidence of EBD in students (Forness, Freeman, Paparella, Kauffman, & Walker, 2012; Kauffman & Landrum, 2018; Smith, Polloway, Doughty, Patton, & Dowdy, 2016). Given these prevalence rates reported under IDEA, it has been concluded that students with emotional and behavioral disorders are the most underserved in the public schools in comparison to professional estimates of prevalence (Forness, Kim & Walker, 2012; Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). Based on parental reports (e.g., the *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* (SDQ; Bourdon, Goodman, Rae, Simpson, & Koretz, 2005), Pastor, Reuben, and Duran (2012) noted that about 5% of all children had serious emotional and behavioral problems. Kauffman and Landrum (2018) have indicated that the likely estimate of actual prevalence would be between 3% and 6% of the school population and this more consistent with the parental reports than the federal school-based data set. The Federal Interagency Form on Child and Family Statistics (2016) similarly reflects approximately a 5% prevalence rate.

<Insert Figure 1 about here>

The variance between expected levels of students experiencing EBD in comparison to the percentage of students actually served in special education per the annual federal reports is underscored by the variance found across the states (see Table 1). In comparison to the overall

figure of 0.5% (USDOE, 2016), the range for individual states (USDOE, 2015) includes three states with rates under 0.2% (i.e., Arkansas, 0.12%; Alabama, 0.13%; Louisiana, 0.17%); (approximately 25% of the national average). On the other hand, three states reported 1.0% or greater (i.e., Vermont, 1.58%; Minnesota, 1.26%; Wisconsin 1.0%) (200%-300% of the national rate of 0.5%) (Polloway et al., 2017). Given the high degree of variance noted in prevalence across states, certainly seem to be reasonable conclusion that there is similarly a great variance actual nature of the students who are identified (Polloway et al., 2017).

Ethnicity

The second demographic consideration focused on ethnicity patterns. As noted by USDOE (2016), the key area of disproportionality continues to be African American students, who are more than twice as likely to be labeled EBD as might be predicted based on raw percentages of the population.

In spite of the data on the apparent increased risk ratio for African-American students identified as having ED, further analyses appear to indicate that this variance are not related to bias in the identification process. Morgan et al. (2015) posited that students from minority backgrounds consistently were less likely to be identified as emotionally disturbed than were white, English-speaking children across ranges from primary grades through middle school. They further posited that they had carefully corrected for variables that might service potential confounds, including level of academic achievement and behavioral functioning as well as family background. Their conclusion was that alternative factors rather than minority status were the basis for any increase risk of identification as emotionally and behavioral disorders. Rather, they found that externalizing problem behaviors with the key variable in increasing the likelihood of being identified. Further reviews of data appear to substantiate these claims of

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under-identification of African-American students for EBD, if not for special education in general (see Anastasiou, Morgan, Farkas, & Wiley, 2017; Kauffman & Anastasiou, in press; Morgan et al., 2016).

Educational Placement

In considering USDOE (2016) data, 53.8% of students with EBD are placed in settings primarily outside of the general education classroom, including what might be considered resource rooms (17.6%) and special education classes (18.8%). Of particular note is that 17.4% of this group of students are served outside of the regular school setting including separate schools, residential programs and correctional facilities. These data on placement in more restrictive settings are also significant when compared to other disability groups. For example, 69.2% of students with learning disabilities are in general education classes 80% or more of the time while only 2.0% of the students are placed outside of regular schools. The parallel numbers for students with intellectual disability are, respectively, 16.9% in general education classes (80% of the time) and 7.6% outside of regular schools (USDOE, 2016). Forness et al. (2012) also speculated that the placement of students with EBD may reflect the fact that only those students with very severe and complex disorders are identified for the ED federal category (see also Mattison, 2014).

School Exit

The percentage of students identified as EBD who completed a high school diploma increased every year, other than in 2011-12, over the 10 years of data presented in Table 2. In parallel fashion, the number of students who dropped out of secondary school decreased annually for every year except, again, for the year 2011-12 (USDOE, 2015, 2016). Other than that blip, these trends indicate that students with EBD are increasingly likely to complete high school with

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a diploma and decreasingly likely to drop out. Nevertheless, Sullivan and Sadeh (2016) recently contended that “dropout continues to be a persistent and serious problem for students with ED, who are at least twice as likely to drop out as students with other disabilities and five times as likely to drop out as students without disabilities” (p. 253). They attribute their conclusion to the fact that other data sets, such as the National Longitudinal Transition Study, have typically indicated less optimistic trends in terms of school completion. Mattison and Blader (2013) found that the poor academic performance of students classified as EBD was impacted more by achievement than emotional or behavioral issues and that this overall achievement deficit definitely affected dropout rates. A reasonable conclusion is that there is a positive trend in terms of school completion rates but that this group of students remains vulnerable to dropping out and failing to complete. Again, as Forness et al. (2012) suggested, it might not look so grim for the ED category compared to others were comparisons made to only the students most severely disabled in other categories.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. The data from the federal government are valid only to the extent that the reports from individual states are current and accurate. Further, the IDEA Annual Reports experience a delay of about 2 years from data reporting to publication. Consequently, the 2016 report included data from school year 2013-14. Third, because state-specific prevalence data (from the state static tables) were not available yet for the USDOE (2016) report, we used data from the USDOE (2015) report.

Implications

A number of important implications derived from this demographic study. The data as presented herein confirm the trend for over a decade of the decreasing prevalence of students

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identified as emotionally disturbed and served under special education in the public schools. Given the fact that national prevalence is 0.5%, the common reference to emotional and behavioral disorders as a “high incidence disability” must be re-considered. Second, ethnicity patterns suggest disproportionality in this area but the data require attention to context in order to confirm that there is bias in identification patterns. Third, students with EBD continue to be among the most likely groups to be educated in settings removed from full-time placement in general education. Only students identified as deaf-blind, having intellectual disability, autism, or multiple disabilities more likely to be outside the general education environment. Fourth, there is a positive trend regarding earning a school diploma and not dropping out of school although students with emotional and behavioral disorders still have the greatest risk among all categories of exceptionality for failure to complete school.

In conclusion, participation in educational programs for students with emotional and behavioral disorders have significantly decreased for at least the last 10 years. An important question remains as to whether a significant number of students consequently do not have the opportunity to benefit from potential special education services and support. It may be that the students who are currently identified as emotionally disturbed are the most likely to be educated in less inclusive settings, which may be a direct reflection of the fact that other students who have less significant disorders in this area are simply not being identified and not consequently being served.

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Table 1**Summary of State Prevalence**

State	Prevalence (ages 6-21)
All states	
Alabama	0.13%
Alaska	0.41%
Arizona	0.51%
Arkansas	0.12%
California	0.29%
Colorado	0.51%
Connecticut	0.71%
Delaware	0.40%
District of Columbia	0.91%
Florida	0.47%
Georgia	0.54%
Hawaii	0.35%
Idaho	0.36%
Illinois	0.71%
Indiana	0.87%
Iowa	0.83%
Kansas	0.36%
Kentucky	0.49%
Louisiana	0.17%
Maine	0.89%
Maryland	0.53%
Massachusetts	1.08%
Michigan	0.55%
Minnesota	1.26%
Mississippi	0.53%
Missouri	0.50%
Montana	0.36%
Nebraska	0.51%
Nevada	0.32%
New Hampshire	0.80%
New Jersey	0.44%
New Mexico	0.42%
New York	0.64%
North Carolina	0.27%
North Dakota	0.54%
Ohio	0.64%
Oklahoma	0.48%
Oregon	0.59%
Pennsylvania	0.90%
Rhode Island	0.79%
South Carolina	0.26%
South Dakota	0.59%
Tennessee	0.24%
Texas	0.41%

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State	Prevalence (ages 6-21)
All states	
Utah	0.24%
Vermont	1.58%
Virginia	0.54%
Washington	0.32%
West Virginia	0.38%
Wisconsin	1.00%
Wyoming	-- ¹

Source: U.S. Department of Education (2015). *37th report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: Static tables, Part B Child count and educational environments, Table 8*. Washington, DC: Author.

¹ No prevalence data available.

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Table 2**Educational Environment
Percentage of students with ED, ages 6-21, by State (2015-16)**

State	Correctional facility	Homebound / hospital	Regular class <40% of day	Regular class 40% -79% of day	Regular class >80% of day	Parental Placed private schools	Residential facility	Separate school
Alabama	0.15	0.96	4.90	8.16	71.59	0.00	7.57	6.68
Alaska	3.01	0.00	13.68	20.30	48.57	0.15	1.65	12.63
Arizona	1.92	0.60	26.89	15.33	41.09	0.07	0.90	13.20
Arkansas	1.67	4.55	18.54	30.62	32.78	0.12	5.62	6.10
California	1.74	0.87	29.38	17.11	28.96	0.11	2.10	19.73
Colorado	1.85	0.69	13.66	16.73	54.82	0.14	1.90	10.21
Connecticut	1.15	1.61	9.84	14.11	39.68	0.09	2.08	31.44
Delaware	1.83	2.56	25.21	11.21	40.19	0.00	2.44	16.57
District Of Columbia	2.60	0.00	29.49	10.73	36.72	0.00	2.15	18.31
Florida	4.95	0.24	29.65	11.57	42.66	0.56	0.14	10.24
Georgia	0.03	0.52	15.79	15.93	53.82	0.03	1.77	12.13
Hawaii	1.44	0.72	23.56	38.27	32.00	0.10	1.13	2.78
Idaho	2.04	0.21	12.66	24.05	50.07	0.00	1.55	9.42
Illinois	0.47	0.36	15.96	19.98	33.56	0.23	2.96	26.47
Indiana	1.13	2.46	18.79	13.55	56.08	1.33	2.67	3.99
Iowa	0.36	0.00	8.91	22.51	65.70	1.00	0.55	0.96
Kansas	1.83	0.26	13.36	19.87	49.56	0.22	1.18	13.71
Kentucky	0.84	2.51	16.17	18.61	56.42	0.05	2.28	3.12
Louisiana	2.21	2.38	23.31	24.11	46.57	0.11	0.45	0.85
Maine	0.00	0.27	19.11	22.47	45.70	0.09	2.01	10.34
Maryland	1.53	0.66	18.81	10.38	45.53	0.05	0.13	22.91
Massachusetts	0.63	0.36	18.73	11.46	43.26	0.32	1.55	23.70
Michigan	3.80	0.39	14.18	16.07	54.60	0.53	0.70	9.74
Minnesota	0.48	0.54	11.96	22.46	53.43	0.27	0.04	10.81
Mississippi	0.03	2.03	11.96	24.75	54.74	0.17	2.00	4.32
Missouri	2.05	2.11	13.00	26.85	44.60	0.47	0.02	10.90
Montana	1.31	0.92	17.21	31.41	41.39	0.39	3.02	4.34
Nebraska	0.39	0.43	11.28	12.19	64.29	0.61	1.38	9.42
Nevada	1.75	0.27	22.56	19.93	48.74	0.00	0.00	6.74
New Hampshire	0.05	0.00	11.91	17.09	58.95	0.14	2.47	9.40
New Jersey	0.92	1.73	16.40	20.36	34.09	0.26	1.48	24.74
New Mexico	1.79	0.05	32.01	23.28	39.41	0.10	1.63	1.74
New York	1.00	1.37	30.33	11.17	32.72	1.41	2.48	19.51
North Carolina	0.97	3.31	21.93	20.29	50.57	0.04	0.16	2.73
North Dakota	0.68	0.80	9.68	12.87	68.34	0.11	4.10	3.42
Ohio	0.58	2.41	19.03	17.31	42.41	0.69	0.68	16.88
Oklahoma	1.03	2.87	17.07	23.05	52.45	0.00	1.91	1.62
Oregon	1.76	0.87	17.84	16.28	58.06	0.23	0.04	4.91

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Pennsylvania	0.71	0.29	13.08	20.08	47.23	0.03	2.02	16.56
Rhode Island	1.17	0.25	25.60	7.37	39.53	0.37	3.93	21.79
South Carolina	2.40	5.13	27.38	24.19	37.43	0.00	1.24	2.23
South Dakota	0.00	0.00	10.46	24.20	61.33	0.18	2.91	0.91
Tennessee	0.40	1.58	18.84	17.15	52.43	0.12	2.04	7.45
Texas	0.64	0.89	14.49	16.23	66.02	0.03	0.11	1.58
Utah	0.64	1.34	24.37	25.82	44.47	0.00	0.43	2.94
Vermont	0.20	0.10	9.50	9.81	58.69	0.46	4.37	16.87
Virginia	1.92	2.04	9.89	18.53	48.04	0.21	2.52	16.85
Washington	0.91	0.13	20.65	30.69	41.53	0.04	0.76	5.28
West Virginia	1.25	5.06	13.79	28.97	48.68	0.00	2.02	0.23
Wisconsin	1.54	0.79	13.14	19.28	61.85	0.21	0.78	2.41
Wyoming	0.53	0.36	9.24	23.09	52.40	1.07	8.35	4.97
US, Outlying Areas, etc.	1.27	1.05	18.48	17.41	47.11	0.36	1.47	12.85

Source:
 USDOE,
 ED*Facts* Data
 Warehouse,
 2015-16, July
 14, 2016.

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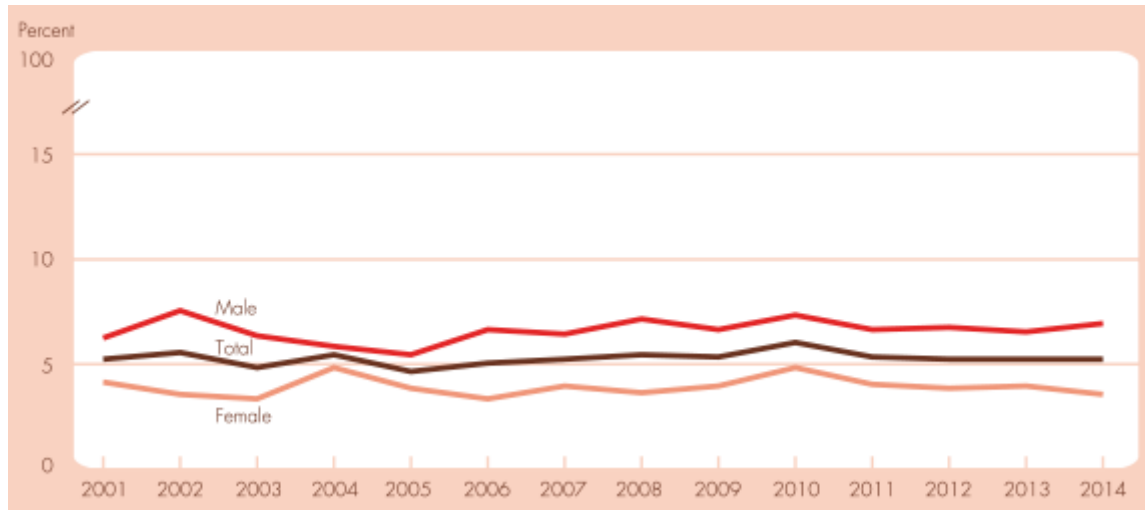
Table 3
Secondary School Exit Patterns: Students with EBD (%)

Exit	2004-5	2005-6	2006-7	2007-8	2008-9	2009-10	2010-1	2011-2	2012-3	2013-4
High School Diploma	40.1	43.4	42.7	45.6	47.4	49.9	52.8	51.1	53.8	54.7
Drop out	48.2	45.1	44.8	43.3	40.6	38.7	37.0	38.1	35.4	35.2

Source: U. S. Department of Education (2016). *38th annual report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. Washington, DC: Author.

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Figure 1
Percentage of Children Ages 4–17
Reported by a Parent to Have Serious Emotional or Behavioral Difficulties by Gender
2001–2014



Source: Federal Interagency Form on Child and Family Statistics. (2016). *America's Children in Brief: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2016*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office (Figure Health3).